

Manipulating the Mass Consciousness: Russian & Chechen “Information War” Tactics in the Second Chechen-Russian Conflict

T L Thomas

The views expressed in this chapter are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Army, Department of Defense or the US Government.

Introduction

How important is public opinion to the overall success of a military operation? In the information age, as Russians and Chechens clearly demonstrated, it is “more important than ever.” Live feeds from all corners of the globe shape an audience’s understanding of events. These digital images spawn a virtual battlefield on which the actions of soldiers and sergeants acquire strategic significance, especially when presented and explained by TV reporters who lack a military background. This makes media control of sensitive military-political situations a crucial though difficult proposition. In addition the Internet can circumvent media control by reporting directly from battle zones with no intervening media filter. The Internet can also shape images and build public and financial support. The end result is an “information war” in the true sense of the word.

This chapter discusses the battle for public opinion, the “information war” (IW), during the second Chechen campaign. The discussion has a Russian, Chechen, and foreign news context, and includes the evolving Internet battle between Russia and Chechnya. Initially, the Russians were successful in capturing public opinion. Their information victory changed public support for the conflict almost overnight. For example, in May 1999 President Boris Yel'tsin was almost impeached for his decision to intervene in Chechnya in 1994. By October of 1999, with the press under control, Yel'tsin gathered widespread support for the second intervention, and raised the popularity of then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. But as the war drags on into the summer of 2000, Russia may be neutralizing its own achievements by promising victory too many times. Sustaining the rosy picture that all will end well has become a very difficult proposition.

Background

The Gulf War clearly reflected the positive effects of preparing public opinion for conflict, and controlling information about that conflict. The Western nations took great care to explain the importance of the Persian Gulf region to Western national interests, and to portray the transgressions and sinister character of Iraqi leader Sadaam Hussein. As a result, public opinion was mobilized and remained strongly behind US President George Bush’s initiative until the war’s successful conclusion. Even if the West had taken heavy casualties, it is likely that public opinion would have supported the war, at least for the short term. Conversely, Somalia demonstrated that if the cause is not properly explained it can have a negative effect on Western politics and public opinion. One serious skirmish was enough to cause US policy to shift dramatically overnight.

For Russia, the first war with its secessionist-leaning Republic of Chechnya (1994-1996) was a public relations disaster. The military's move against the Chechen capital was taken quickly and with very little explanation to Russian citizens. Public opinion was not prepared for the conflict, and the Russian military belatedly began their own public relations campaign some two months after the initial incursion. The Russian military treated the press with little concern or respect, refusing any contact with its soldiers and leaders during the first few months of the war, and conducting little counterpropaganda. As a result the military lost control of the media and with it control over television and other digital images.

The Chechens, on the other hand, openly welcomed the press and TV coverage. Consequently, the Russian evening news featured scenes of destroyed Russian equipment and dead Russian soldiers. The Chechens deftly manipulated and painted these scenes for public consumption by taking TV reporters to locations the Chechens wanted them to see. The result was a total "information war" defeat for the Russians. In March of 1995 Sergei Stepashin, head of the Federal Security Service during the first conflict, noted that

Yes, the Russian authorities lost the information war... How splendidly Chechen Information Minister Movladi Udugov is operating, how skilful and adroit he is at feeding the press with all kinds of lies, distortions, and misrepresentations of the facts...!

Stepashin also noted that "we were almost totally unprepared for ideological and propaganda work. The journalists at first were not allowed to come here (Mozdok) so they went 'over there' [to the Chechen side for information]. There was nothing to fill the vacuum of a very powerful ideological machine after the elimination of the Union. Now we have seen the result of this and our leaders have to draw certain conclusions."² By allowing the Chechens to present their version of events, world attention was drawn to the Chechen cause. Their difficulties were highlighted against the backdrop of Russian brutality. Barely a word was said about Chechen brutality. Even members of Russia's Parliament rushed to criticize the actions of their own army. Clearly the Russian armed forces sorely needed instructions on how to interact with the press during a conflict.

The second conflict in Chechnya witnessed a reversal of this situation and an "information war victory" for the Russians during the early stages of the conflict. There were three reasons for this turnabout. First, the Russians properly analyzed their public relations disaster of the first war. President Boris Yel'tsin, in December 1999, instituted Russian Federation Resolution No 1538. The resolution was designed to filter military information from Chechnya, and to select which foreign information would be disseminated in Russia about the conflict. This insured that the "information war" defeat of the first conflict would not be repeated. Less certain is just how completely Russian information warriors implemented Udugov's formula of "lies, distortions, and misrepresentations of the facts," but clearly they have done a little of all of them. Second, the Russians studied how NATO spokesmen handled the press during the fight for Kosovo. Third, Vladimir Putin, the acting and later elected President of Russia, placed experienced people in key positions to ensure media control. This factor was every bit as important as the others.

These factors should be considered during the ensuing discussion. It offers insight as to how the information war was fought and won during both the August-September intervention in Dagestan, and the October intervention into Chechnya;

and how difficult it has become to maintain the momentum of the early information campaign as time goes on. The discussion also demonstrates how the Russians were able to subtly change the goals of their operation from October to January without anyone really noticing.

Dagestan

The Russian Approach to IW during the Dagestan Operation

Joan Beecher Eichrodt, a historian and journalist who was in Chechnya from 1994-1996, commented on the initial Chechen intervention into Dagestan:

Reporting of the Dagestani conflict in both the Russian and foreign media has been much more one-sided—in most cases, having little sympathy with the insurgents—than previous reporting on the Chechen war. The army of international journalists, so conspicuous in Chechnya, is absent this time around; the threat of kidnapping has seen to that. Not one of the Dagestani and Russian freethinking media outlets—including independent news sources on the Internet—primarily depend on press releases from Russian military headquarters and from official Dagestani sources.³

Ms Eichrodt's comments are right on the mark. At the beginning of the incursion by Chechen fighters into Dagestan, reporters held little sympathy for the Chechen cause, a situation vastly different from the first war. There were several reasons for this. First, Chechens had kidnapped many foreigners and local citizens on or near Chechen territory (nearly 1800 people were kidnapped between 1992 and the start of the war, and nearly 872 remained in captivity as of March 2000⁴). Kidnap victims included journalists, which destroyed the willingness of Russian publications to support the Chechen cause as in the past. Second, these kidnappings sometimes resulted in brutal slayings of the victims, such as the Red Cross workers who were helping the sick and injured, and British businessmen working to make Chechnya more modern and habitable. Third, the Chechens were viewed as the aggressor in Dagestan. No one asked them in. According to Russian NTV information service editor-in-chief Vladimir Kulistikov, *"if we are to call a spade a spade, then what is going on now is an act of aggression. It is an act by the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic against Russia. I think that now everyone understands this new reality."*⁵ Finally, the Russian government accused the Chechens of bombing several apartment complexes in Russia itself, bringing Chechen terrorism not only to Russia's doorstep but inside its house. Images of these terrorist acts were shown on Russian and international TV. This changed the minds of many Russians, including reporters. These bombings occurred after the Dagestan intervention at a time when the Russian military was performing little constructive work with the press.

Journalists were reluctant to offer sympathetic commentary on the Chechens, and the Russian Ministry for the Press added an official reason not to interview Chechens or make disparaging remarks about the mass media—government dissatisfaction. The First Deputy Minister of the Press, Mikhail Seslavinskiy, stated that leaders of Chechen gangs were calling on the population of the Russian Federation and Dagestan to change Russia's territorial integrity by force. He added that a massive propaganda war was underway, and that the real Chechen desire was to create an Islamic state on Dagestani territory. Seslavinskiy stopped short of prohibiting dissenting reports which differed from official government statements,

but his warning was very clear. There were even different versions of his text for different TV stations, some more strictly worded than others to make sure the message got through.⁶

From the very beginning of the conflict with Dagestan, the Russian military tried to control mass media reporting of events. When Chechen forces crossed the Dagestani border on 7 August, Russia's armed forces responded quickly, both with units ready for action and with an information blockade. Regarding the latter, one report noted that "detailed information from the combat area is lacking—the federal force structures have decided to restrict the flow of information to the mass media with the goal of preventing the extremists of Chechnya and Dagestan from objectively assessing the situation."⁷ The information blockade to military activity was supplemented by information from the Dagestan authorities about the political situation. For example, the Dagestani government, in particular the Ministry of Nationalities, Information, and External Relations, developed its own Internet site to get its story out. The site was located at www.kavkaz.com, and began functioning on 10 August. Another Dagestani Internet site was listed as Makhachkala Respublika Dagestan WWW.

Chechen (and even Russian) Internet sites also began reporting from the scene. The sites used transcripts from radio and phone transmissions. Reports from media outlets outside Russia that were more sympathetic to the Chechens plight (such as Muslim countries) were on foreign Internet sites. News-starved Russian reporters would repeat these reports, thereby circumventing the Russian information blockade. A *Red Star* (Russian military newspaper) report from 21 August appeared to understand the implications of what was happening with military reporting in Dagestan. The reporter, Vadim Markushin, wrote that the military should not create an information vacuum and close their doors to the mass media. Russian reporters were searching out other news agencies and reporting the news based on these contacts, some of which were even pro-Chechen. The mass media, however, bore a similar responsibility, according to Markushin. Members of the press should remember where they are from and to which state they belong, he reminded his colleagues.⁸ These and other reports prompted some improvement in reporter access to military information.

Mikhail Lesin, the press minister of Russia, stated that even offering a Chechen air time was wrong. *"It is as if a contract killer is given the chance to talk before he goes out to kill,"* he explained. Journalists had their own concerns. They were worried about what appeared to be totally unreliable and contradictory government sources and reporting.⁹ For example, the airing of Chechen executions of Russian servicemen without commentary was especially troubling to the journalists, since it was unknown if these images were from the first conflict or from the current one. The government's goal was obviously to shape the public's image about Chechens. CNN aired this particular film clip world-wide.

On 30 August, Russian TV reflected a shift in the federation's IW campaign. First, it showed militants killed the week before in a raid in Nazran, Ingushetia, as examples of the fate awaiting others who tried such activities. Second, the Russians destroyed a TV retransmitter near the Dagestani village of Karamakhi which was used by the extremist Wahhabite religious organization. Finally, the Russians hacked into a Chechen web site, and connected it to the Russian Internal Security Service. This must have shocked those attempting to access the Chechen site!¹⁰ In short, Russia's 1999 Dagestani information campaign had already

become more successful than the 1994 Chechen effort through better coordination and planning.

On 9 September 1999 the Russian government began a further effort to control military information. Perhaps this effort anticipated the 1 October intervention into Chechnya, and prepared the information battlefield. An *Izvestiya* headline proclaimed that General Staff Chief Anatoliy Kvashnin “Opens Second Front...against Russian Media.” Apparently Kvashnin had authorized a directive imposing “a ban on making public information about the combat situation in Dagestan.” This included the location or movement of subunits of the joint group of forces, places where subunits were being brought up to strength in Dagestan, and reports on losses of manpower and equipment. All of this was “classified” information. This prompted the comment that only in a country where people are regarded as cannon fodder could the names of people be considered a military secret. Journalists felt that Kvashnin was trying to silence reporters’ growing concern over what appeared to be Russian military ineptness in the region.¹¹

The Chechen Approach to IW during the Dagestan Operation

Chechen fighters, as noted above, were in large part responsible for the lack of interest shown in their cause by Russian and Western journalists. The kidnappings discouraged most non-Chechens from visiting. The Chechens were no longer regarded as a small, separatist people struggling to defend their territory from indiscriminate attack.¹² Western journalists listened more closely to what Russians were saying as a result.

Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, a Russian newspaper devoted to military topics, listed five targets of Chechen psychological pressure during the Dagestan campaign. These were: world and Russian public opinion; the military-political leadership of Russia; foreign states and components of the North Caucasus region; servicemen of the Army, Internal and Border Troops; and the population of Chechnya. Movladi Udugov, Chechnya’s IW leader since the ‘94-’96 conflict, coordinated the main attack against public opinion. He is expert at creating events and believes that in war the mass media are for waging war, not for transmitting news. Most important, Udugov worked with the foreign mass media, the Internet, and press attaches of a number of embassies (taking advantage of satellite communications) to offer his interpretation of events.¹³

Russians also believed that Chechens were conducting political and military psychological warfare. The former included attempts to internationalize the conflict by requests to NATO from Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov to intervene and reconcile relations between Russia and Chechnya. Military psychological warfare was conducted by terrorist activities, such as blowing up apartment buildings in Moscow and threatening journalists with death. The Chechens also threatened to use death-row prisoners to set off explosions and carry out sabotage operations throughout Russia, and filled land mines with radioactive wastes, according to the Russian report.¹⁴

During the Dagestan campaign Chechen web sites were very active. Udugov’s Kavkaz-tsentr (Caucasus Centre or www.kavkaz.org) was often referred to as “Udugov’s site” but according to Udugov the site was really owned by a group of young programmers in Grozny, which he helped out with money and analytical reports from his research institute (the Institute of Strategic Research). The site reported Chechen military successes against Russian forces, and some light-hearted items, such as a 16 November 1999 item noting that Shamil Basayev had

taken a second wife. Udugov's site was ranked 21st in popularity among sites accessed in Moscow (the Dagestani site was number 357), probably because it represented an alternative source of information early in the fighting. The site also had a section called "Yel'tsingate," which covered alleged illegal financial transactions by the Russian government.¹⁵ Worried about Udugov's propaganda success, Russian hackers wiped out his site on 29/30 August. On the left of the page, hackers posted a picture of the poet Mikhail Lermontov, who fought in the Caucasus War over 150 years ago, holding a Kalashnikov. The words "Misha was here!" were displayed next to his head. The right of the page said, "this site has been closed down at the request of Russian citizens. This is what will happen to all web sites of terrorists and murderers."¹⁶ According to a 9 September BBC report, the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs, Vladimir Rushaylo, secured help from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation in eliminating other Internet sites set up by the Chechens in exchange for information on Osama Bin Laden.

Finally, Khattab, a foreigner fighting on the Chechen side, used his Malaysia-based www.qogaz.net.my site with much success. The site is believed to be an Afghan Mujahadeen site with videos and photos. The Internet site of the Chechen government, www.amina.com, carries news items and background on the conflict drawn from Western sources.¹⁷ The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria has a site at www.Ichkeria.Com.Ge, and there is a site for news at www.chechentimes.com which is also of interest.

Foreign Press IW Reporting during the Dagestan Operation

Most Western reporting on the conflict in Dagestan came to one conclusion—the Russians did much better at controlling public opinion and the information war than in 1994-'96. The Russian government demonstrated an aggressive attitude in fighting the propaganda war. However, suspicion remained about official government releases inside and outside the country. There was little if any third party confirmation of what was happening inside Chechnya. Most foreign journalists felt certain (based on their instincts and "unofficial" sources) that they were not being given all of the information required to draw a reasonable conclusion about the course of the fighting.

Chechnya

The Russian Approach to IW during the Incursion into Chechnya

October/November/December: Pavel Felgenhauer, an independent Moscow military analyst, summed up the Russian information war approach during the October intervention thus: "this is not journalism. You can't even call it one-sided. This is propaganda. But it keeps up the popularity of the war."¹⁸ It also demonstrated that the Russians took Stepashin's IW lesson from the first conflict with Chechnya to heart. Many Russians understood that such support was needed, and gave it whole-heartedly. Ideologically, the fact that the Federal Forces were fighting terrorists made the war understandable to most Russians. To spread the Russian understanding of the conflict in Chechnya, Russia's military news agency AVN cited 23 Chechen radio networks, two of which broadcast in Arabic, that were presenting the Russian version of events.¹⁹

Aleksandr Zhdanovich, head of the Federal Security Service's (FSB) Public Relations Centre, spoke for many members of the administration in early October. He thanked the Russian media and journalists for ignoring the threats and demands of the Chechen rebels, and for refusing to allow them airtime. On the

other hand, he criticized the foreign press (especially the French) for allowing airtime to someone as influential as Shamil Basayev.²⁰ Interpreted another way, Russia was winning the “information war” at home but having less success beyond its borders. Foreign Minister Ivanov warned that Chechen militants were trying to open a “second front” through the foreign media. The head of the Russian Information Centre (founded in October on the order of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin), Mikhail Margelov, agreed. He added that Chechen assertions of ecological disasters caused by Russian aviation were aimed at misleading the public as well as the European community on the eve of the OSCE summit.²¹ Margelov ran the Internet site www.infocentre.ru, and offered instructions to reporters on how to report news from the front (for example, describe casualties as minimal, inconsiderable or unavoidable). Infocentre.ru is a professionally run site that offers statements/briefings on events, expert opinions, an archive search, maps and books about the war. It is the one place that official Russian news is available solely about the conflict.

In addition to this Internet site, other pro-Russian sites included pro-Moscow Chechen leader Bislan Gantamirov’s site www.Chechnya.Ru, and an independent site at www.Antiterror.Ru. Gantamirov’s site reportedly used the voice of the people (in the form of appeals from public figures and videos) instead of simply repeating press material. This, it was said, had a stronger effect on web surfers than high-flown phrases.

Russian Media Minister Mikhail Lesin stated that the information war was similar to terrorism in that it had an international character.²² Further, Lesin noted that Chechen extremists were trying to “whitewash themselves before public opinion in the West.” To do so, they tried to describe actions by Federal Forces not as counteractions to international terrorism but as a reaction to Chechnya’s freedom-loving people, and as an infringement on human rights.²³ One *Izvestiya* reporter agreed with another Lesin comment, noting that at Mozdok headquarters the press, on MOD press Centre orders, was not allowed access to various areas for several “drummed up” reasons. These included ongoing work of a secret nature (technicians working on aircraft), a lack of seats on helicopters, the dangers lurking ahead, or the journalists’ incorrect view of the situation. Such control made some journalists worry that in spite of its impressive start, Russia might yet lose the information war.²⁴ For operations around Shali and Grozny a journalist had to be accompanied by four people when flying to the combat zone (one was sufficient in the past). This further limited the number of available seats on helicopters.²⁵ Such control was apparently required since the Russian military were taking losses or being ambushed, action which did not play well on the home front.

Kommersant claimed to have obtained a document that outlined how tightly the military controlled the mass media. The newspaper cited a Russian Information Centre document directing what terms military spokesmen and journalists must use when reporting on events in Chechnya. For example, federal forces and troops should be called “subdivisions and units of the Russian Federation Armed Forces and the Ministry of Internal Affairs Internal Troops, operating against separatist and terrorist units.”²⁶

By late December, Russia’s Information Centre was complaining loudly that Western reporters were circumventing the government’s prescribed rules. They did this by bypassing Russian checkpoints. There was no need for this, the Russians argued, since the Centre, the military, and the government were “guaranteeing secure conditions for journalists’ work and offering them the possibility of receiving

authentic first-hand information.” Since it was established in October, the Centre had arranged trips to Chechnya for more than 140 journalists from 75 foreign media groups.²⁷ However, even Russian journalists were becoming concerned with the restrictions placed on them. Anna Shargorodskaya, chief of the St Petersburg branch of the independent Russian National Press Institute, noted that “they [the government] are actively using an old and notorious method—endowing themselves with the right to decide what we should or should not know. It used to be like this in Soviet times. We have to look to foreign media for alternative information.”²⁸ It appeared to many journalists that the search for “criminals” had expanded to include videotapes, notebooks and unsupervised reporters.²⁹

Meanwhile, another information war, this one a more traditional psychological war of leaflets and loudspeakers, was underway. Russian propaganda units targeted Chechens whose villages were occupied by rebels with leaflets fired from howitzers, and loudspeaker broadcasts. Eastern Federal Group commander Gennadiy Troshev noted that these methods were used as an IW attack prior to action. The propaganda officers believed they contributed greatly to success.³⁰ The commander of the North grouping of forces, Lieutenant-General Vladimir Bulgakov, also had high hopes for the propaganda effort, stating that ideological work by radio and leaflets would accelerate the split among rebels.³¹

On 6 December, Russian helicopters and planes dropped leaflets over Grozny in preparation for the assault on the city. The leaflets contained ultimatums to the peaceful residents of Grozny, warning them to leave the city via a humanitarian corridor on December 11. After this date, the leaflets noted, all those remaining in Grozny would be regarded as terrorists and militants. Chechen warlords attempted to prevent such an evacuation, hoping to use civilians as human shields, according to one Russian report.³²

There was also predictable Russian criticism of Western reporting on the conflict in Chechnya. For example, one reporter noted that Western media resort to a predictable template to garner support. First, the world community demands that “democracy” be observed. Then the right of people to self-determination is expressed, followed by CNN covering the humanitarian catastrophe (mothers breast-feeding emaciated babies, tearful old people talking of mass shootings and bombardments, etc). Finally, there is talk of the inhumanity of the military involved, and discussion of a potential military coup.³³

January/February/March 2000: January saw the heaviest fighting for control over Grozny, and with it the greatest number of casualties. These losses, combined with the extended fight for the city, caused public opinion to begin to waver. When the media (especially the newspaper *Izvestia* and the TV network NTV) began to lambaste government and military shortcomings, Russian information specialists confronted their greatest challenge thus far in the conflict. They met the challenge by appointing several key individuals to public relations positions.

The first was Sergei Yastrzhembskiy to oversee the government’s public relations efforts over the war in Chechnya. Acting President Vladimir Putin hoped to suffocate contradictory statements over the war, and Yastrzhembskiy was the person for the job. As Press Secretary for former President Boris Yel'tsin and as a former Vice-Premier of the Moscow city government he was well qualified to handle the pressures of the job. Yastrzhembskiy’s goal reportedly was to give the war a brighter image, and to coordinate the information work of armed and other services involved in Chechnya.³⁴ Yastrzhembskiy developed more principles and guidelines

for the press both to consider and follow. First, he stated that “*never in territory where such operations are going on can there be full freedom of action for representatives of the mass media.*”³⁵ Second, it was clear that producing the “wrong” information could be fatal to a reporter’s career, not because of one’s editor but because of Yastrzhembskiy. In particular, he made cases against Izvestia, NTV, Novyye Izvestiya and Novaya Gazeta, that their reporting was directed against the federal authorities’ actions in the Chechen republic, and had always been *a priori* negative. Third, he placed strict limitations on when a journalist could be taken to the battlefield (when the last rebel was killed or when weather was suitable for flying). Finally Yastrzhembskiy displayed contempt for Western opinion that he regarded as predictably negative, citing the fact that Western media had been particularly harmful to Russia’s military actions in Chechnya in the past. He cited the West’s oil interests in the Caucasus and a desire to see Russia fail in Chechnya and lose influence in the region as reasons for negative Western reporting.³⁶

Yastrzhembskiy’s methods and influence are best seen in the charges brought against Izvestia and Andrey Babitskiy in January. Izvestia’s reporters were banned from entering a hospital after a 21 January report about a hospital’s inability to identify one of its patients. It took the military more than two days to identify him. The same reporter also interviewed some soldiers, and the government did not like these interviews either. Izvestia was, according to a Russian general, generating hostility since it was printing what were in the General’s opinion ‘defamatory’ items about the course of the operation in Chechnya.³⁷

The case of Andrey Babitskiy, a Russian Radio Liberty reporter, gained worldwide attention. Babitskiy was accused of supporting the Chechen cause with his reporting, and was arrested by the Russian military. Then Babitskiy was exchanged with the Chechens for two Russians. One lawyer noted that such an exchange of one citizen for another was unprecedented. One of the authors of the Law on the Press and Mass Media, the Secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists Mikhail Fedotov, was outraged for two reasons. First, that society was being denied the possibility to obtain full, reliable information about how events surrounding the Radio Liberty correspondent were developing. Second, that authorities were also in breach of international legislation, in particular the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts.³⁸

Finally, several authors noted the growing power of television to influence public opinion due to instantaneous reporting from the scene of an incident. Yastrzhembskiy believed that TV was a large-calibre weapon which could shoot at one’s own people as well as the enemy and therefore must be controlled.³⁹ Yevgeniy Kozhokin, Director of the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, an arm of the Russian External Security Service (SVR), noted that real time TV can impart an instantaneous and powerful emotional impulse. It is directed both at the consciousness and at the subconscious of the TV viewer. It produces a desire to stop the suffering of innocent people along with a feeling of sympathy. Selectivity is another special character of TV, according to Kozhokin. Further, it allows a producer to focus attention and concentrate on a specific emotion. He cited the effort built against Serbian paramilitary crimes while concurrently supporting the Kosovo refugees as an example. No one in the West spoke about the crimes of the Kosovo Liberation Army and problems for the Serb minority in Kosovo with the same passion as they did about Serbian crimes once the bombing ended, he said. This made the “information component a component of combat operations.” Finally, Kozhokin recalled how the bombing of the Market Square in Sarajevo was

instantly used to begin the bombardment of Serbian positions even though NATO did not know who was responsible.⁴⁰

April/May 2000: In early April, the Russian government published “Chechnya. A White Book” for the Western mass media. The book discussed the human rights violations that took place in Chechnya before the war, and other relevant facts from Russia’s point of view. Director Mikhail Margelov and Sergei Yastrzhembskiy presented it at the Russian Information Centre.

Yastrzhembskiy discussed his own actions as a spokesman as well, particularly how he tried to influence the Chechens. He stated that one of his tactics was to “throw” information out to provoke a Chechen reaction. Such information was almost never released during news conferences. Information for press releases, however, was a different story. Such information included everything interesting and important from the official bodies (key ministries and agencies involved in the counter-terrorist operation) as well as Russian and foreign (plus Chechen) news agencies, TV and web sites.⁴¹

In May, there were reports in the Russian press about an independent information Centre dealing with the Caucasus. It was run by the Free Chechnya (Svobodnaya Chechnya) news agency in Russia. Most of the staff were reportedly Chechens. Two other sites supporting Russia’s efforts in Chechnya were the Russian Information Centre and the government of Dagestan. The Russians reported that the Chechens had nearly 100 sites situated throughout the world that produced information in 20 languages.⁴²

The Chechen Approach to IW during the Russian Incursion

October/November/December 1999: Due to the restrictions on journalists, it was very difficult for the Chechens to get their story out to their own and the Russian populace. Russian efforts to publish newspapers in Chechnya also minimized the Chechen propaganda effort. Therefore the Chechens utilized their web sites to the maximum extent possible, especially in the winter and spring.

On several occasions the Chechens accused the Russian mass media of spreading disinformation. This included Russian reports attempting to negate criminal actions by Federal Forces, which the Chechens listed as mass executions, harassment and torture at filtration points (concentration camps), and other atrocities. From the Chechen point of view, such Russian disinformation was disconcerting because it was apparently having some success in sowing seeds of doubt among the fighters and the civilian population of Chechnya. In addition, the Russians published a paper called Svobodnaya Chechnya (Free Chechnya) in the Russian occupied areas of Chechnya. This time the Chechen population was manipulated by the Russian press, a reversal from the first war.

January/February/March 2000: Chechen use of the Internet expanded during this phase of the conflict. By clicking on www.qoqaz.net, it was possible to download videos of attacks on Russians, view photos of Chechens in action and of Russian prisoners of war, find news items, read profiles of Chechen commanders, and read interviews with various Chechen leaders and fighters. In case this site was down, alternate sites were listed: www.qoqaz.net.my, www.qoqaz.com, and www.qoqaz.de. Videos available on this web site included:

- Chechnya: Destruction of a Nation (December 1999, 30 minutes)
- Massacres in Chechnya (October 1999, 21 minutes)

- Jihad in Dagestan (August 1999, Part I 60 minutes)
- Jihad in Dagestan (August 1999, Part II 60 minutes)
- Russian Hell in the Year 2000 (April 2000, 51 minutes).

Under "Facts and Figures" there was a list of frequently asked questions about the Jihad of Chechnya. There were also diary entries of fighters, information about how to contribute money to the Chechen cause, and other general questions. "Photos" showed dead Russian soldiers, the "victorious" return from Grozny, Shamil Basayev and other leaders, and the results of operations against Russian convoys.

In February, the Kavkaz-Tsentr News Agency web site noted that more than 1500 civilians from Chechnya were captured by the (Russian) aggressors during the '94-'96 war, and their whereabouts were still unknown. Further, 3,000 civilians were captured and taken to unknown destinations during the latest conflict. The Chechens also stated that the Russians operated a children's concentration camp, which had 100 inmates between the ages of 10-15. This claim has not been substantiated⁴³. In March, the same Chechen web site attacked Sergei Yastrzhembskiy for what it called his absurd writing on the final stage of the war, calling it "information garbage."⁴⁴ The web site developed and published a Russian "wanted list", which included many MVD officers and several prominent politicians.⁴⁵

The Western Media Approach to IW during the Chechen Intervention

In what is being called the "information war," journalists are apparently the enemy. The Russians have decided that one mistake of the unsuccessful 1994-96 campaign to crush Chechnya's independence drive was to allow the press to cover it. Not any more.⁴⁶

October/November/December 1999: The Western media believed early on that Russia's media outlets were mimicking NATO reporting over Kosovo. NATO, the Russians believe, backed up its military activities with scenes of allied successes and Serbian atrocities. Now, in Chechnya, Russia appeared to be following the Kosovo script. The Boston Globe of 17 October reported that Mikhail Margelov, the Russian press Centre organizer, stated that *"this is one lesson of Kosovo that we have learned. We are trying to use media technology to let the international community see what is really going on."*

From the very beginning the Western media criticized the Russian version of what "was really going on." One reporter noted that if television were one's sole source of news, the war appeared as a saga of Russian courage and military brilliance. Villages were liberated at will, casualties were low, civilians respected what Russia was doing, and generals described the flight of the enemy. TV coverage of the war was described as entertainment, since there were no dead bodies, only missiles flying and tanks moving. No casualties were shown.⁴⁷ Russian media shaped the flow of information out of Chechnya and onto Russian TV screens in a manner unprecedented since the time of the USSR.

The Western media reported that Russian civil servants were provided with guidance on how to deal with the media, including a glossary that specified how to refer to Chechen fighters (as terrorists). A new group of Russian spin-doctors (media specialists) put the best possible slant on a story.⁴⁸ Western media also reported that there was a shift in Russian tactics against Western news agencies in early December, starting with Western coverage of a Chechen ambush against

Russian forces in Grozny. Journalists were accused of lying and working for other countries' intelligence services.⁴⁹

January/February/March 2000: When Vladimir Putin became Russia's acting President on New Year's Day, Russia began a new and more repressive attitude toward the Western press. Travel restrictions on the press in Chechnya were increased, followed by attempts to put one journalist into a psychiatric ward. Clearly repression was on the rise. One reporter noted that foreign journalists began to be treated as they were in Soviet times. For example, Russian authorities denied foreign news agencies information about Russian losses and instances of Russian soldiers looting, even when these events were filmed and documented! FSB spokesman Aleksandr Zdanovich said Western news was "an active operation carried out by foreign special services" to "whip up anti-Russian ferment."⁵⁰

However, almost simultaneously with Putin's assumption of the Presidency, Moscow's mass media began turning against the war as well. Both NTV and Izvestia offered negative critiques of military operations. In mid January Interfax reported on Russian casualties, causing the Russian Defence Ministry to immediately label such reports "conscious lies."⁵¹ The confrontation between MOD and the mass media had clearly begun. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that Duma member Sergei Glaz'yev, an opposition Communist Party member, was of the opinion that "*public opinion is dictated by what is seen on TV. I wouldn't trust any sources of information from Chechnya.*"⁵² NTV correspondent Yuri Lipatov, whose station had played a strong role in shaping public opinion from the Chechen viewpoint during the first war, reported that military spokesmen had accused him of spreading lies. The network was told its correspondents would no longer be allowed on Russian military positions.⁵³ And the leader of Russia's Union of Journalists wrote "*a threat to freedom of speech in Russia has for the first time in the last several years been transformed into its open and regular suppression.*" Jonas Bernstein of UPI said Babitskiy's case indicated a "pattern of intimidation" since Yel'tsin's resignation.⁵⁴

Washington Times reporter Jamie Dettmer noted that there were Russian internal, external, and military controls in place. Sergei Yastrzhembskiy was the internal news controller. "*When the nation mobilizes its forces to achieve some task, that imposes obligations on everyone, including the media.*" The external news control was in the hands of Mr Putin's chief of staff, Alexander Voloshin, who warned the foreign press not to draw up and implement any information agenda different from the Kremlin's. General Valeriy Manilov served as the military spokesman. Finally, Dettmer stated that Robert Coalson, program director for the National Press Institute, observed some of the results of "media pressure" (the attacks, arrests and the Andrei Babitskiy case). This pressure had forced some private journalists to defect to state-controlled agencies, in particular, key figures such as Oleg Dobrodeyev at NTV and Raf Shakirov at Kommersant who "defected" to the state-controlled media.⁵⁵

From the Western media point of view, the case of Radio Liberty journalist Andrei Babitskiy demonstrated how these three controls came together to manage an incident that did not fool anyone and received very negative news coverage. Babitskiy's treatment by Russian authorities was rough, to say the least. According to one report, Russian officials violated their own legal codes by refusing to inform his wife of his whereabouts or to assign a lawyer to him. They denied he was in detention, and then they compounded their problems in his handling by violating the Geneva Convention:

On the one hand, they purportedly exchanged a civilian journalist for prisoners of war with a group of people the Russian authorities have described as bandits and criminals. On the other hand, they explicitly said they no longer bear any responsibility for the fate of one of their own citizens.⁵⁶

The action against Babitskiy appeared to be part of a larger agenda designed to intimidate journalists into less independent reporting habits. In short, the truth cannot be different from official Moscow's line. As one Russian journalist noted

One of former Russian President Boris Yel'tsin's first steps after the failed August 1991 putsch was to allow Radio Liberty to open a bureau in Moscow. One of the first steps under acting Russian President Vladimir Putin's administration has been to arrest a Radio Liberty journalist.⁵⁷

Agence France Presse noted that Moscow had banned Russian media from broadcasting any comments by Chechen rebel leaders who were wanted on charges of terrorism, including the democratically elected Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov. Deputy Information Minister Mikhail Seslavinskiy added that it would be supporting the spread of terrorist propaganda to allow such reporting. Britain did the same in 1988 with Sinn Fein, he added.⁵⁸

Yastrzhembskiy's fight with Western media will apparently continue. As but one example, Western film Director Phillip Noyce is preparing a film about the war in Chechnya. The film, taken from the Chechen point of view, cannot please Russian authorities, especially because its producers, TF1 Intl, is a film sales arm of France's TF1 TV. Called "Bloodline", the film explores the saga of two brothers, children of Russian emigrants living in America. One is an adopted son of Chechen descent. The two return to Russia and become involved in the conflict.⁵⁹ The portrayal is not kind to the Russians.

Conclusions

There were several important military lessons that the Russian government and military learned from their first experience in Chechnya from 1994-1996. Perhaps none was more important to long term Russian success in Chechnya than the battle for public opinion. Public opinion is important and can be shaped to support local conflicts. In the information age, it is more difficult than ever to control the flow of information to a population. Russian authorities initially shut off independent reporting, and did everything possible to insure that TV and newspaper reporters carefully reported "their facts" from the battlefield. As time progressed, however, and as the Chechens were able to bypass the Russian imposed information blockade via the Internet and via access to cellular phone hookups with foreign correspondents, Russia's information advantage began to slowly slip away. As the conflict drags on it is becoming more and more difficult for President Putin's government to maintain public support both from Russians and from pro-Moscow Chechens living inside Chechnya.

Initially, however, Russia's control of and access to information was very successful. It made the armed forces appear much more effective and capable than they were. This kept public opinion strongly behind the effort to subdue the "terrorists." Part of the blame for the gradual loss of public opinion can be placed on Russian tradition. The Russian government is slow to provide casualty figures

to society. It demonstrated little accountability to its people in both Afghanistan and WWII. In both Chechen conflicts it was public pressure applied by the Soldiers Mother's Committee that finally forced the government to account for its soldiers. This public pressure group demonstrated how in the information age, contradictory information can rise and escape the clutches of state control. It might be possible to win the IW struggle by controlling public opinion in the early going but this advantage can be nullified by exerting too much control.

Part of the loss of state control was also due to the Internet battles between web sites during the conflict. The web sites, however limited their availability to the average Russian, enabled combatants to mobilize public opinion and support from outside the boundaries of the conflict. The Internet is an important asset in a local conflict, especially to the weaker side. The Chechen web sites were more dynamic than the Russian sites, and more easily accessible in the West. During this conflict the following web sites were key, however filtered and one-sided they might be:

Russian side:

1. www.chechnya.ru
2. www.antiterror.ru
3. www.infocentre.ru
4. www.kavkaz.com

Chechen side:

1. www.kavkaz.org
2. www.qoqaz.net
3. www.amina.com
4. www.ichkeria.com
5. www.chechentimes.com

The Russians studied the information campaign that NATO ran against the Serbs during the campaign against Kosovo. Perhaps they should have directed similar attention to how the Serbs exploited the Internet to their advantage as well. The predictable template in Kosovo reporting is certainly a weakness: NATO should be aware of the patterned propaganda image it is portraying to the world. Michael Wines of The New York Times summed up the information war in Chechnya differently. He focused on how Russian and Chechen cultures sized up a conflict, their traditions influencing each side's analytical process. Russia viewed Western concepts like "democratic rule" and "consent of the governed" through the opposite end of the same telescope. This meant that Russia would apply the Kosovo "template" in a different fashion, and that Russian society would interpret events differently. Talk of a no-casualty conflict disappeared as a theme, which the Russian public barely seemed to notice, and was replaced with the theme of victory and how well the entire operation was going. Figures support this. According to a Public Opinion Foundation survey, after six months of war seven out of ten Russians still supported the war. Does this mean that in Russia public support moves in inverse proportion to the number of troops lost, that is inside out from the West? Probably not, but it does indicate a higher tolerance for casualties than the West has at the present time.

The "information war" is not yet over in Chechnya. Initial Russian successes are beginning to fade, but the Chechens have not capitalized on Russian shortcomings as they did during the first conflict. As one analyst noted

The Russian media, like the free media in most Western countries, was for the most part willing to accept both government controls and the government's story in the name of national security for as long as that story made sense. The public, too, seemed happy enough at first with the government-released information. Over time, however, the disparities between the official line and the increasingly obvious realities, reported both by soldiers themselves and by their parents, proved impossible to ignore.⁶⁰

How long the government's picture of the conflict can be sustained is an open question. But then again, the name of the game is access, and Russia is in the driver's seat.⁶¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Valeriy Vyzhutovich, Interview with Sergei Stepashin, as reported in FBIS-SOV-95-043, 6 March 1995, p36.

² Oleg Falichev, "FCS will Certainly Publish Information on Who Helped Dudayev and How," Krasnaya Zvezda, 21 January 1995, p2.

³ Joan Beecher Eichrodt, "Internet Insurrection," Transitions Online, at www.transitions-online.org.

⁴ As reported on 29 March 2000 on the web site of www.polit.ru.

⁵ Moscow NTV, 1030 GMT 14 August 1999, as translated from the FBIS web page on 15 August 1999.

⁶ Radiostantsiya Ekho Moskvyy, 17 August 1999.

⁷ Petr Polkovnikov, "A Painful Spot," Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, No 31, 13-19 August 1999, p1 as translated by FBIS on its FBIS web page on 29 August 1999.

⁸ Vadim Markushin, "War and the Press," Krasnaya Zvezda, 21 August 1999, p3 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 26 August 1999.

⁹ Daniel Williams, "This Time, Russian TV is Sour on Rebels in Caucasus," Washington Post Service, 22 August 1999.

¹⁰ Russian Public TV, 5:00 PM, 30 August 1999, as translated by FBIS on its web page on 30 August 1999.

¹¹ Vladimir Yermolin, "Kvashnin Opens Second Front...against Russian Mass Media," Izvestiya, 9 September 1999, p1 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 9 September 1999.

¹² Floriana Fossato, "Media Support Bombing Chechnya," RFE/RL, Moscow, 23 September 1999.

¹³ Dmitriy Nikolayev, "Previous Methods are not Working: Extremists' Psywar Efforts are not Yet Producing Tangible Results," Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, No 40, 15 October 1999, p2 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 21 October 1999.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, Eichrodt.

-
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Peter Feuilherade, "Russia's Media War over Chechnya," BBC Online Network, 19 November 1999.
- 18 Geoffrey York, "How Russians Learned to Love the War," The Globe and Mail (Canada), 4 November 1999, page unknown.
- 19 Feuilherade, *ibid.*
- 20 Andrey Norkin, Russian NTV, 0400 GMT 12 October 1999, as translated by FBIS on its web page on 12 October 1999.
- 21 Moscow RIA, 1539 GMT 18 November 1999 as translated by FBIS and on its web page on 18 November 1999.
- 22 Olga Kokorekina, RTV, 1700 GMT, 21 October 1999 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 21 October 1999.
- 23 ITAR-TASS, 1056 GMT 7 November 1999 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 7 November 1999.
- 24 Aleksey Belyanchev, Aleksandr Chuykov, Mikhail Klimentyev, and Dmitriy Astakhov, "Hidden War. Concerning Events in Chechnya with No Military Censorship," Izvestiya, 2 November 1999, p7 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 3 November 1999.
- 25 Grigoriy Krichevskiy, Moscow NTV, 0900 GMT 10 December 1999 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 10 December 1999.
- 26 Andrei Krasnov and Viktor Smirnov, "From the Russian Information Bureau," Kommersant, 16 October 1999, p3 as reported in The Current Digest, Vol 51, No 42, p17-18.
- 27 INTERFAX, 30 December 1999.
- 28 Judith Matloff, "Kremlin Toughens its Stance on the Foreign Media," The Christian Science Monitor, 23 December 1999, p7.
- 29 Yevgenia Borisova, "In Chechnya, a War against the Press," Moscow Times, 5 January 2000.
- 30 Aleksey Pobortsev, Russian NTV, 1500 GMT 25 October 1999 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 25 October 1999.
- 31 Aleksandr Kharchenko and Andrey Shirokov, ITAR-TASS, 0159 GMT 29 November 1999 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 29 November 1999.
- 32 Moscow NTV, 0900 GMT, 6 December 1999 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 6 December 1999.
- 33 Maksim Shevchenko, "The West Begins to Operate According to Kosovo Scenario," Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 8 December 1999 p3 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 8 December 1999.
- 34 INTERFAX, 0925 GMT 21 January 2000 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 21 January 2000.
- 35 Moscow RIA, 1403 GMT 11 February 2000 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 11 February 2000.

³⁶ ORT 1, 1800 GMT 5 March 2000 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 5 March 2000.

³⁷ Igor Litvinenko, "Preventive Measure; it was used against Izvestia in Volga Military District," Izvestia, 28 January 2000 p1 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 31 January 2000.

³⁸ Alla Tuchkova, "Andrey Babitskiy Story Becomes Ever More Complicated," Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Electronic Version) 5 February 2000, as translated by FBIS on its web page on 8 February 2000.

³⁹ ORT 1, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Igor Yadykin, "Information is an Awesome Weapon," Krasnaya Zvezda, 2 March 2000 Internet version, as translated by FBIS on its web page on 1 March 2000.

⁴¹ Ren TV, 1145 GMT 13 May 2000, as translated by FBIS on its web page on 13 May 2000.

⁴² Russian TV RTR, 1900 GMT 12 May 2000, as translated by FBIS on its web page on 12 May 2000.

⁴³ Kavkaz-Tsentr News Agency, 1041 GMT, 11 February 2000 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 11 February 2000.

⁴⁴ Kavkaz-Tsentr News Agency, 0530 GMT, 29 March 2000 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 29 March 2000.

⁴⁵ Kavkaz-Tsentr News Agency, 0530 GMT 31 March 2000 as translated by FBIS on its web page on 31 March 2000.

⁴⁶ Fred Weir, "Hide-and-Seek with Russia's News Minders," Christian Science Monitor, 18 January 2000.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey York, "How Russians Learned to Love the War," The Globe and Mail (Canada), 4 November 1999, page unknown.

⁴⁸ Feuilherade, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Matloff, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Charles Fenyvesi, "Putin to Fight Chechens and the News Media," RFE/RL Watchlist, 7 January 2000.

⁵¹ AP, "Russia Denies Media Reports on Casualties," Dallas Morning News, 15 January 2000.

⁵² Brian Bonner, Knight Ridder Newspapers, "Chechen War Takes Growing Toll on Russian Army," Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 19 January 2000.

⁵³ Peter Graff, "Russian TV Says Sidelined for Reporting Losses," Reuters, 23 January 2000.

⁵⁴ Jamie Dettmer, "Putin Revives Soviet-Style Media Curbs in Russia," Washington Times, 27 February 2000, pC12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Thomas A Dine, "Truth is also a Casualty in Grozny," Wall Street Journal Europe, February 8, 2000.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Moscow, 15 March 2000 as downloaded from the Johnson List on 15 March 2000.

⁵⁹ Paul F Duke, Noyce to Wage Chechnya War," Reuters/Variety, 21 January 2000.

⁶⁰ Olga Oliker, "Moths to the Flame: Russian Urban Operations in Chechnya, 1994-2000," May 2000 forthcoming publication of the RAND Corporation.

Disclaimer

**The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence**