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ADC to Shamil Basaev and later to Aslan Maskhadov

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I saw military action as a member of Shamil Basaev's battalion during the August 1994 operations against Ruslan Labazanov. I was wounded in the leg in Argun and could not walk for 4 months. I left Chechnya for medical reasons and only managed to return on 30 December 1994 in the evening. I took part in the defence of Grozny on 31 December as a volunteer. Later I joined the HQ. As an ordinary fighter, it was difficult for me then to get the full picture of what was going on. I can only talk about what I witnessed myself.

The Battle for Grozny

Russian heavy artillery was positioned on the Sunja range overlooking Grozny. It began firing "152" Howitzers at 6 pm on 31 December and never stopped until 23 February. Frontline aviation was working even in heavy fog. Despite the lack of impact of the artillery and air fire on our armed units, they never stopped for more than 20 minutes, even when Chechen and Russian positions were within 50 metres of each other. Therefore, they inflicted as much damage on their own troops as on us.

I fought in the Staropromyslovski suburb of the city. There were 2 kinds of units in the district – resistance groups which had formed spontaneously among inhabitants of the same village or city quarter and groups of our existing armed forces – principally Basaev's and Gelaev's battalions. These battalions occupied key positions on Staropromyslovski Avenue, near the factory "Elektropribor".

My first impression on arriving in Grozny on 31 December was that our High Command had brought all our forces back to Grozny. We did not have enough manpower and strength to stop the Russians' advance outside the city. What struck me at first was that Russian tanks and APCs were not even advancing in battle order. They were marching as if on parade ground with only a distance of 5 to 6 metres between each APC. They were unable to manoeuvre or turn around when necessary. This was a suicidal manoeuvre for APCs. What is more, infantry was also advancing in complete disorder among the APCs.

I witnessed a short battle near Elektropribor during which 11 APCs were destroyed in 15 minutes: around 6 pm the Russians had reached Elektropribor. There was an open field by the factory next to the 2nd Sovkhoz. They had to cross approximately one and a half km of open ground and pass a narrow gully of approximately 200 metres before reaching Straropromyslovski Avenue. They marched through the open ground without taking any precaution, hoping probably on speed to reach the city. We had some 30 men positioned in the gully. We let the Russian column enter. The leading vehicle was a *BTR*, it was followed by *BMPs*. The first APC to enter the gully and the last one were destroyed, some 11 APCs caught fire and burned like match-boxes. The battle lasted no more than 15 minutes.

On the same day, the Russians attempted exactly the same manoeuvre in similar terrain in the district of Beriozka with the same disastrous result. At the Karpinski crossroad an artillery piece (152 mm) was destroyed and several APCs. The same operations were repeated on all the roads used by the Russian columns to reach the centre of Grozny.

Today we can get the broad picture of the battle for Grozny, using information provided by Russian officers. The Russians moved on Grozny from 3 directions – General Rokhlin's column was moving from the North, General Babishev from the South-West along the "Gruzinski" mountain range, and another column was moving from the East in the direction of Khankala having by-passed Argun. Their task was to enter Grozny and take positions around the Presidential Palace. Russian POWs told us that they had no detailed instructions on how to storm Grozny. Middle ranking officers complained to us

that they did not have maps of the city. Approximately 60 per cent of Russian POWs were drunk and did not understand where they were and what was going on. They were told that they had to drive through the city and surround the Palace where some 100 partisans of Dudaev were holding up. They were assured that Dudaev and his partisans would run away on seeing the Russian army's heavy weaponry. The operation should not present any difficulties. This was the Russians' greatest mistake.

The column of General Babishev was stopped near Karpinski, and as far as I remember, did not attempt to enter Grozny on that day. Rokhlin's column was met by our units on Pervomaiskaia Street. The column from Khankala was stopped for a time by Tadashaev's battalion but he ran out of ammunition and his battalion was wiped out. Our tactics were simple but effective: we let the Russian columns enter the city, driving along streets where the APCs and tanks could not manoeuvre. When a column was engaged in a narrow avenue, we simply shot the leading APC and the last one of the column. The Russians were sitting ducks.

When the fighting and shooting started many tank formations managed to escape into side streets that were not defended in order to retreat from the city. But when they understood that they were most vulnerable when on the move, they stopped, tried to capture positions from where to set up a defence. That was when we began to suffer higher casualties - it was easy chasing moving or runaway targets, quite another storming well entrenched positions.

After 3 January 1995, the Russians managed to secure positions in certain points (in the district of the railway station, near the tin food factory), and on 7 January they launched another offensive to storm the city. Artillery and air bombing was particularly intense on that day. The Russians admitted it themselves later. My unit was positioned in the courtyard of a building from where we watched as rockets exploded around us in 3 or 4 directions at a time. Front line aviation was also at work.

During the week between 31 December and 7 January the Russians managed to advance their heavy tank units from Severnyi and from the eastern part of Grozny, but at the cost of enormous casualties. However, on 7 January the situation changed. Our losses increased, mainly due to mortar fire. The GRAD and URAGAN systems that the Russians were using beforehand proved ineffective in the urban environment.

The second storming of Grozny on 7 January was more massive than the first. After 12 January, Rokhlin's and Babishev's columns managed to break through to meet in the district near "Dom Pechati". Our units defending the area were surrounded and had to withdraw across Russian lines.

Problems Facing Chechen Forces during the Battle

Our main problem at the time was lack of co-ordination. Besides our regular armed forces, which were trying to co-ordinate their operations, many volunteer groups had not been incorporated in a command structure. They had no tactic and just went to the areas where they heard action. Frequently these volunteer groups would defend a position in a district and regular units in a neighbouring district would assume that their flank was covered. However, because the volunteers were not under the General Staff's command, they could decide at any moment to go home without warning, leaving the regular units unprotected. This created chaos as any uncoordinated military operations would. Therefore, the volunteers were sometimes more of a hindrance than a help to our regular units that had specific orders and tasks to perform. We had many casualties at that time among people, who did not know where they were going and who did not know where Russian positions were.

The situation in Grozny was utter chaos during the first 2 weeks of January 1995. Sometimes our units were positioned in the first floor of a building while the Russians were in the courtyard and in the upper floors. One could go away for 5 minutes and return to find Russians in the position one had left. We also had cases of friendly fire casualties. Such occurrences were more frequent among the Russians because they had more troops

than we did but it also happened among us, especially at night. But in the case of the Russians, it reached crisis proportion. Two battalions could be engaged in combat for several hours, calling the same artillery units and aviation to their rescue!

Our main problem at the time was lack of communication and the lack of a united command. The volunteer groups muddled the map despite the fact that some fought with great bravery. This upset the tactics of the General Staff and of the commanders in charge of the defence of specific areas.

After 19 January when we evacuated the Presidential Palace and moved to the other bank of the Sunja, Maskhadov gained some time to prepare new defensive positions. The battlefield became more clearly defined and co-ordination improved. Thanks to that, we were able to evacuate the city on 23 February in an organised fashion.

After Grozny

During the battle for Grozny Shamil Basaev was chief of the Grozny garrison. He went personally to collect all the remaining units still defending Grozny and led them out of the city in the direction of Goity where they divided. One lot went to the South-West to form the South-Western front, the other to Argun. At the time heavy fighting was already going on in and around Argun. People nowadays frequently forget that the same type of combat was going on in Argun during most of the battle for Grozny. The HQ moved to the factory “Krasnyi Molot”. I could not understand why the highest building in Chechnya was selected as HQ.

The different phases of the war

a) position warfare

From the end of February to approximately 10 May 1995 came a phase of conventional position warfare. During this period we faced a new difficulty: for various reasons our forces generally stood approximately 1 km from the towns, villages and populated areas. The Russians deliberately fired over the positions of our forces directly on the villages.

Therefore the population of the villages saw the presence of our forces as a threat to their security and exerted pressure for them to leave. The Russians used this tactic to the full although it did not have the desired impact on every occasion. Later the commanders became more assertive towards the civilians who became afraid to oppose them.

From March 1995 to the beginning of May the Russians did not engage in close contact combat. We were subjected to constant artillery fire. Their tanks were spread out facing our lines, we could see them clearly, and every day, always at the same time, they began firing. We had to dig trenches. Sometimes from one spray of artillery fire, we would lose 8 to 12 men. These were terribly heavy casualties for us. The situation was the same on the central front and on the South-Western front. But the presence of our forces nevertheless slowed Russian advance.

Because of the lack of close contact combat, we suffered more casualties during that period than at any other time of the war.

b) fighting in the mountains - Vedenó

The next phase saw fighting in the mid-mountain areas. Two weeks before the withdrawal from Vedenó, the Russians began clearing up the forested mountain range using aviation and long range artillery. I was in the Vedenó direction and in one week we saw the Russians capture three important villages – Nozhay Yurt, Vedenó and Shatoy. Previously I had always thought that Vedenó could be easily defended for 10 years. The narrow gorge, which leads to Vedenó, made it awkward for heavy tank units to advance. Shamil Basaev had organised an effective defence on the heights above the gorge. “Effective defence” may sound pompous – what it meant was that we had a few 12.7 or 14.5 calibre guns with 4 or 5 rounds of ammunition. But they were enough sometimes to frighten off Russian aviation.

What happened next was this: when the road between Shali and Shatoy was cut we used a route between Shatoy and Vedenó, which went along a riverbed, passed the village of Selmentausen to Ulus Kert. It was approximately 8 km long. It was enough to put 2 or 3

grenade launchers along that route to stop the Russians. But somehow during the 2 or 3 months of position warfare our Command forgot to protect that route. The Agishty and the South-Western fronts also left the area unguarded. The Russians were positioned in the cemetery of Duba Yurt. They managed with the help of collaborators from Duba Yurt to advance to Selmentausen and Makhkety. Maskhadov threw whatever forces we had available in an effort to stop the Russian offensive on Selmentausen, including the Naur battalion, which was stationed on the Nozhay Yurt front. But the offensive was too strong, with aviation and long-range artillery support and the Vedenov front too weak. There was an added difficulty: the Russian infantry had dispersed in the forest and it is practically impossible to fight an enemy in a forest. When we withdrew from Vedenov the Russians had managed to bring their long-range artillery to Elistanzhi and their tanks were spread out on the mountain range above Tsa-Vedenov. They were firing above our heads in the direction of Kharachoy.

The Russians' advantage during this offensive was due to the fact that they had good maps whereas we had practically none apart from the ones we took from captured Russian officers, and that they used the services of Chechen traitors who guided them on little known mountain paths.

Fighting went on in Serzhen Yurt for another 4 days after we abandoned Vedenov. The commanders in Serzhen Yurt were the men of Shamil Basaev. Between 10 May and 4 June they repulsed on average 5 or 6 Russian attacks per day. There were very few of them facing the Totski Regiment and the 56th Peace-keeping Regiment. On 25 May alone I counted that Russian aviation flew 425 missions over Serzhen Yurt.

You know the events after we left Vedenov – the raid of Shamil Basaev followed by the negotiation period during which our units managed to regroup and infiltrate themselves in the rear of the enemy. When the negotiations collapsed our units were ready to fight again.

Aviation

Sometimes we had the impression that Russian pilots were working strictly to rule. The planes flew, found a convenient place to drop their rockets and bombs, and continued to bomb the same spot during a whole day with the result that we could safely move around avoiding that particular area. However, when the Russians had the upper hand, when we were retreating surrounded by columns of civilian refugees, the pilots became more daring and dangerous. They began to hunt, chasing cars, buses and motorcycles.

With regards to helicopters: during the position warfare period, our men were often able to creep up at night with DShKs or other equipment of 12.7 or 14.5 calibre into the no man's land zone between the frontlines. These weapons were effective against helicopters. Thus sometimes we were able to shoot down helicopters practically from Russian positions. However, these were rare occasions. The helicopter pilots were fairly daring at the beginning of the war but after our men had had a few successful hits they began to panic and to fire anywhere, including on their own positions.

Patrols

The Russians could not afford to patrol in the manner that you understand it in the West,. As a rule, at night, they could only guard themselves or their encampment. During daytime, they tried to de-mine various areas, to conduct cleaning-up operations (*zachistka*) and passport controls, always with the support of APCs. As a rule their raids were directed against the civilian population not the resistance. At night they went back to their bases and could not care a damn about what was going on beyond the perimeters of their camp. During our offensive against Grozny on 6 March 1996, Russian units did not go to each other's aid even when they could see what was happening next door to them. Units of the MVD and Ministry of Defence did not go to each other's help as a matter of principle.

Chechen-Russian Relations

Our relations with the Russians were odd. Our radio operators frequently spoke with their Russian counterparts. Sometimes friendly relations occurred with Russian operators who gave us forewarning of artillery and air attacks. I often spoke on the radio with Russian operators and officers in my capacity as Aslan Maskhadov's ADC and I had the impression that they did not understand why they had been sent to Chechnya. They had no idea of what Chechnya represented, who the Chechens were, what traditions they had, or what the Chechens wanted. One man I spoke to, told me that he had come to fight in Chechnya to prevent China attacking Russia.

During the negotiation period Russian soldiers wanted to have their photographs taken with Maskhadov's lieutenants. They stopped us with Husain [Iskhanov]. We let them take photographs and chatted with their officer who had studied in the same institute as I. We had the same teachers, the same acquaintances. However, the cruel seeds of an ethnic war were there – for 70 years, we had been forced to embrace the Russians in the name of internationalist brotherly love. The outcome of such compulsion was hate. Now we had an opportunity to make up for it, knowing what the other side weaknesses were. It was then that the war became cruel. Although the Russians did not understand our motivations, they knew how to hurt us most – for example when they forced our people to buy the bodies of our dead. Unfortunately today many Chechens have shown themselves worthy students of the Russians. The Russians were at the origin of phenomena such as the “slave trade” and kidnappings for ransom.

The majority of the Russian population of Grozny was pleased with the arrival of the Russian army. The period between 1991 and 1994 was hard for them. Overnight they had lost the status of favoured and dominant nation. They believed that Russian generals would take care of them and distribute food. But when the Russian troops came they were usually drunk and could not care less whether the people they killed were Russians or Chechens. When the barbarity of the Russian contingent became evident, they become

disillusioned. Some Russians fought on our side but the majority was ready to cooperate with the invading forces.

Russian forces did not attempt to use the Russian population for intelligence work and information. They knew that the local Russians could not afford to raise the suspicions of the Chechens. They preferred to use Chechens. This they did rather successfully, at least at the beginning of the war. Later people became more suspicious of traitors, excessively so sometimes - people could be wrongly accused outright at the slightest doubt.

Lessons of the War

The war was fairly intensive and dynamic. If one compared the Russians' hardware and infrastructure – ammunitions, weapons, transport, medical supplies and so on, and that of our forces, our supplies amounted to those of one Russian motorised regiment (*moto-strelkovyi*). We were beggars compared to the Russians. Imagine a Russian battalion supported by 5 or 6 tanks and APCs, artillery, and a couple of helicopters. Even when positioned in open terrain it could prevent us from approaching nearer than 1.5 km. At night they had lighting around their positions and night sight equipment. Our most powerful weapons – the grenade launcher - had a range of some 400 metres. That was the Russians' main strength. The lesson I gained was that it was easier to fight the Russians when they were on the move or when they were mounting an offensive. As soon as they began to dig themselves in it was much more difficult to attack and beat them.

In urban areas, it was much easier for our units to tackle the Russians. Their lack of coordination due to two systems of command - that of the MVD and of the Ministry of Defence and their mutual aversion, played in our favour.

We had another advantage: for any Chechen who had served in the Soviet army, the Russians were totally predictable. With mulish stubbornness, the Russian command tried to implement the combat rules of conventional ground forces. In this war, these tactics did not apply. As Mumadi Saidaev pointed out the front and the frontline did not mean

anything to us. Our task was simple: we had an enemy; he had to be found, chased, and killed. That was why Russian marching columns were particularly vulnerable even when they had air support.

Another factor contributed to the poor performance of the Russian troops – the fact that with a few exceptions such as the Maikop Brigade and the Samarski Regiment, most of the units were newly formed (*svodnye chasty*) for service in Chechnya. Regiments around the Russian Federation were requested to supply soldiers for service in Chechnya. Naturally, these regiments tried to get rid of their worse elements. In some cases the new formations did not have proper names and numbers. The POWs frequently had papers mentioning that they had left their units prior to 11 December 1994 but no mention was made of the new units they had joined in Chechnya. This was one way the Russians managed to hide their casualties. When a soldier left his unit he simply “disappeared” from the point of view of the Russian army’s bookkeeping – no record was kept of where he went from there.