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Russian Armed Forces: A Learning Bear or a One-Trick Pony

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RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES: A LEARNING BEAR OR ONE-TRICK PONY

INTRODUCTION

February 24th, 2022, marks the commencement of Russia's general invasion of Ukraine. The fighting has been fierce, destruction is widespread, and there are numerous reports of terrible atrocities by the Russian Armed Forces (RAF). The RAF has, to this point at least, been largely unsuccessful in accomplishing its operational goals. The effectiveness of the RAF has rightly been called into question. The RAF has been dominated in the information domain by Ukraine, enabling western nations to increase support for Ukraine. RAF formations appear to have been unprepared for a protracted conflict with units running out of essential supplies. Many military theorists hypothesize that the RAF was overconfident and did not expect the fierce Ukrainian resistance it is currently facing. Others identify the apparent lack of Command and Control (C2) and the lack of joint integration as key aspects of the RAF's failures observed to date. The lumbering advance that, of late, appears to have degraded to massive use of indiscriminate fires begs the question is the modern RAF just a reincarnation of the Soviet and early post-soviet RAF of old? Has it learned nothing in the past 40 years?

To answer these questions this paper will look back at a scenario that, operationally, has many similarities. The First and Second Chechen Wars provide an interesting case study of the RAF's ability to be a learning organization. While the First Chechen War is characterized by many of the same RAF failures currently being observed in the Ukraine, the Second is a different story. After a humiliating defeat in 1996, the RAF returned to Chechnya in 1999 and demonstrated that it had overcome the operational failures of the first war.

This paper will establish that the RAF is a learning organization. It learns from failure and rapidly implements improvements. Although the RAF's recent shortcomings in Ukraine will

provide an interesting case study as more credible information comes available, one should not underestimate the RAF's ability to learn and improve. It is too early to know why the RAF is failing at seemingly basic operational concepts. What is certain is that the RAF has the proven ability to learn and rapidly become a more capable force.

WHAT IS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

To prove that the RAF is a learning organization one must first define what characteristics define a learning organization. There are countless studies defining 'Learning Organizations' and what their specific characteristics are. Many of these are focused on profit-driven business and not fully relevant to militaries facing the life and death challenges of combat.¹ A common dominator does emerge, however, that is proven among successful organizations and compatible with military challenges. A learning organization must have the ability to, 1, recognize lessons, 2, adapt its organization, 3, incorporate new knowledge, 4, inform its people and 5, make effective use of technology.² This model provides an effective template to evaluate the RAF's ability to learn from the First Chechen War onto the Second.

FIRST CHECHEN WAR

The First Chechen War can generally be characterized by three themes, unpopular, unprepared, and unsuccessful. There are numerous aspects of this conflict that have striking similarities to Russia's performance to date in Ukraine and are therefore worthy of further analysis. The First Chechen War was widely unpopular in Russia. The Russian economy was left in tatters following the chaotic transition to democracy and capitalism in the early 1990s.

¹ Heather Keathley, Dr Eileen Van Aken, and Dr Geet Letens, "Learning Organization Characteristics in Deployed Military Units" Proceedings of the *American Society for Engineering Management 2015 International Annual Conference*, 1-2.

² Michael J. Marquardt, *Building the Learning Organization: Mastering the 5 Elements for Corporate Learning* (Palo Alto: Davis-Black Publishing, 2002), 235.

Uncontrolled inflation with a shrinking economy meant that many Russian citizens could barely afford necessities in 1994. A costly conflict on the fringes of the federation involving conscripted forces did not resonate with Russians struggling to afford groceries. A negative cycle ensued where the unpopular impression at home reduced morale at the front. Poor morale at the front reduced effectiveness and contributed to an increasingly negative impression of the war at home and in the media.³ Colonel-General Kvashnin attributed that the increasing opposition to the war invariable hurt the morale and effectiveness of the Russian soldiers.⁴ Had the Russian forces been better prepared for the conflict and/or been able to achieve decisive successes, this cycle may have been broken.

Unprepared

The RAF was unprepared for the fighting in Chechnya. In preparation for the conflict ad hoc 'groups' of Russian Army conscripts, Internal Affairs soldiers (MVD), Border Guards, and Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) troops were organized under the Minister of Defence, Pavel Grachev.⁵ For the purpose of this essay the collection of members and soldiers serving under the MOD during the conflicts discussed will be collectively referred to as the Russian Armed Forces (RAF). The North Caucasus Military District (NCMD), a previously administrative HQ, was suddenly given operational command over a combined, multi-agency force, an operational level task for which it was not prepared.

Grachev directed on 29 November 1994 that the operation shall commence on 7 Dec. When General Vorobyov was refused more time to prepare the ad hoc groups for combined

³ Jacob W. Kipp, "Russia's Wars in Chechnya," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 54.

⁴ The Caucasus conflict and Russian security: The Russian armed forces confront Chechnya III. The battle for Grozny, 1–26 January 1995. 88.

⁵ Brett C. Jenkinson, "Tactical Observations from the Grozny Combat Experience" (master's thesis, Fort Leavenworth, 2002), 45.

operations, he resigned rather than take command.⁶ After being cleared of charges for refusing to take command, General Vorobyov gave a press conference. General Vorobyov openly criticized the Russian government and MoD for rushing the “Unotypical operation” and cites the lack of planning and training for the operation as the cause for lack of success.⁷ His interview added fuel to the fire of opposition to the increasingly unpopular war.

Many soldiers and tactical commanders had no urban combat experience, and most had limited military experience.⁸ Most of the junior officers were fresh out of the academy with no military experience.⁹ The soldiers from the multiple agencies had virtually no collective experience working together in combined groupings. Despite the unprepared nature of the forces assembled, overconfidence permeated much of the RAF senior ranks. The Minister of Defence General Pavel Grachev publicly stated that Grozny could be seized by an airborne regiment or two in a matter of hours.¹⁰ The aggressive timeline laid out in the campaign plan is indicative of the overestimation of RAF capabilities. The plan discounts the complexity of the terrain, weather, and time of year, along with an underestimation of Chechnia’s will and ability to fight. Commencing the conflict unprepared and overconfident would prove to be a receipt for failure.

Unpopular

Russian leaders and RAF commanders who had spent their careers under Soviet censorship were inexperienced with the role and power of free media in a democracy. Russian leadership made no attempt to justify the conflict to the average Russian citizen.¹¹ Meanwhile,

⁶ Kipp, "Russia's Wars in Chechnya,"..., 53.

⁷ “Russia: General Vorobyov Criticises Authorities over Chechnya” YouTube video, 1:29, posted by “Associated Press,” 21 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9G45YyzlCAY>

⁸ Brad Nickens, "In Search of Post-Soviet Operational Art: A Case Study in Russian Military Operation in the North Caucasus Since 1991" (master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2009), 7.

⁹ Jenkinson, "Tactical Observations from the Grozny Combat Experience"..., 37.

¹⁰ Ibid, 36.

¹¹ Elena Koltsova, “Change in the Coverage of the Chechen Wars: Reasons and Consequences,” *Javnost - The Public*, Vol 7, no. 3 (2000), 44.

private media and journalists' freedom had been enshrined in the new Russian constitution in 1990. As the conflict commenced Russian citizens and subsequently the media thirsted for information and particularly video imagery.

The Russian government's initial response to the war was to ignore it. Officials gave conflicting statements ranging from complete denial that anything was happening to proclamations of great victories.¹² After two weeks of silence, President Yeltsin finally acknowledged that the RAF was conducting operations in Chechnya.

The RAF failed to recognize the powerful role the media would play in shaping public support for the conflict. The RAF finally established a Special Information Center (SIC) to provide information to journalists, more than a week after the fighting commenced.¹³ Information provided at the SIC was limited and often outdated due to the slow and cumbersome RAF approval process.¹⁴ Chechnya, on the other hand, outmaneuvered them in the information domain. Movladi Udugov, and others, were accessible spokespersons for the Chechen view. The responsiveness of Chechnya to Russian journalists influenced how the war was perceived in Russia. As the view of the war turned against Russia, the RAF responded by further limiting access to information and the conflict zones under Russian control. This only made a bad situation worse. Of the 23 journalists that covered the first year of the war only six were permitted to attend media briefings by the RAF.¹⁵

As Russian casualties and failures mounted, public opinion cemented against the war. The RAF commanders and government leaders who had failed to justify the war in the first place

¹² Koltsova, "Change in the Coverage of the Chechen Wars:"..., 44.

¹³ Ibid, 44.

¹⁴ Laura Belin, "Russian Media Policy in the First and Second Chechen Campaigns" Paper presented at the 52nd Conference of the Political Studies Association, Aberdeen Scotland, 5-8 April 2002, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

were unable to turn the tide of negative publicity. This failure to identify the importance of the media and information domain during a war in a democratic state was a severe loss. The resulting lack of public support for the conflict, coinciding with Yeltsin's re-election campaign, was a significant factor in Russia agreeing to a ceasefire on Chechen terms.¹⁶

Unsuccessful

The RAF had rapidly developed a four-phase plan that would see three Task Forces rapidly advance into Chechnya and converge on Grozny within the first two days.¹⁷ The plan identified seizing the Capital as the main effort. 10-13 December 1994 were allocated for seizing key objectives within the city with the final stabilization phase to commence on 14 December.¹⁸ The operation played out very differently.

The ad hoc groupings that were rapidly assembled the week before the conflict, were a Command and Control (C2) nightmare. The aggressive timelines provided for each phase proved unrealistic and took substantially longer to execute. The Task Forces were eventually in a position to commence the assault on Grozny on 26 Dec.¹⁹ 15 days late and without the element of surprise, the Chechen forces were prepared for the RAF's assault. The envelopment of the city never fully occurred which provided the opposition freedom of movement in and out of the city.²⁰ Unable to coordinate precise strikes by air or artillery fire the ground forces reverted to a heavy artillery bombardment on the city. The first series of assaults were unsuccessful and ended in RAF retreat. With limited ability to communicate with flanking forces, issues of fratricide were frequent.²¹ The lack of coordination meant that joint fires from the Russian fixed and rotary

¹⁶ Koltsova, "Change in the Coverage of the Chechen Wars:" ..., 44.

¹⁷ Nickens, "In Search of Post-Soviet Operational Art: "..., 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5.

¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

²⁰ Raymond R. Lutz, "Russian Strategy in Chechnya: A Case Study in Failure" (master's thesis, Air War College, 1997), 8.

²¹ Nickens, "In Search of Post-Soviet Operational Art:" ..., 19.

wing assets were almost not nonexistent.²² Indiscriminate massing of artillery destroyed large sections of Grozny, increasing civilian casualties, and making maneuver in the urban areas even more difficult for the Russian forces.

Grozny was finally secured at the end of March 1995. Instead of giving up when Grozny finally fell, as was predicted in the plan, the Chechen fighters moved to other towns and the cycle of urban combat continued.²³ The fighting persisted until Chechen forces were able to recapture Grozny in August 1996. The loss of Grozny combined with public outcry over the war, the atrocities, and Russian casualties, brought Russia back to the negotiating table, thus ending the First Chechen War.

The RAF's failure in the First Chechen War can be attributed to overconfidence, lack of preparation, abdicating the information domain, absence of joint coordination, and poor C2. Seizing their primary objective, Grozny, took months rather than days and only at a substantial cost. Capturing Grozny proved irrelevant in breaking Chechen's will to fight and its eventual loss was ultimately more decisive in defeating Russia's will than Chechnya's. Russia's unsuccessful war in Chechnya certainly marks a low point for the RAF. In defeat, however, the RAF would learn from its mistakes.

THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR

Prepared

The RAF would not be rushed to failure in the 2nd war. The RAF began planning the second Chechen war from the humbling perspective of having been defeated there only three years earlier. Most of the commanders in the Second Chechen War had served in the First

²² Jenkinson, "Tactical Observations from the Grozny Combat Experience" 32.

²³ Quentin Hodgson, "Is the Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 26, no. 2, (June 2003): 69.

Chechen War and knew how effective Chechen fighters could be.²⁴ They had experienced the role terrain played in complicating the operating environment. Urban terrain requires different fighting skills and consumes supplies faster than open-field combat. General Kvashnin, now the Chief of General Staff for the RAF, harbored no illusions that his forces could advance and then pacify Grozny in a matter of days. He directed the development of a plan to deliberately seize and then occupy Chechnya with realistic timelines and force allocations.

With time on their side, the RAF enacted several supporting directives. Soldiers with less than 12 months of experience were initially barred from the operational units being deployed.²⁵ Although this later proved unsustainable, and the threshold was lowered to six months of experience.²⁶ Enacting these policies demonstrated the RAF's attempts to deploy experienced cohesive units to the operation.

The RAF transformed the previously administrative NCMD HQ into an operational command. By the late 1990s, the NCMD could coordinate the deployment of multiple agencies into 'Operational Groupings' within its geographical area.²⁷ The NCMD held numerous large-scale interagency exercises enabling the coordination and cooperation of border troops, MVD, and MoD units. The exercises included operational level HQ exercises to synchronize the Modus Operandi of the various agencies into a cohesive whole.²⁸ Large tactical exercises with the soldiers from all agencies improved the interoperability and C2 between units. The largest exercise, held in July 1999, deployed 15,000 soldiers from all the agencies within NCMD.²⁹ The exercises provided the units experience in urban offensive and defensive tactics, counter-terrorist

²⁴ Hodgson, "Is the Russian Bear Learning?"..., 83.

²⁵ Jenkinson, "Tactical Observations from the Grozny Combat Experience"..., 73.

²⁶ Ibid, 73

²⁷ Ibid, 73-74.

²⁸ Kipp, "Russia's Wars in Chechnya,"..., 58-59.

²⁹ Jenkinson, "Tactical Observations from the Grozny Combat Experience"..., 73.

actions, and hostage rescue responses.³⁰ An additional 7,000 soldiers were sent to the mountain warfare school in Siberia.³¹ The experience of the soldiers combined with the transformation of their operational HQ enabled an RAF that was prepared for most of the realities of fighting in Chechnya before the conflict commenced.

The plan for the Second Chechen War was deliberate. The planning took place over several months.³² Intelligence preparation also played a critical role. Understanding the human terrain was virtually absent in the first war.³³ Now a detailed understanding of the demographics of Chechnya was considered.³⁴ Detailed studies of the urban terrain were conducted. The three-dimensional avenues of approach within the urban environment were analyzed. With the new command structure, intelligence was shared between agencies and incorporated into the combined exercises that were occurring concurrently.³⁵

Experience and intelligence shaped the development of the campaign plan. There was no expectation that if Grozny were seized, the Chechens would capitulate, but securing the urban centers would remain critical to stabilizing Chechnya. The plan sought a deliberate advance that would isolate the Chechen fighters where they could then be annihilated.³⁶ The collection of agencies would be used in roles that match their capabilities and training. The improved allocation of tasks to force types enabled the RAF to develop an achievable plan.

³⁰ Ibid, 73.

³¹ G.D. Bakshi, "The war in Chechnya: A military analysis," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol 24, no. 5 (August 2000): 891-892.

³² Hodgson, "Is the Russian Bear Learning?" ..., 68-69.

³³ Ibid, 71.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nickens, "In Search of Post-Soviet Operational Art: "..., 20-21.

³⁶ Kipp, "Russia's Wars in Chechnya," ..., 59.

Popular support

Russia took the offensive on the info war early. The terror bombings that occurred in September 1999 fed the perception that Russia was under attack. Debate remains on whether the bombings were actually Chechen in origin and there are indications that government officials were able to influence the upper echelons of media corporations to secure favorable coverage.³⁷ Dissecting the legitimacy of the war's origins and potentially undue influence on supposedly free media is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear is that the Russian government was able to secure a favorable narrative to justify The Second Chechen War, something completely neglected during the first. Government leaders were routinely seen in Russian media addressing the nation about the growing threat.³⁸

The RAF's approach to the media and information domain, in general, had also significantly matured. During the first war, Russian commanders had been apprehensive to give information, which pushed journalists toward the Chechens. This time, the RAF provided a continuous flow of information to journalists. Risks to freelance journalists attempting to seek the Chechen view were well-publicized, if not exaggerated, to help maintain the RAF dominance of the information space.³⁹

The initial public outcry over the terror bombings combined with the active information operations by the RAF ensured that Russia secured public opinion for the war before it fully began. Although public opinion would oscillate throughout the conflict, the early justification

³⁷ Emil Pain, "Does Russia's Reach Exceed Its Grasp: The Chechen War," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* Vol 8, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 10-11

³⁸ Elena Koltsova, "Change in the Coverage of the Chechen Wars: Reasons and Consequences," *Javnost - The Public*, Vol 7, no. 3 (2000), 51

³⁹ *Ibid*, 52

and continuous feed of info from the RAF enabled the Russian view to maintain the upper hand with its domestic audience.

Successful

The RAF invasion began at the end of September 1999. The invasion of Chechnya used purpose-built formations to advance south to the Terek River. The Forces then set out to encircle Grozny. The urban warfare tactics that had been practiced during the summer exercises were tested in the towns that surround Grozny before deliberately securing Grozny itself.⁴⁰ With key urban centers secured the RAF set up for the final phase. Although Grozny had been encircled and the urban fighting had been fierce, thousands of Chechen fighters had managed to escape to the hills.⁴¹ The RAF established a deliberate ‘anvil and hammer operation on the remaining Chechen strongholds.⁴² The annihilation of these strongholds effectively eliminated organized Chechen resistance. The RAF’s performance in the second war was superior to its operations in the first.

The RAF had resolved many of the C2 challenges that plagued it in the First Chechen War. The RAF had found that the ad hoc composite units of the First Chechen War had suffered casualties 2-3 times higher than usual.⁴³ The Operational Groupings (OGV) were not ad hoc combinations of troops from multiple agencies but actual operational formations. The task-specific exercises of the summer had improved the interoperability of units within the NCMD. The units were employed in roles specific to their capabilities. Units with urban operations

⁴⁰ Hodgson, “Is the Russian Bear Learning? An Operational and Tactical Analysis of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2002,” ..., 70.

⁴¹ Bakshi, “The war in Chechnya: A military analysis,” ..., 894.

⁴² Ibid, 894.

⁴³ Timothy L. Thomas “The Caucasus conflict and Russian security: The Russian armed forces confront Chechnya III. The battle for Grozny, 1–26 January 1995,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol 10, no. 1, (March 1997), 88.

experience would surround and clear the area before handing over control to MVD units.⁴⁴ The improved interoperability between units enabled these effective handovers. The interoperability also allowed a more decentralized control of key combat support elements.

During the Second Chechen War, the RAF decentralized the control of fire support, engineers, and air defence.⁴⁵ By maintaining command at higher levels but having them controlled at lower levels, these enablers were able to be assigned where they could influence the battle while being responsive to the units they were supporting. Fire observers and forward air controllers were assigned down to the company level. The delegation of fire support enabled the Russian units to rely on fires to destroy enemy positions rather than advancing through ambushes.⁴⁶

During the previous war, the RAF had attempted a rapid spearhead to the center of the city. That advance was met with ambushes and unrelenting sniper fire causing many casualties and devastating morale.⁴⁷ This time the RAF advanced into the city methodically. Using fires to either destroy Chechen fighting positions or force their withdrawal. The bit and hold methodology was time-consuming but effective at reducing RAF casualties and defeating Chechen control.

Ultimately, the RAF succeeded in achieving its military objectives. The morality of its operation is rightly questioned. From a purely combat point of view, however, the RAF had significantly improved its effectiveness from the First Chechen War. The second time around the RAF properly evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of its forces and its enemy. They took the

⁴⁴ Jenkinson, "Tactical Observations from the Grozny Combat Experience"... , 75.

⁴⁵ Nickens, "In Search of Post-Soviet Operational Art: "... , 23.

⁴⁶ This paper does not defend the morality of using massed fires or fuel-air explosives in urban areas. This section is meant only to emphasize that the C2 challenges of the first Chechen war had been improved and the RAF's use of Joint fires was subsequently enabled. The ethics and morality of how Russia chose to employ its Joint fires are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴⁷ Thomas "The Caucasus conflict and Russian security:"... ,58 & 84.

time to prepare their forces and provide specialized training for the challenges of urban and mountain warfare. The purpose-built groups benefited from improved C2 and were subsequently enabled by joint fires. Throughout the RAF sought to maintain the initiative in the information domain which contributed to their success. The improvements made by the RAF in the 3 years between conflicts demonstrate its ability to learn from failures and rapidly implement effective solutions.

RAF IS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

When viewing the difference between the First and Second Chechen Wars through the lens of a learning organization the RAF was clearly able to demonstrate the five general characteristics of a learning organization. Recognize lessons; the RAF correctly identified several failures from the first war and underwent deliberate efforts to overcome them. Adapt its organization; It reshaped the administrative HQ into an effective Joint Command and reorganized the units into fit-for-purpose formations. Incorporate new knowledge; the RAF improved its understanding of the operating environment and force employment therein. Inform its people; The soldiers were properly trained, and the RAF maintained the initiative in the information domain contributing to improved morale of its forces and public support. Finally, make effective use of technology; although there are virtually no technological differences between the two wars, the RAF was able to employ the technologies it possessed more effectively, enabling joint fires and improved C2.

The RAF's performance from the First Chechen War to the end of the Second demonstrates that it is a learning organization. The RAF, however, did not stop learning. Following the Second Chechen War, Russia has continued its modernization sparking concerns in the west over its resurging military power.

RESURGENT RUSSIA

The RAF continued its modernization following the Second Chechen War. RAF funding had reached an all-time low in 1999 at less than 10 billion USD.⁴⁸ Since 2000 the RAF budgets have increased substantially and consistently. As the Russian economy improved the RAF has been able to secure an increasing percentage of GDP. RAF budget as a percentage of GDP has risen from below 2% in the early 2000s to being consistently over 3% for the past several years.⁴⁹ Despite variations in reporting as well as shifts in the Russian economy, the RAF has maintained annual funding of over 40 billion USD for the past 10 years.⁵⁰ The RAF has used this increased funding to modernize its conventional forces as well as expand into emerging domains like Information Operations (IO) and cyber. The rapid increase in Russian military capabilities has been a significant cause for concern for many NATO countries.

The RAF has consistently allocated approximately 30% of its annual budget to procurement and Research & Development (R&D).⁵¹ Together these will be referred to as Russia's modernization. The RAF's financial commitment to modernization has enabled many units to upgrade their tactical equipment. Currently, approximately 70% of the RAF has received new equipment since 2011.⁵² Russia's investment in the defense industry has made it an attractive supplier of modern military hardware. Since 2000 Russia has seen increasing sales of its most modern equipment to other major military powers. Russian military exports consistently

⁴⁸ Keith Crane, Olga Olikier and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities*. (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2019), 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 9-10.

⁵⁰ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (DIA Publications, 2017), 20.
https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Russia_Military_Power_Report_2017.pdf

⁵¹ Crane, et al, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: ...*, 12.

⁵² Ibid, 15.

surpassed its procurement expenses from 1998 to 2013.⁵³ The self-sufficiency of this defense investment has fielded impressive capabilities.

The RAF's modernization goes beyond upgrading their legacy conventional forces. The RAF has invested substantially in developing new capabilities that have collectively been termed by the west as Anti-Access, Area-Denial (A2AD). The development and deployment of A2AD systems have sparked concern in many NATO countries over Russia's resurgent capabilities. Western military theorists evaluating the recent demonstrations and deployment of A2AD capabilities commonly cite three main areas of the RAF's development.⁵⁴

Information / Cyber Domain

Russia has significantly increased the tempo of its operations in the info domain. RAF doctrine cites the importance of information dominance and seizing the initiative early while also denying the adversary effective use of the information domain.⁵⁵ RAF's use of the info domain will contribute to the deception and denial of RAF operations and challenge its adversary to respond effectively. When effectively employed, information operations can improve one's freedom of action while reducing that of the adversary.

The US senate select committee on national security cites that Russia's military intelligence agency (GRU) hacking operations have increased in frequency, complexity, and scale in the last 10 years and now represent a significant threat to US national interests.⁵⁶ Russia's use of "troll farms" to conduct large-scale mis/disinformation operations in countries around the world to further Russian interests is an example of the emphasis Russia is putting on

⁵³ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*: 12; and Crane, et al, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces*: ..., 17.

⁵⁴ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power* ..., 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁵⁶ Select Committee on Intelligence, *Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns Panel 2*. (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2017), 19.

the information domain and its use of cyberspace. Although many of the information operations currently of concern for Western intelligence agencies may not be directly tied to the RAF, Russia's ability to direct the execution of large-scale information operations combined with the RAF's new capabilities represents a significant and credible threat.

Strat Air Operations and Precision Strike

RAF's emphasis on Strategic Air Operations is not new and dates to the first half of the 20th century. The RAF's resurgence, however, has placed particular emphasis on revitalizing this capability. New Russian doctrine emphasizes the role of Strategic Air Operations in both the defensive and offensive phases of war.⁵⁷ Russia's fielding of advanced aircraft, improvement of the indigenous precision-guided munitions industry, and hypersonic weapons provide the credibility for this doctrinal concept.

Integrated Air Defense System

While the RAF doctrine emphasizes the role of Strategic Air Operations, it also seeks to deny this ability to its adversaries through its Integrated Air Defence System (IADS). Russia is still developing its latest IADS but already it has already fielded some very capable platforms which represent key components in any of its A2AD deployments.⁵⁸ Many of Russia's new platforms have declared ranges and capabilities that exceed those of equivalent NATO platforms.⁵⁹ The apparent asymmetric advantage of new Russian systems provides a credible challenge to western air power.

⁵⁷ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power ...*, 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Dr. Herb Kemp. "Strategic Security in Northern Europe: The Implications of Russian Anti-Access/Area Denial Strategies in Developing Complex Threat Environments." *Journal of Strategic Security* Vol 14, no. 1 (2020): 80-83.

The Fait Accompli

In 2014, the RAF openly demonstrated its capabilities in the emerging domains. Russia's annexation of Crimea, in 2014, represented in many ways the convergence of the RAF's modernization. The RAF coordinated across multiple domains simultaneously while being supported by an aggressive IO campaign.⁶⁰ Disciplined and specially trained soldiers rapidly seized key locations. The supporting IO provided a degree of deception and deniability to the operation.⁶¹ The annexation of Crimea serves as a proof of concept for a 'fait accompli', at least on a small scale.

Concurrent with its Crimean operation the RAF began a hybrid war in eastern Ukraine. Combining IO, indigenous separatist elements, and conventional with special forces, these Russian-backed separatists were able to seize control in areas of eastern Ukraine.⁶² The separatists received massive fire support from the RAF as well as weapons, material, and military advice. Though not perfect this hybrid war proved to be a major challenge for Ukraine which, to date, it has been unable to overcome.⁶³

CONCLUSION

The RAF is a modern fighting force capable of learning from its mistakes and rapidly implementing effective improvements. Between the First and Second Chechen Wars, the RAF was able to identify several key reasons that led to the operational failure. Comprehensive and systemic changes were implemented and in less than three years the RAF returned the Chechnya and proved its operational success.

⁶⁰ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power*: 13.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Congressional Research Service. *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*. Report for Members and Committees of Congress, (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 25.

Following the Second Chechen War, the RAF's defence budget quadrupled. The substantial funding increase has allowed for an aggressive modernization strategy. Most RAF units are operating equipment less than 10 years old. Its continuous development of modern military hardware has made Russia a leading supplier of military technology and platforms around the world. The RAF has also expanded its modernization efforts into emerging domains and capabilities. The RAF now possesses significant capabilities in the IO & cyber domains while benefiting from the Russian government's ability to direct large-scale mis/disinformation operations in support of its national interests.

Since 2014 the RAF has demonstrated its boldness. The annexation of Crimea demonstrates its ability to execute a *fait accompli*. While in eastern Ukraine the RAF employed hybrid war to pry regions from Ukrainian control. The scope and scale of Russian IO and cyber operations around the world have increased dramatically. From allegedly hacking other nations' critical infrastructure to aggressively attempting to influence the outcome of the US presidential elections. The RAF has proven its ability to operate in the emerging forms of warfare.

Currently, in Ukraine, the RAF appears to be struggling to scale up its operations. The individual capabilities it has previously employed seem disjointed and unsynchronized in the current conflict. The ongoing invasion of Ukraine calls into question all the perceived improvements and theories of Russian capability. Many of the issues the RAF identified as leading to operational failure in the First Chechen War appear to be resurfacing in the Ukraine. This author cannot explain the apparent lack of Russian IO in support of their invasion or the apparent lack of coordination between special operations detachments, conventional ground forces, or their joint enablers. This appears to be a major step backward for the RAF.

Why the RAF has displayed such an apparent regression in operational abilities in the Ukraine is currently an enigma. What is clear is the RAF has a proven ability to bounce back. Although some military analysts may wish to focus on the RAF's failures in Ukraine and claim that the RAF has been overestimated, it is important to recognize that the RAF has been in this position before. Although the RAF's current shortcomings are encouraging for Ukrainian forces, one should not expect these weaknesses to exist for long. Instead of drawing inflated confidence from the RAF's failures, it will be important to observe how quickly the RAF can implement effective solutions this time around. The RAF has had its back against the wall numerous times in its history, however, it has never stayed there for long. The RAF will learn from its failures and enact solutions.

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