

Small Wars Journal

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Fighting in Grozny was easier than in the mountains but we had to be on the alert all the time in order not to harm the civilian population inadvertently. For instance when we were laying mines and booby-traps we had to ensure that no Chechen car would be damaged by mistake. After a while we replaced our mines. Our people are very inventive. We used photo cameras equipment, television and toy cars' remote controls. We perfected them and in the end could use them for up to a 100-metre distance.

We had no instruction books, only a few articles copied from military engineering books which gave instructions on how to blow railways lines and telegraph poles. It was fairly useless but we could get hints on how to calculate correlation, distances and settings. We had no professional engineers among us and experimented everything. We mixed tubes with explosives and screws, sealing one end of the tube with plaster. The tube was cabled to a detonator. We could use these tubes anywhere, they were invisible. We also used electro-detonators. At first we earthed them in the ground but it was dangerous for the civilians because there could be long delays as the Russians were not punctual people - when a Russian column was due at 6 am, it could be 3 hours late.

After the war we got modern guns and sniper rifles but during the war we had very few of them. At first we used telescopic sights from grenade launchers and welded them to automatic guns. Telegraphic sights were useless for grenade launchers because they were effective only for a distance of between 30 and 50 metres.

We invented all kinds of silencers. We even planned to use crossbows. They are small and silent. We knew that hunting shops in Moscow had some but we were unable to find anybody to send them to us. The Russians frequently accused us of killing innocent

soldiers who went to the markets to buy cakes! But during war there are no cakes and innocent soldiers. Had we had crossbows they would not have dared leave their garrisons.

When I watch American films I have the impression that US snipers have computers, not guns, in their hands. In urban conditions the maximum distance a sniper has to deal with is approximately 200/300 metres. For such distances one does not need a telescopic sight. But for a distance of 1000 metres one has to account for temperature and speed of wind.

We, Chechens, loved sniper rifles but we had no professionally trained snipers. No one would agree to lend his rifle. Sometimes our snipers operated alone. In such cases they solemnly swore that they would fight to the end. Russian snipers were not very dangerous. The devil is often not as black as he is painted. The worse about them was the psychological impact and the rumours about their presence. The distances we had to cross in Grozny were not big and Russian snipers seldom killed our fighters. We did not use dummies to find out snipers' positions, it was easy enough without. We usually could determine the snipers' position by the trajectory of the bullets. Once you have found the building where a sniper is hiding, it is not difficult to determine behind which window he is positioned. We used machine-guns and grenade launchers against them. We filled the grenades with dust and pepper. It caused sneezing and eye watering and a sniper became harmless for some time.

For long distances we used tubes from helicopters. We cut them and adapted them as grenade launchers. They were very effective. Now there are new models, which can be used on a distance of 1000 metres.

There were no cases of sniper duels – this only happened in films! The Russians fought without any order and discipline. Their main achievement was destroying civilian houses. In comparison with the Russians, our losses were minimal. The main cause of our losses was lack of ammunitions. When one man had an machine gun, he was followed by another 10 unarmed men who were hoping to seize weapons from his potential victims. We had information that the Russians had lost more men in 2 years in Chechnya than

during 10 years in Afghanistan. I think in all they lost over 100,000 people. Their daily loss was between 65 and 70 men.

On our side we know that we have lost 2000 fighters – most of them were killed in the first year of war. In the second year, we gained experience. It became easier to move positions. We could circulate freely on the main roads. To close the roads, the Russians would have needed thousands and thousands of soldiers and first class logistics.

When we recaptured Grozny the Russians had to reposition and redistribute their forces, bringing back their units from the mountains. They had no chance, their only way out was to stop the war, although I think it would have been better for us to fight to the end. We had the advantage – we had no heavy artillery, no tanks and aviation to move from place to place. The Russians were in our hands. Either they had to bring additional troops or try to defend their positions. To save their men they had to accept our conditions. They tried to bring in special troops but they achieved nothing.

We loved Russian infantry. Infantry meant captured weapons and victory. Tanks and APCs were not dangerous. Because we were always short of weapons, we tried to capture armoured cars rather than destroying them. We always managed to renew our stock. Once we managed to capture a whole column of tanks with plenty of ammunitions. We had professional grenade men who knew how to hit a tank without damaging the gun.

How did our men operate? A group of 15/20 people would search for a house with food provisions. From there, they went on reconnaissance to hunt for weapons. Once they found weapons, they moved their positions. It was simple. The main difficulty in Grozny was the absence of radio transmitters. Only the battalion commanders had radios. We tried to organise a single commanding staff but without communication, it was impossible.

During the re-capture of Grozny, my unit joined Ruslan Gelaev's group in the north-west of the city. In all there were 3 groups in this district. My unit arrived last and was ordered

to surround the Russians' headquarters. We waited before attacking them because we hoped that they would run out of supplies. We tried to storm the garrison several times with no success. We had grenade launchers but it was not enough. We managed to destroy all the vehicles inside the garrison but we could not drive the Russians out, it was a real fortress, surrounded by mines and barbed wire. There were 30 metres between the garrison and us – it was impossible to cross this distance. There was an empty fire engine there, which we took. At one stage, the Russians tried to trick us: they put green scarves around their heads and attempted to break out shouting “Allah-u Akbar”. Their accent betrayed them! We tried to think of other means – like pouring petrol on the garrison with the fire engine but something was wrong with the pressure. Then we tried to build a catapult but we only managed to reach 25 metres. We also tried some rockets from tanks and from an APC. When nothing worked, we decided to keep the siege and starve them. We were mistaken – they had enough provisions to last a year. After a few days came an order to stop further action.

Some days later we realised that the Russians had gone. Through waste land at the back of the garrison they managed to reach the airport. We occupied the headquarters and distributed their weapons and food. Fighting was still going on all around us. We were envious of other groups which were in the thick of action but our orders were to guard the garrison's headquarters and a Russian unit based nearby in Zagrezhsky. They were in a five-storey building, surrounded by a 60-metre strip of mines and barbed wire. It was impossible to approach the building because they had snipers on the roof. There was a factory “Electropribor” on the right of the building where the Russians had also positioned snipers, trying to expand their defence lines. But in our urban conditions, they had no chance. The snipers had to remain in their positions until death whereas we could move around easily. They did not know our positions as we did not know them ourselves from one moment to the other.

The Russian units did not help each other. There was a command point in a nursery nearby surrounded by small buildings from where one could easily throw grenades. We left them alone and they preferred not to interfere. After a while we crossed in front of

Zagrezhsky and they did not fire at us when they could easily have done. After a few days, the Russians asked us for permission to leave. We allowed them to take their tanks but kept the rockets. Tanks are nothing without infantry. They should have used infantry for reconnaissance and to occupy positions. Only then should they use tanks. But it was not their war. They were not interested in it.