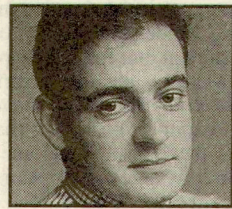


# Empty victory in fallen Grozny

## Russians win Chechen battle but not the war



Mark Franchetti  
Grozny

MOVING slowly towards the blackened sky above Grozny, nothing could have prepared me for the spectacle of complete devastation as we entered the fallen Chechen capital aboard a Russian armoured personnel carrier.

After sustaining four months of the heaviest bombardment in Russia since the second world war, the scene last week was apocalyptic. Thick plumes of black smoke rose from the centre in a grey haze, rendering the city almost invisible.

During a four-hour drive through the outskirts and into the heart of the city, we did not pass a single building left intact. Every house, apartment block and shop bore the scars of air and artillery bombardment.

The last of the estimated 2,000 Chechen rebels who had been holed up in Grozny finally left last week, abandoning the city to the Russian invaders. The war has now moved to the mountains in the south, on the border with Georgia, from which the rebels fought a successful guerrilla war against the Kremlin's forces in the previous conflict from 1994-96.

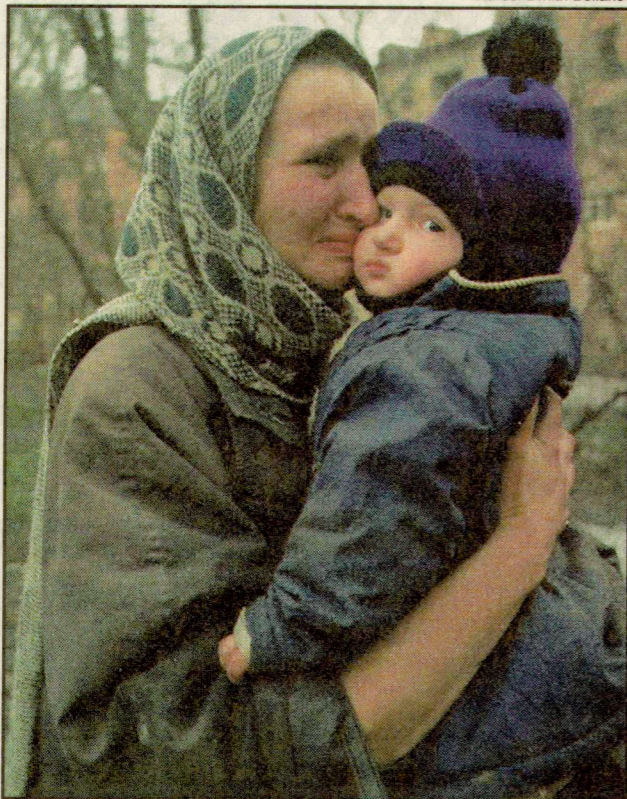
Valery Manilov, first deputy chief of the Russian general staff, confirmed yesterday that his troops were being redeployed towards the south. "As the task of freeing Grozny from bandit groups is carried out, it allows us to complete their routing and liquidation in the mountainous regions," he said.

Russian forces continued their fierce air and artillery attacks on villages in the west of the republic where scores of rebels, who had left the capital, were believed to have sought refuge.

As the generals celebrated the fall of the Chechen capital by raising the red, white and blue flag in front of camera crews, it was difficult to disguise the fact that they had conquered a city that no longer exists.

The muddy side streets leading through to Minutka Square, a strategically important junction on the outskirts of the city that the Russians took after 10 days of fierce fighting, were lined by the remains of what had once been simple, but comfortable, single-storey houses.

Many had been reduced to rubble, their high metal gates riddled with holes. "People live here" was the message painted on the remains of one gate. On



Cold comfort: a child is cradled in battered Grozny

the square itself the high-rise apartment blocks, that had until recently been a haven for Chechen snipers, had been gutted by a relentless barrage of heavy artillery.

Some had entire floors blown off; others were split down the middle to reveal the inside of flats where radiators and bath tub were left dangling precariously — the only reminder that they had once been a home.

Personal possessions lay scattered along the side of the roads, mingled with empty artillery shells. Pitch-black tree trunks poked out of the ground like sticks. Some houses were still burning. What remained of the streets was peppered with bomb craters.

Russian soldiers, faces black with dirt, rested in the mud, huddled around camp fires and leaning against dozens of launchers pointed towards Minutka. Adding to the surreal air, some slouched on looted sofas in the middle of the empty square.

"The city is almost completely under our control," said Viktor Kazantsev, the burly Russian general leading the war, as he strolled through the rubble surrounded by his deputies and heavily armed guards. In the distance the sound of automatic gunfire crackled across the city.

"There is still some fighting in two districts, but it is a matter of days before we win it all. We are liberating the city and its people from years of slavery. The Chechen bandits are now out of here and we are destroying them on the outskirts.

"They are cornered. They are the ones who carried out much of the destruction but the city will be rebuilt. At least now peo-

ple here can walk around freely."

As we moved towards the heart of Grozny, his words sounded increasingly empty. The Chechen capital is in Russian hands, but it is difficult to see what Moscow can do with it. Most of it will probably have to be bulldozed. Privately, even Russian officers concede it will be much harder to rebuild life there than it was to take it.

Prospekt Lenina, once a bustling central avenue lined with shops along its three mile-length, was deserted. Several huge craters marked the spot where the road had taken direct hits from Russian aviation.

Chechen graffiti urging the rebels to resist was sprayed inside a road tunnel on the spot where a Russian general sur-



Retreating rebels kill three Interior ministry troops 20 miles southwest of Grozny. Nearby villages of Alkhan-Yurt and Alkhan-Kala come under repeated aerial attack from Russians

vived a bomb blast during the last conflict. Open manholes marked the entrances to the city's sewage system, used by Chechen fighters to carry out ambushes on Russian tank columns. Many of the buildings were believed to have been mined by the Chechens before they retreated en masse.

It had been estimated that as many as 40,000 civilians were

trapped inside Grozny at the height of the Russian assault. This now appears to have been exaggerated; most appear to have long since fled, either to towns or villages elsewhere in the republic or across the border of the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia.

Apart from thousands of Russian soldiers patrolling the streets aboard tanks and arm-

oured personnel carriers — some decorated with pirate flags and bull horns — Grozny is now a ghost town.

Those few civilians who have stayed behind are still too scared to venture out on the streets. At 70 Dragayev Street, the only sign of life was a dirty white flag hanging from the entrance of a bombed-out apartment block. But as we stumbled

in the dark down to the cellar, guarded by a Russian sniper, a faint voice came from the bowels of the building.

Hava Bakanayeva, 75, a gaunt and exhausted Chechen woman left partially deaf from four months of heavy bombing, emerged from her hide-out crying with joy at the sight of outsiders. "I haven't seen daylight for weeks," she said, as she sat with her few possessions in a dingy cellar lit by oil lamps and secured with sandbags.

"For three months my husband and I have moved from cellar to cellar. There is no water, no electricity, hardly any food except for a few potatoes and some home-made bread.

"We live in terror, scared of Russian bombs and Chechen alike. We have nowhere to go: no money, no car. Please let this be the end. I don't care where, just let me out of this hell."

Hearing foreign voices her neighbours, too, began to emerge. Ghostly, pale figures, their desperate expressions summing up their ordeal.

"My husband was executed by the Russians when they came," said Gabari, sobbing and shivering hysterically as she held Muganev, her 20-month-old baby, in her arms. "They put us against the wall,

searched us and singled out my husband, accused him of being a rebel and shot him."

There could not be a more potent symbol of the devastation of Grozny than the sight of Dzhokhar Square, named after Dzhokhar Dudayev, the former Chechen president and rebel leader who was killed by the Russians during the last Chechen war.

A grand presidential palace once stood here, although it was razed during the fierce street battles of the previous war. Last week the square was a muddy wasteland scarred by bomb craters and the shells that still poked out of the ground.

Amid all this devastation, as the sound of gunfire echoed across the square and smoke filled the air, the battle for Grozny seemed as pointless as ever — a pyrrhic victory that cost thousands of lives.

"I am sad for the civilians who have suffered so much here but I am happy about the city," said Zegei, 30, a Russian sniper who fought in Grozny during the last Chechen war. "This is not their land. It is ours and now we have it back.

"It's the second time I am here and I have no doubt that in three years' time all this will start again. It will never be the end. We will be back."



Bombed out: Russian guns blasted a path into Grozny, but the city has been deserted by rebels and residents alike