

# THE OFFICER

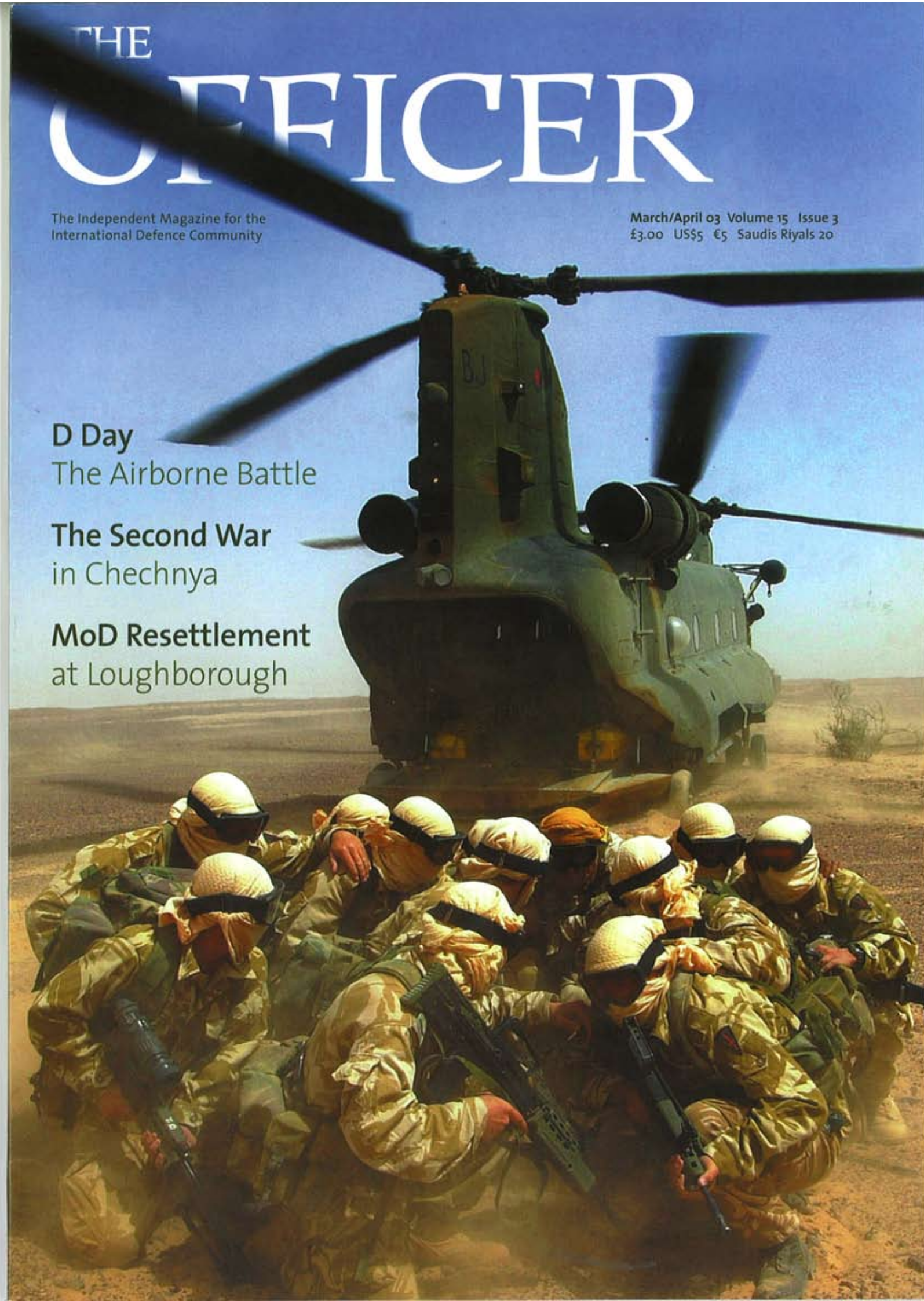
The Independent Magazine for the  
International Defence Community

March/April 03 Volume 15 Issue 3  
£3.00 US\$5 €5 Saudi Riyals 20

**D Day**  
The Airborne Battle

**The Second War**  
in Chechnya

**MoD Resettlement**  
at Loughborough





# The Empire Strikes Back

by Marcel de Haas

Major Marcel de Haas looks at the current Chechen war and outlines the historical background of Chechen-Russian relations. He explains the course of the conflict as well as the Russian and Chechen strategies.

'The Chechens have a history of showing fierce resistance against Russian occupation, which goes back to the Russian Tsarist Empire'

In two successive articles, I attempt to describe the second Chechen conflict, which started in autumn 1999. The levels of strategy, as depicted in the figure, are the leading threads running through both articles. This first article starts with some historical outlines of Chechen-Russian relations to give the background of the present conflict. Then I go on to elaborate on the course of the conflict before explaining Russia's grand strategy as well as the strategy and operations of the Chechens. I end by adding some conclusions and an assessment. In my second article, I will focus on the use of Russian air power in this conflict and on the Chechen response to this type of military force.

## Background

Chechnya is a small republic in the Russian Federation (RF). To really understand the Chechen conflict two premises are essential. First, the Chechens have a history of showing fierce resistance against Russian occupation, which goes back to the expansion of the Russian Tsarist Empire in the 19th century.

Second, to the Chechens tribal adherence outweighs a nation state.

Due to the disorder after the break up of the USSR, it was not until 1994 that Russian President Yeltsin deemed it necessary to respond to Chechnya's attempted secession. From December 1994 until August 1996, Russian Forces intervened in Chechnya, later known as the first Chechen conflict. However, as a result of heavy casualties and several hostage-takings, as well as the recapture of cities such as Grozny by the Chechens, the Russians were forced to sign a truce. Defeated, the last Russian Forces left Chechnya in December 1996.

From 1996 until 1999, Chechnya regained its virtually independent status. However, the country became a centre of anarchy, in which abductions, especially of foreigners, became a major source of income for local warlords. In October 1999, Russian Forces for the second time invaded Chechnya.

Chechens belong to some 135–150 clans. Recent history makes it clear that, as a result of a lack of 'national feeling' and in the absence of the 'foreign invader', Chechens will fight against each other. For instance, President Dudayev as well as his successor Maskhadov experienced a number of assassination attempts. Especially under Maskhadov, central power was lacking and warlords ruled over large parts of Chechnya. These two premises hamper any attempt to establish solid governance over Chechnya, either by the Russians or by the Chechens themselves.

Russian authorities have always tended to portray all Chechen fighters as 'bandits and terrorists'. However, distinctions can be made between the three different groups of Chechen armed resistance. First was the official Chechen Government, represented by President Aslan Maskhadov, a former Soviet army colonel. The government was mainly made up of moderate, pro-western individuals. Second, there were small, uncoordinated

locally orientated armed groups, whose main interest was the revenge of killed relatives. The third group was the militarised and well-structured extremist-Islamic organisation of the so-called *Wahhabis*. The Chechen commanders in charge of the incursions into Dagestan, in August–September 1999, Basayev and Khattab, belonged to this group.

## Course of the Conflict

### Phase one: The air campaign (September 1999)

For weeks Russia mounted an air campaign against Chechnya in which not only the insurgents withdrawing from Dagestan were targeted, but also strategic objectives such as telephone and electricity infrastructures, water reservoirs and the airport of the capital, Grozny. Tactical targets destroyed were military bases, bridges, roads and vehicles. Many civilians were killed as a result of the air strikes. Colonel-General Anatoly Kornukov, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Air Forces (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily*, VVS), consecutively denied these allegations of civilian casualties and collateral damage.

### Phase two: The installation of a security cordon in northern Chechnya (October–November 1999)

Putin's statement on 1 October that the authority of Chechen President Maskhadov and of his government was illegitimate was the signal to start the ground campaign. The objective was to capture territory to establish a security zone up to the river Terek, north of Grozny, officially to prevent any further incursions into RF territory. The Russian Forces used 'slow and steady' tactics, a minimum risk approach, sending in infantry only after heavy artillery and air bombardment, to avoid the heavy casualties of the first Chechen conflict.

On 15 October, the Commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces, General Kazantsev, announced that the security zone, comprising one-third of Chechnya, was complete. After this, and although officially denied, Russian troops made efforts to encircle Grozny in preparation for an invasion of the Chechen capital. On 12 November Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city, was taken. At the end of that month Russian Forces largely surrounded Grozny and held more than 50 per cent of Chechnya.

### Phase three: The occupation of the larger part of Chechnya, including Grozny (November 1999–February 2000)

On 4 December Grozny was fully blockaded by Russian troops. By 13 December the

Russians had regained control of Grozny's airport. However, the next day Russian Forces met fierce resistance in advancing into the outskirts of Grozny. But by 3 February 2000 the Federal Forces held half of Grozny. In the following days, 2000 Chechen fighters pulled out of their capital into the southern mountains. The Russians had recaptured Grozny.

### Phase four: The battle for the southern mountains (March 2000–January 2001)

From mid-February 2000, VVS bombed Chechen positions in the southern mountains, where around 8000 fighters were believed to be hiding. The Chechens benefited from the mountainous terrain in their hit-and-run attacks on the Russian troops. Still lacking a sufficient counter-insurgency doctrine, the Russian Forces were unable to deal with the Chechen guerrilla tactics and to complete the operation.

### Phase five: The switch from a military operation to an FSB-led anti-terrorist operation (January 2001–present)

In January 2001, President Putin announced that the military campaign in Chechnya was successfully completed and that this allowed turning over command of the 'anti-terrorist operation' from the military to the Federal Security Service, the FSB (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*). The FSB would further restore Russian federal law and order in Chechnya by employing special units (*spetsnaz*) in conducting extensive search-and-destroy operations against rebel groups and their commanders.

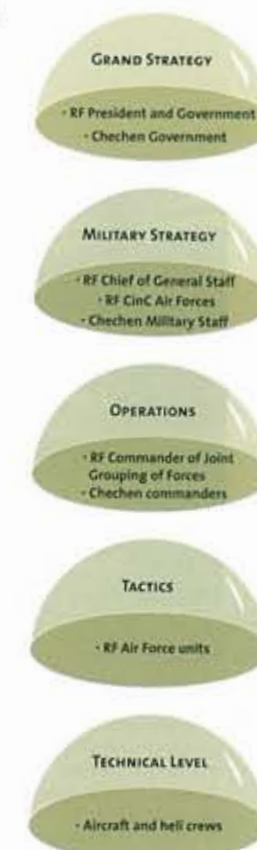
Although Russian officials claimed that the military conflict had ended, the Chechens continued their guerrilla warfare not only in the southern mountains, but also throughout Chechnya and even by bomb attacks and incursions into Dagestan and Ingushetia. In September 2002, three years after the second Chechen conflict had started, the official total (MoD forces and troops of the power ministries) of Russian soldiers killed was 4500, which exceeded the loss of around 4000 servicemen in the first Chechen conflict. Also according to Russian officials, 12,500 Russians had been wounded and nearly 14,000 Chechen fighters killed.

## Russian Grand Strategy

Economic, internal and external politics, as well as military and ideological grounds gave rise to the second Russian invasion of autumn 1999. The motives for this invasion can be divided into structural and opportunistic ones.

Structural motives are present in the fields of economics, geo-strategy and internal

'Putin was on his way to the leadership of the country. A successful campaign in Chechnya would strengthen his position'



Levels of strategy in the second Chechen conflict (1999–)

Below: A Russian platoon of approximately 30 airborne soldiers. The overall quality of Russian troops is mixed.





politics. The economic drive was the presence of oil in the area of the Caspian Sea and in Chechnya. Oil was and is an important source of income for Russia. Therefore Russia had an economic interest in safeguarding the pipelines through Chechnya and the petrochemical industry on Chechen territory.

Furthermore, Russia considers the Caucasus to be of vital strategic importance, as it leads towards Turkey and the Middle East. In order to maintain its influence in that area, a stable southern border, on which Chechnya is situated, is an essential prerequisite.

Concerning internal politics, Russia considered the secession of Chechnya as a threat to its integrity. This could create a domino effect; other entities within the RF might follow this example, which could eventually lead to the break up of the RF.

Secondly, opportunistic motives can be found in the fields of internal, military and ideological politics. Putin was on his way to the leadership of the country. A successful campaign in Chechnya would strengthen his position.

The military motives were twofold. First, the Russian generals were keen to have their revenge for the humiliating defeat they suffered in 1996. Second, the top brass wished to increase the defence budget with the intention of modernising and strengthening the Armed Forces. A victory in Chechnya would increase their means of achieving this.

'The Russian generals were keen to have revenge for the humiliating defeat they suffered in the first Chechen war in 1996'



Russian military personnel emplaning at Lipetsk air base. Experienced fighter pilot-instructors from the combat training centre at Lipetsk were allegedly sent to Chechnya, to fill the gap of well-trained fighter pilots

Finally, the ideological argument was the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, which is a constant theme in Russian foreign as well domestic policy. Internationally, Russia pointed at the Islamic terror attacks in Central Asia, developments in Afghanistan, and domestically at the incursions by Islamic extremists in Dagestan and the installation of Islamic rule in Chechnya. Often these developments have been portrayed as

connected, especially to Osama bin Laden's terror network.

The most likely direct impetus for the decision to use force was the incursions into Dagestan and a number of bomb attacks in Russia. One explosion occurred in Dagestan, three explosions in Moscow, and one in Volgograd, all between 31 August and 16 September 1999. However, to this day no proof has shown that Chechens were behind the bomb attacks. On the contrary, the FSB is often accused of these attacks. Another point of interest is that the invasion of Chechnya was well organised, which makes the option of a sudden decision to use military force not so likely. Probably a reason was found for conducting an already planned military campaign.

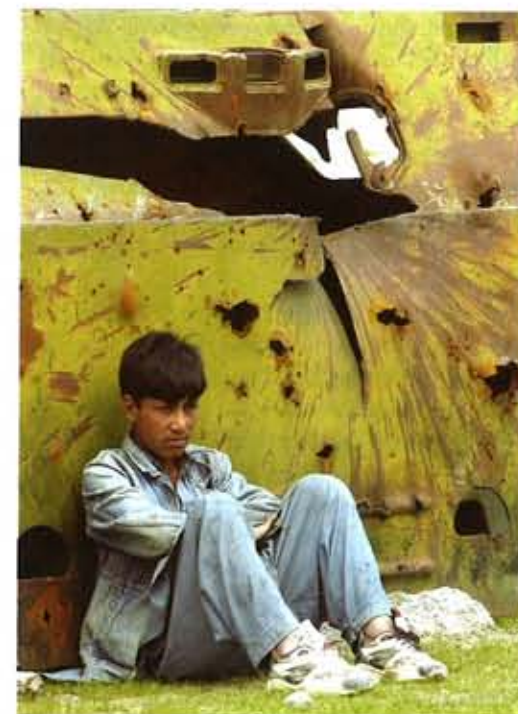
### Chechen Strategy and Operations

To reach a good understanding of the political-strategic level (grand strategy), some background explanation of the Chechen resistance is necessary. The objective of the moderate Chechen Government was to maintain an independent Chechnya. The second faction, the locally orientated armed groups lacked any specific political or military objective. The objective of the third group, the extremist-Islamic *Wahhabism* organisation, under the leadership of the field commanders Basayev and Khattab, was not only to throw the Russians out of Chechnya, but also to install Islamic rule in Chechnya and in Muslim areas on Russian territory, such as Dagestan.

At the operational and tactical level, the personnel strength of the Chechen resistance was estimated at 20,000 men, of which between 3000 and 6000 fighters defended Grozny. When the fall of Grozny was imminent, 2000 Chechen fighters pulled out of their capital into the southern mountains, where around 8000 fighters were believed to be based.

From the outset of the Russian ground campaign, Chechen fighters offered little resistance, apart from defending prepared strongholds, realising that they were no match for the large and heavily armed Russian Forces. However, in December 1999, Chechen militants started counterattacks, employing guerrilla tactics. From areas where they could not cope with the strength of the Russians, Chechen fighters withdrew, with the intention of attacking the enemy in and from the southern mountains.

The Chechen militants exploited the deteriorating weather conditions to step up attacks on federal troops and made good use of the mountainous terrain. After the recapture of Grozny in February 2000, the Chechens



continued their guerrilla warfare not only in the southern mountains, but also throughout all of Chechnya and even in the neighbouring RF republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia. The guerrilla tactics employed by the Chechens were hit-and-run attacks, mining, ambushes, and assassination of individual soldiers, urban terrorism in the occupied villages and cities, as well as sniper and (suicide) bomb attacks.

### Conclusions at a Political-Strategic Level

At the political-strategic level, Russia's emphasis was on influencing public opinion – which might also be described as information or psychological warfare. Two objectives lay at the foundation of employing information warfare in this conflict. The first was to convince the Russian nation of the inevitability of waging war against Chechnya. The second was to sustain public support during the conflict.

The bomb attacks of August–September 1999, as well as the Chechen raids into Dagestan and the traditional dislike of Chechens, created a solid foundation in Russian society in favour of conducting a war against Chechnya for a second time. Putin's leading role in the campaign guaranteed popular support for his election as President in March 2000.

To meet the second objective, tight control of the media was meant to ensure an impression of a smooth operation in Chechnya, and thus sustain support in society. The destruction of Chechen mass-media facilities (radio and television) was also part of the information warfare, to prevent broadcasting of information other than what the Russians desired.

The Russians tried to copy NATO's media campaign in the Kosovo conflict. For instance, VVS Commander Kornukov showed pictures and

videos to prove that targets were hit without causing any civilian casualties. However, public support decreased as casualties mounted. The authorities were blamed for understating casualty figures and for making the same operational-tactical mistakes as in the first conflict. In addition to this, foreign non-governmental organisations and media reported on human-rights abuses and disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force. So in spite of all efforts to control the media, eventually Russian authorities were unable to maintain a strict control on information.

Although the Russian political-military leadership achieved a military victory over Chechnya, they did not win the war politically. The Russians failed in combining military objectives with realistic political objectives. Occupation and oppression will only encourage the Chechens to continue a protracted insurgency war against the Russians. As long as the Kremlin does not recognise that this conflict can only end by a political solution, the war will continue.

### Conclusions at a Military-Strategic Level

At the military-strategic level, the change in command, from the military to the FSB, was a remarkable move. For two reasons this seems to have been a wrong decision. First, it was an error with regard to the difference in capabilities between the Armed Forces (MoD) and the troops of the power ministries. The Russians should have learned from the first Chechen conflict and the recent Dagestani conflict that a sound command-and-control structure was of vital importance for a military campaign.

In the aforementioned conflicts command by the Ministry for Internal Affairs (*Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh Del*, MVD) had failed, mostly because of poor cooperation with MoD Forces, especially with regard to calling in artillery and air support. This time another power ministry, the FSB, was ordered to take over command from the military. The choice of the FSB might

'By employing irregular warfare the Chechen fighters have been capable of damaging Russian control over Chechnya'

Above left: A local boy sits against the remains of a Russian armoured vehicle on a rifle range. Rebel resistance was clearly effective

Below: Major Marcel de Haas (far right) during an arms control inspection at Lipetsk air base.

