Russo-Soviet Battle Scenarios

By Mike Stewart

Grau, Lester W. (trans) *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*. Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1996.

Oliker, Olga. *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*. Washington: RAND, 2001.

Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, there seems to be a resurgence in interest regarding conflict between United States/NATO forces and Soviet/Russian Federal forces in a variety of situations. This is no doubt partly due to increased tensions due to Crimea and eastern Ukraine, though the Russian plastic miniature company Zvezda has been selling a "Hot War" series (in 1:72 and 1:100 scale) that purports a conflict between US-Soviet forces in the late 1980s. This scenario is based on the assumption that Gorbachev never became Soviet leader in 1985, and thus there was no glasnost, no perestroika, and thereby no fall of the USSR.

Unfortunately Zvezda's game and scenarios in their Art of Tactic game line tend to be very pro-Russian in their biases. Not a surprise as they're a Russian company after all. Yet if someone is interested in gaming such possible combats, a source of scenarios can be hard to find. In this article I will discuss two books that are easily available and that give excellent sources of information and battles for the miniature wargamer.

Each book was provided as a military "lessons learned" manual for combat forces, *The Bear Over the Mountains* (BOTM) is an English translation of a Russian history and tactical review of the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1980-1989) with various situations explained and reasons for Red Army successes and failures. The second work, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000* (RCW), is a United States Army report of Russian tactics in both the first and second Chechen wars of the 1990s.

The virtues of both books are that they provide not only history on each of the conflicts, but also critique the combat performances of various troops and equipment used in theater. Though the Chechen book is technically about the Russian Federal Army, its equipment and doctrine were still Soviet in origin so there's much to be used in it as well.

BOTM and RCW both provide analysis of individual scenarios, which are useful just in that regard. Fortunately for the wargamer, there's much more in each book that is of use. Comments on various situations that I'd never come across were detailed and provide valuable info to create combat situations of skirmish level conflicts. It's easy enough to set up two sides and then have at, but actually using the national doctrine of a given side is much more satisfying…not to mention educational.

One example of this was given in *The Bear Over the Mountains* book. According to BOTM while the average soldier in the Soviet Army was a conscript, reconnaissance forces were volunteers. As such, their élan and discipline were notably higher than normal Red Army units.

This was a good and bad thing, because throughout the Afghan war Soviet commanders kept throwing recon units into frontline combat with Mujahadeen and thus, while highly skilled, they suffered a disproportional number of casualties compared to normal USSR forces.

As for the RCW book, tactics and equipment are given in detail, especially the two battles of Grozny (the capital of Chechnya) and the impact of both victory and defeat on the respective sides. For example, Russian forces in 1994 used Soviet Army urban warfare doctrine, which came from Warsaw Pact plans on dealing with NATO. Soviet commanders didn't believe that NATO forces would desire battles in urban areas, so they made an assumption that many West German cities would be declared "open" to minimize civilian casualties. If a city was determined to resist, then most Soviet forces would simply bypass the city and leave clearing it out to follow on troops. These troops were expected to be Warsaw Pact satellite forces, so casualties wouldn't be inflicted on Soviet formations. 'Fighting to the last Pole' as it were.



This sort of intentional ignorance was surprising for the Red Army, whose skill in urban combat in World War II was legendary from Stalingrad to Berlin. Yet even at the height of the 1980s only a small group of Soviet forces were trained for urban combat and most of them had been stationed around West Berlin, anticipating that partitioned city as the only major urban location that would have to be stormed. As a result, Russian troops in Chechnya had to relearn city combat that their grandfathers would've found typical of firefights in the Great Patriotic War.

The following is quoted as an example of "Storm" doctrine used by the Russian Federal Army in Grozny.

"The Russian 'storm' detachments were geared to maximize mobility and flexibility. Within each detachment, groups of three men armed with an RPG, an automatic rifle, and a sniper rifle provided the core element. They were supported by two additional soldiers armed with automatic

weapons. Other components of the Storm group were armed with the Shmel RPO-A flamethrowers that had proved so effective five years before and in Afghanistan. Artillery and aviation forward observers, sappers, and reconnaissance personnel rounded out the detachment." (Oliker, pg. 36)

Critiques of equipment as well as tactics are covered in both works, especially in noting the poor design of the T-80 tank in the 1990s. Despite its reputation, its constant breakdowns and jet fuel requirements made it unpopular with crews who preferred the more robust T-72. However, neither tank was of much use in urban areas, something the Russian Army found out to its cost when it simply rolled long lines of tanks into the narrow streets of Grozny. These displays of force meant to cow the rebels were failures, and were met by RPG-7 teams; wielded by Chechens who were veterans of the Soviet Army too and knew the combat doctrine that would be used against them.



T-80

The above are only individual samples of the wealth of material within each book. I highly encourage anyone interested in the period to give both books a read. One thing to be cautious of is the scale of listed battles, or firefights as they really should be called. The largest listed battle (RCW) has around 2500 per side at most. So, if you're looking for big battles of regiments, divisions, or corps; these won't be for you. But for skirmish and platoon sized combats, these two books can't be beat.

Bear Over the Mountains frankly reads much like a typical scenario book for any wargame by itself. Lists of unit strengths, equipment (even down to individual pieces of artillery and aircraft used), and support by reserve units are given in some detail. *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000* reads more like the instructional work it was intended to be, but there are several excellent nuggets of information to be mined in its pages. I highly recommend both if you desire a NATO-Warsaw Pact or NATO-Russia conflict on your gaming table.