The Battle of Grozny
by Kyle Lockwood

The Chechen capital of Grozny awoke to a Russian bombardment on 31 December 1994. Four columns of Russian armor and infantry flooded the city, igniting one of the most brutal urban battles since the end of World War II. Despite being outgunned, a small but lethal force of Chechen rebels made the Russians fight for every street and building, tearing the city apart and nearly bankrupting the morale of Russian troops fighting in Chechnya.

The Rise of Rebellion

In 1817, the Russian Empire invaded the Caucasus region. The invasion was met with stiff resistance from the local nationalities that lived in the region. Despite having one of the strongest armies in Europe in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the Russians struggled against the native Caucasians. The Russo-Turkish War (1828-29) and the Russo-Persian War (1826-28) diverted resources and troops away from controlling the Caucasus, but following those conflicts Russia refocused its effort there. The Russians again met stiff resistance from the fierce mountain warriors, and fighting between the two sides stalled yet again during the Crimean War (1854-1856). In the aftermath of the Crimean War, Russia deployed 250,000 troops to the Caucasus to take the region. Victory was finally achieved in 1864 and the Caucasus region was annexed into the Russian Empire.

When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan declared independence and formed a single nation, the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus. This state was recognized by the world powers but was not to last. The Soviets invaded the small nation in 1920, absorbing the region into the Soviet Union in 1921. It was reorganized as the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

During World War II, the region was partially occupied by Germany, resulting in Josef Stalin disbanding the Republic and forcibly deporting thousands of locals whom he viewed as collaborating with the Nazis. The republic was restored on 9 January 1957 by Nikita Khrushchev, lasting until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it again declared its independence.

As other former Soviet republics abandoned Russia in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, President Boris Yeltsin opposed the independence movement for Chechnya. Despite claims that Chechnya was an integral part of Russia, in reality the region was a major hub for oil resources, and independence would hurt the fledgling Russian economy. Chechnya declared full independence in 1993, establishing the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.
Thousands of non-Chechen citizens fled the nation between 1991-1994, as violence flared in the small country. The Chechen economy suffered as a result of the emigration. In December 1993, a coup was attempted by a group calling themselves the Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic. The organization hoped that by seizing power they could call on Moscow for assistance to strengthen the economy and possibly rejoin the Russian Federation.

Moscow began to support the rebel factions clandestinely, providing financial support, military equipment, and mercenaries to fight the Chechen government. Russia suspended civilian flights to Chechnya and ordered border troops to establish a blockade along the Chechen border. Unmarked Russian aircraft provided air support to the rebels on the ground, and Russian Special Forces joined the rebels for an assault on Grozny.

On 26 November 1994, Russian troops and Chechen rebels assaulted the capital. The Russian-Rebel force was defeated by the Chechen government, embarrassing the administration of Boris Yeltsin, and indicating to the higher echelons of the Russian military that a conventional use of force would be needed to exert Russian influence.

Second Chechen War

The Russian withdrawal from Chechnya in 1996 left the small mountainous nation independent. Despite its independence, the First Chechen War had left the Republic in chaos. Separatist organizations all tried to gain control, leading to greater dysfunction. With the rise of separatist groups, extremists began to emerge, especially in the form of Islamist Wahhabism. On 2 August 1999, the Islamic International Brigade invaded Dagestan from Chechnya, igniting the Second Chechen War.

The Russians countered the Islamic invasion in Dagestan and launched an invasion of Chechnya on 26 August. An air war commenced operations in Chechnya. This massive air war destroyed 30 bridges, 80 vehicles, and mined 250 kilometers of mountain roads. The Russian Air Force launched 1,700 sorties a day over Chechnya, lasting until 25 September 1999. The air war led to 100,000 Chechens flee their homes, creating a refugee crisis in the neighboring Ingushetia.

The Russians launched their ground offensive into Chechnya on 5 October 1999. They found themselves again bogged down in heavy fighting with Chechen insurgents, although in this campaign much of the fighting took place in the surrounding mountains. In early December, the Russians began their assault on Grozny. This assault was far different from the 1994-95 Battle of Grozny. The Russians held their armored forces back while they subjected the city to an intense aerial and artillery bombardment. Russian infantry, trained in urban warfare, supported armored forces as they thrust into the city.

On 10 January 2000, the Chechens launched a counteroffensive to support the garrison in Grozny. During the assault, the Chechens ambushed a Russian supply column that killed 26 troops, the highest one-day death toll in the war. The Russians responded by sending tens of thousands of troops into the city in a three-pronged assault. The city again fell to Russian control. The siege and fighting had left the Chechen capital decimated.

In 2003, the United Nations called Grozny “the most destroyed city on the planet.”

The Russian victory in Grozny led to the downfall of the Chechen Republic. Chechnya was reintegrated back under Russian control, but the conventional victory did not mean the insurgency was over. From 2000-2009, the Chechens continued to wage an insurgency. While the counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya has ended, Chechen terrorists continue to strike targets in Russia, with notable examples such as the Beslan School siege and Moscow Theater hostage crisis.