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Deputy Prime Minister in 1999

Commanded units in all battles of Grozny, took part in the Pervomaiskaia expedition, was commander of the Shelkovski raion during the 1995-6 cease-fire, previously took part in military operations in Abkhazia

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To draw lessons out the Russian-Chechen war that can be used for the training an of other armed forces, one must first go back to the events which provoked the war and take into account the spirit of the Chechen people. We had no other choice but to sacrifice ourselves. This was the main element to influence the character of our resistance. Also, the success we gained during the failed Russian attempt to seize Grozny on 26 November 1994 put the basis of our future victory by giving us the necessary confidence.

When the Russians attacked, we had no armed forces to speak of. Only 2 units were battle trained – the battalions of Ruslan Gelaev and Shamil Basaev. The other units that took part in the battle of Grozny did not oppose any organised resistance. Added to them there were many individual volunteers who were ready to fight and sacrifice themselves to defend Grozny. Our success, that is the fact that we were able to defend Grozny for so long, was due to the fact that there was no organised and well-planned resistance. There was no strategy, no clear lines of defence. This was what the determinant factor of our successes on 26 November and on 31 December 1994.

The battle of Grozny

First, the Russian military had drawn plans for the capture of Grozny expecting Dudaev's partisans to run away. Secondly, the Russian military were ready for a conventional offensive with well defined lines of defence, which took into account analysis of enemy troops' movement, radio listening posts, reconnaissance, and so on. But we had practically no radio communications and no troops in the early days of the war. We had the General HQ, which registered volunteer fighters and sent them to various positions – such a street or building to defend. But the instructions of HQ were not followed. Volunteer fighters did not always check the orders of HQ and could go to different positions on the spur of the moment. The Russians had no means of knowing where Chechen fighters would be next.

When we heard on 31 December (1994) that our line of defence in the east had collapsed and that the enemy had entered the city in large heavy tanks formations, we left our positions on the outskirts of Grozny and returned to the centre of the city. I had a small group at that time – 5/6 people among whom was Salman Raduev. When we got into Grozny the situation was really amazing - Russian aviation was bombing, there were tanks and explosions everywhere, but people were steadily returning to the city. Danger did not put them off. On the contrary, they went where danger was in a manner conformed with the national character. Some were carrying weapons, many more did not have weapons, but they went to fight knowing that a powerful enemy had entered the city, that they had every chances of being killed.

After 2 or 3 days the enthusiasm waned. Some people could not take the pressure and abandoned their positions. The most remarkable achievement that military historians should remember was that for 19 days the Russians were unable to storm the Palace although they had reached Prospekt Pobedy and Lenin Street, and were within 40/50 metres of the Presidential Palace. Our tactic was to fire at the enemy everywhere without being seen anywhere. The Russians did not know where and who the enemy was. We shot, destroyed, withdrew, went home to sleep, returned to start military actions again. This haphazard approach without organisation and planning, and the lack of a single command, were the reason for the miracles we achieved in the city. We were independent

hunters. Everyone could go and shoot a tank, grab weapons and ammunition, go home and return to the hunting later. Such was the war in Grozny.

I led a unit of 85 to 125 men on and off defending a district stretching along one kilometre. The Russians were facing us across the street. Not all the men had weapons. We had 2 RPG7. I went to Maskhadov to ask for reinforcement and weapons. He told me "I have 400 men fighting here against the Russian Armada. The areas to defend are too far apart, 400 men are not enough. If I had an extra 300 men I would be able to move them around." I returned to our positions, which we held for another 12 days without a change-over of men. Our main problem was the lack of fresh water. We collected water from the river but had to cross a line of artillery and mortar fire to reach it. The main difficulty was movement but once we were in position in the ruins it was not so dangerous, we could even have a nap in safety.

Urban warfare tactics

When we left Grozny and tried to set a conventional defence line our fighting became less effective. I consider that our surrender of Argun was due to the skills of the Russian command. The operation for the capture of Argun by the Russians was well planned and efficient. On that occasion, they did not enter the town. They bombed the town from 3 directions. We were virtually encircled, and had to retreat.

Afterwards we changed our tactic. We crossed Russian lines and scattered our forces in the towns and inhabited areas by small groups of 2 or 3 people. Each group was positioned within a distance of approximately 200/300 metres. This was the best tactic for urban warfare. With minimal losses I could hold the enemy at bay whatever forces and means he deployed. When 2 or 3 people hold a position in a building it is practically impossible to destroy them - they can move around in the building, attack, take cover in the cellar, go up again. With other groups in the buildings within a 200 metres radius, they have the flank cover. The positions remain flexible but are virtually unbreakable.

The best position is to choose a central building surrounded by others, thus the men can follow each others' actions, give cover from all directions, modern weapons being well within a 200/300 metre range. The enemy would never be able to break through. If he managed to break through he would be destroyed.

Pervomaiskaia

We meant to use this tactic in the failed operation against Kizliar. We meant to capture the Kizliar suburb Chiriomushki (?). We could have held Kizliar easily for over a month done with the forces, experience and weapons we had. But our commanders changed their minds and we left Kizliar. Raduev chose the itinerary out of Kizliar. It was a bad route and I think he was fooled by Russian services. But he was the overall commander and we had to accept his authority. Our units and the hostages were de facto doomed in Pervomaiskaia. A tight ring surrounded us. The enemy was everywhere. If one group gave up its positions, it would have meant the end for everybody, thus I could not allow my men to let the enemy break through. Co-operation was perfect. We had no alternative but to fight in Pervomaiskaia as we had no possibility of an orderly withdrawal..

We did not waste a minute to organise the defence of the village. Although the flat terrain seemed to be to the advantage of the Russians, it also played in our favour – there was no high ground from where the Russians could overlook our positions to aim accurately. Much of the firing went over our heads despite the reconnaissance flights of helicopters. We had another advantage: the village was surrounded by marshes with few roads of access. The Russians could not mount a frontal attack. Their offensives came from 5 or 6 different directions. Of course, they could have taken us by storm. They had the men and the fire-power, but we did not let them. We saw how hopeless they were despite the weaponry and troops deployed in three rings around Pervomaiskaia. However, I must admit that their positions were well thought out.

The escape was well organised. We expected that some of us would make the escape back to the homeland - if one man fell, the next one would make it. With this thought, we went towards Russians guns. We had decided that the storm group, the first to break through Russian lines, would leave the dead and wounded behind, and would keep on pushing forward. The next group and the hostages would collect the wounded. The rear group was covering the escape. We left many friends behind, approximately 70 men. My group was leading. Out of 40 men, I lost 17 during the escape, but it was a miracle that we managed it.

Grozny – 6 March 1996

For the offensive against Grozny in March 1996, I was given the order to control a particular district along one of the roads leading to the centre of the city. I commanded a unit of 100 men. My men did not know in advance that we were going to Grozny. We arrived around 4 or 5 am by-passing the military posts by previously planned routes. We drove straight into the centre of Grozny. My orders were to occupy our positions under cover and to attack only at a pre-arranged signal in order to stop all movement of enemy troops. The tactics were easy and convenient. If fighting broke out some 2 km from our positions we were able to stop any rescue column. Surprise was total. The same tactics were repeated elsewhere in the city – wherever Russian positions were attacked, other groups were positioned in such a way as to prevent Russian troops coming to each other's aid. The enemy was shocked, could not understand what was happening, and lost control.

Operation Jihad – August 1996

The March offensive was a rehearsal. In August, we had sworn to win or die. This time there would be no turning back. We knew the superiority of the Russians forces – some garrisons in Grozny had up to 6000 men, in Khankala, Severny Airport, and the *komendatury*, out of a total contingent in of 100,000 troops. We had approximately 850

men for the operation although we knew from our intelligence that we could rely on the support from the population. There is no precedent in military history for such an operation. We had thrown all our organised forces in the operation knowing that the city was a well defended place-forte and that we were going to fight on enemy's ground.

The tactics worked excellently for the second time. There was nothing left for the Russian military but capitulation. In order to destroy us they would have had to hit their own troops in the process. They would have had heavy casualties had they bombed the city from the air, although they did bomb some areas when they thought that there was a concentration of our forces. But they never hit the right targets and more often than not hit their own positions which were disseminated throughout the city. Their only option was to either destroy us together with their own troops or agree to a cease-fire. As General Rokhlin said the only other alternative was to put a Russian soldier behind every Chechen citizen, man, woman, and child.

Shelkovski Raion

After Shamil Basaev's raid on Budennovsk, we had the time to reorganise our forces. I was sent to Shelkovski by Maskhadov as member of the special so-called "disarmament commission" to oversee the partial withdrawal of the Russian contingent and the disarmament of the Chechen population. We found wide support among the population, organised various demonstrations, and set up a defence regiment. Although we were not supposed to be armed, we easily managed to enrol volunteers and collect weapons. Shelkovski raion was supposedly under Russian occupation and control but we were the real masters. It was practically impossible for the Russians to catch and disarm our resistance groups because we knew the territory well. We were able to move around, attacking the Russians where it paid most. Thus, we stopped all railway transport and controlled all road transport, which could not move without our permission.

In 1996 after negotiations collapsed, the Russians launched large-scale military operations. We had to retreat to the mountains in the South, but after we left the Russians never managed to regain control and to establish their organs of power. In retaliation, we launched a raid on Shelkovski from the South. The Russians did not expect an attack behind the safety of their lines. We crossed three raions – Nozhay Yurt, Shali and Gudermes, crossed the river Terek and hit the district centre. We held the town for the day and left in the evening burning the administrative and militia buildings. Our groups were highly mobile.

Conclusion

I think one of the advantages we had over the Russians was our confidence in ourselves and in the justice of our struggle. This was perhaps more important than tactics. Tactics can be flexible, one could always think of many ways to make the situation of the occupier difficult. Had I been fighting in Russia maybe I would experienced the same fears as the Russians. There were not in their homeland, it was our land, we knew the terrain, the contempt of the Chechen population made them uneasy. Even children cursed them. They could chat to a man one day and the next day the same man would take a gun and attack them. They did not know where they stood; they did not know where the enemy was; they did not know who they were fighting or dealing with.

But fighting on your home ground had its difficulties. Every house destroyed and person killed affected us. The Russians used Ermolov's tactics: if they were attacked they turned against innocent villages and burned them down. The bombings did not discriminate between civilians and military, old and young. I often saw seasoned fighters cry when a bomb killed whole families. Therefore, we frequently had to restrain our attacks to prevent retaliatory offensives on the villages.

I had fought in Abkhazia. In order not to be afraid you have to know what the dangers of war are. Those like I, who had experience of warfare, knew how to protect themselves in

most situations. They knew the impact of artillery fire and that of other weapons. I do not know Western weapons and would be cautious if I had to face them. But I was not scared of Russian weapons because I was confident that I could always protect myself against them.

By comparison the war in Abkhazia was like being in a holiday resort. We rested and fought. In Chechnya, we fought and fought. In Abkhazia we were mainly on the offensive, in Chechnya we were more frequently retreating. We often attacked and retreated, grabbed trophies and tanks, but we could not launch a steady offensive or conquer territory from the enemy.

The only exception I can think of was during the battle of Grozny when Maskhadov ordered us to attack Moscow Street district. The Russians had dug themselves in. I had 40 men with me to go on the offensive. We managed to push the enemy back several districts beyond the Sunzha. It was our first victory in an offensive battle during the war. We were in a residential district with one-storey houses. In groups of 5, my men advanced from the rear and the flank of the enemy from house to house, destroying the enemy as they went along. In 2 hours, we had cleared the area. I lost 6 men under artillery fire during the battle.

I do not consider that we have won a great victory, we endured and showed bravery and virtue. We had the euphoria of victory but we came out of the war as paupers.