

Small Wars Journal

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Chief of Ahmad Zakaev's HQ in the South-West

Dalkhan Khozhaev, well known Chechen journalist and pamphletist, director of the National Archives since 1991

He received one of the highest decorations for bravery given during the war (one of only seven)

Interview June 1999

The first Grozny battle - 26 November 1994

I was first involved in fighting against Dudaev's opposition, in particular against Ruslan Labazanov. The trouble began on 12 June 1994, Russia's Independence Day, and on 13 June we crushed his units. I was not incorporated in any military structures but Labazanov's actions and killings incensed me. When the clashes began, I joined with a group of friends to give a hand. I did not take part in the later fighting in Gekhi but my friends were involved. After the clashes we negotiated with Labazanov and the opposition. They had promised that they would not enter Grozny but we knew that an attack was imminent.

On 26 November the enemy came with 42 tanks and 8 APCs (*BTR*) from two directions – Nadterechny and Urus Martan. Labazanov group attacked from Petropavlovka (Nadterechny). It was a proper intervention force with more than 3000 armed men. There were Russian crews in the tanks. We saw two planes flying over and helicopters. The helicopters did not fly over the city, remaining on the outskirts. I went to work that morning unaware of any problem, saw the shooting, checked who was fighting and went home to collect my weapons and a group of friends. We went to the Presidential Palace. A tank was burning in front of the Palace. We knew then that Russians were involved

because prisoners had already been taken. The Russians' presence fired us up - we were keen to fight them. Fighting had subdued near the Presidential Palace, but it broke out near the State Security Building. We went there around mid-day. One of our tanks was stationed there, it fired and managed to destroy an enemy tank.

The situation was totally chaotic. Nobody knew what to do. Our volunteers and partisans had never fought before. I told them to take positions along various streets and defend them. With my group of friends, we did the same. There was a small supply of weapons at the State Security: 2 AGS (?) which we left because nobody knew how to use them. There were grenade launchers but many among us saw them for the first time. I asked Magomed Khambiev what was the range of the grenade launchers and even he did not know! At that moment, tanks began advancing from all directions.

If I remember correctly, I was on Chechnya Street when we saw 2 tanks moving towards us. I had 2 anti-tank grenades. I had given one to another chap. We had automatic machine guns. Lyoma Arsimikov, had a grenade launcher but he lent it to somebody who went in another direction promising to bring it back. He kept 2 rockets. I pointed out to him that we needed his grenade launcher now because 2 tanks were advancing on us. Lyoma was a light hearted fellow. He replied "Never mind we will deal with them!".

The tanks were advancing head to tail very slowly as if their crew was scared. The leading tank was rotating its gun firing at the houses on both sides of the street. I stood facing the tank and told Lyoma "you throw your grenade into the first tank and I will aim at the second". We had sent another friend to look for our grenade launcher. People were still walking quietly in the streets but one could see tracers and hear rockets exploding. Some men were already wounded. As the tanks got nearer, I put all my weapons in front of me ready for use. Ahead of us was a crossroad. The tank was obviously scared of being hit from the side street and crossed very rapidly. In seconds, it was in front of us. Lyoma threw his grenade but it exploded in front of the tank. It damaged the drive and moved it a little to the side. The tank turned its gun towards us. Lyoma shouted "throw your grenade quickly!". I threw my grenade and hit the target. But tanks do not burn very

quickly, flames began to spread 2 or 3 minutes later. One tank crew-man got out, he had a flack jacket but I killed him at once. Two more men got out and hid behind the tank. When the lead tank began burning, the second tank turned round and drove away. Had he attacked us we would have been in trouble. We started shouting at the two men to surrender. Another tank was approaching the crossroad from the direction of the market. Someone had arrived with a grenade launcher and fired at that tank. The tank remained undamaged because the grenade man too close – one needs a minimum 18-metre range to fire a grenade launcher.

We did not know at that time that grenade launchers were ineffective at close range. I only realised it two months later when I began to learn and read about weapons seriously. Most of the men on that day did not know it either. They fired grenade launchers at close range and did not understand why the grenades would not transverse the tanks.

Lyoma ran across the street with his grenade launcher, aimed it at the 2 Russians who were hiding, shouting “crawl you worms”. We laughed. We dragged one of the Russians to a courtyard. The Russian’s face was slightly burned, he reeked of alcohol. Lyoma searched him, took his pistol, then told to give up his knife. The Russian was frightened thinking that we were going to slit his throat. He cried “don’t do it, I will tell you everything”. Our taste for acquiring trophy weapons was awaking amongst us. We ran to the other soldier to get his weapons. This soldier was dying. Lyoma took the prisoner to HQ.

Fighting was flaring up along the ring road, at the railway station, in one street after another. The opposition was in Rabochaia Street shooting at us. We ran there and they retreated. The tanks were becoming more cautious trying to avoid us but still shooting at the surrounding houses. Another tank was facing us as we ran towards the battle zone. There was nobody inside but we did not know it. We had no more anti-tank grenades. One man who had no weapons told me “give me a hand grenade, I will blow that tank”. I gave him a grenade, he approached the tank, looked inside, realised there was nobody inside.

We moved on. The opposition had run away, leaving one wounded. It was getting dark. I told Magomed Khambiev that if we did not check all the streets now it would be more difficult at night. We had to kick them out from everywhere before the night. Five of us went to Rabochaia Street. A civilian came to us, asking “is there anybody daring among you?”. I answered that there was. “There is a tank two blocks away, it must be checked”. As it was already dark, we could not see if it was manned. We approached with our *limonki* (hand grenades) and it seemed to us that the crew had abandoned the tank. One man climbed in, we told him to shout if there was anybody hiding inside. He lit a match, saw it was empty. The tank was full of ammunition. We drove it to HQ. (Later one chap was playing with various buttons inside the tank and fired the gun by mistake, making a hole in the MVD building.) We also captured a staff car (a Nissan) and found a list of opposition members involved in the operation. We took another vehicle with a supply of rockets – TURS, “faggots” and “Strela” - an anti-aircraft rocket. We took all our trophies to HQ and went home.

Most of the Russian POWs were taken in Kirov’s Park. The Russians were surrounded by the river and had no way of escaping. They surrendered without fighting to Shamil Basaev’s men. But around the railway station and the State Security building fighting was fierce against the opposition from Urus Martan. Our Chechen opponents were more daring and nefarious than the Russians.

Many fighters had no weapons that day, and we did not have that many people. By the State Security building there were approximately 20 or 30 men. Some estimates gave the figure of no more than 100 men altogether fighting against the intervention forces. That was until 4 pm after which time men began arriving from the villages to give us support.

The experience of that day left a lasting impression. It gave us tremendous confidence to know that we could stop a charging tank with a grenade. Previously the Russians had spread rumours that T-72 were invincible and indestructible. When people saw how easy it was to destroy them, all fear was gone. Many people regretted that they did not take

part in the battle. I often observed afterwards that if your first battle was successful you would continue being successful. That victory encouraged the whole nation and forged its determination. The whole day had a bizarre quality - imagine people walking quietly in streets littered with burning tanks! The number of completely burned out tanks was surprising. I realised the reason later. Our people did not know that when a tank is put out of action it does not burn immediately. They were trying to destroy them until they exploded. That was our lack of experience. That was why tanks were burning, their rockets exploding over 200 metres, with all the ammunition inside lost. But we managed to capture 4 or 5 undamaged tanks. We used them later.

After 26 November, everybody knew that war would come. Many people began arming themselves. With a group of friends, we armed a unit. The threat united many people and the opposition lost many of its partisans. Many men had joined the opposition on the promise of money incentives. When they realised that Russia was going to invade, they joined our ranks. I saw many men in our units who had previously fought against our government forces.

The teething problems

There were some heavy battles. At the beginning of the war, we had few experienced troops and the volunteer partisans were not disciplined. A well-armed unit would arrive claiming to occupy a position. But holding positions was difficult. The winter was very cold, you had to sit in the snow. Chechens liked their comfort - many refused to hold positions in harsh conditions. They refused to dig trenches. As a result, many people suffered. But our losses overall were not very heavy compared to the Russians'. We did a survey after the war – between 11 December 1994 and the end of February 1995, we lost 800 fighters.

The only units with experience were those of Basaev, Gelaev, and Magomed Khambiev. There was also an efficient unit from Gudermes. We had an OMON battalion but the men

were not battle trained. In all during the battle of Grozny only 200 to 300 men could be described as experienced out of perhaps 2000 people who took part in the fighting on and of. These were the forces Maskhadov had to make do the battle of Grozny. The commanders were responsible towards Maskhadov for the defence of their positions. But I want to repeat again that in the case of the volunteer partisans, they could come to defend a position in the afternoon only to leave it at night to go home to eat.

The Russians in Grozny

The Russians watched us for approximately one month while the situation remained alarming for them. But their intelligence was at work. They noticed that people were leaving their battle positions; at night, they moved step by step to occupy empty positions, or attacked those positions they knew would be badly defended. In the later case, their tactics were to fire from a distance with every possible kind of weapons, and to attack when few partisans were left. Thus, they began advancing towards the centre of Grozny.

At first, the Russian contingent numbered 10,000 men. It was increased to 40,000. Rokhlin's troops moved ahead of the other formations through Petropavlovka. Babishev was advancing from the direction of Ermolovka. He marched along the mountain range bypassing the villages where people were standing on the main road to prevent the passage of his columns. He rejoined the main road at Ermolovka and began advancing towards the bus station (*avtovakzal*). I know that Babishev was described as a great humanist for not shooting his way through the villages. This was nonsense - for him Chechens were enemies, including the civilians. He knew, however, that if he forced his way through and destroyed one village, the next one would fight.

Collaboration and neutrality

Stepashin as head of the FSK did good work in Chechnya! After the war we found out who among the opposition served the Russians as guides, snipers, or mine layers. Sultan Satuev from Urus Martan for example received the Order of Courage from Russia for “saving many Russian lives” during the January 1995 battles. In those days, people were not suspicious - he simply went round our units with a radio, informing the Russians on our positions.

Appeasement and neutrality were also manifest especially among elders. They used arguments such as “we must avoid resistance to protect the civilians, the women and the children”; others argued that the Russians had come to “liberate us from the Dudaev’s regime”, that they would not harm the neutral civilians, and so on. These arguments had some impact. I will give the example of Starye Atagi: the village sits on the road from Grozny to Shatoy. The Russians could have destroyed it easily but they preferred to bully its population into controlling the road on their behalf. All the supplies for Shatoy and the Southern mountains were checked by the villagers. When we wanted to mine the road, the villagers objected saying that they had an agreement with the Russians not to shoot at each other. This happened on several occasions and not only in Starye Atagi.

It was impossible to force a village to fight if it did not want to. The local resistance fighters, not the outsiders, influenced decisions in the village. It usually happened this way: the village would hold a meeting to decide whether it village would fight or not. The Russians would activate their local agents to swing the decision in favour of expelling the fighters, and forming a self-defence unit that would reach a cease-fire agreement with the Russian military. If the local fighters were popular, if their commander had authority and respect, the decision would sway in favour of resistance. Ultimately 3 to 5 per cent of the population made the whether. The rest followed.

The tragedy of Samashki was a psychological turning point. It made everything clear. The Russians had convinced the elders of Samashki to compel the fighters to leave the village. When they did, the massacre began. After Samashki, most villages began to arm and defend themselves. But the authority of the elders who preached appeasement had

already been declining before Samashki. The people who fought knew that they were fighting for their homeland. They did not listen to anybody, and knew what they were doing.

I must add that the neutrality [or apparent neutrality] of certain villages served the resistance. Had the Russians exerted military pressure everywhere at the same time, our situation would have been a lot more difficult. As it happened there were villages where our men could rest 5 or 10 km from military operations.

Recruitment and logistics

Throughout the war, we were short of ammunition. In the first days, we were short of weapons. Had we had an adequate supply of weapons, I think many more people would have fought. We had no logistic support. Fighters were relying on food supplies from home, and on people bringing food to the lines. Therefore, it was impossible to keep people in one place for any length of time. Even after one year of war, when we gained experience and maintained an iron discipline, the problem of logistics remained.

As war went on many more volunteers joined our ranks. These volunteers were getting younger. The older men were often ill, pneumonia, back-ache the most frequent occurrences. Men over 35 years old stayed at home. They asked to join us for special operations but they could not sit in the trenches for any length of time. A younger generation came to replace them. We had to send many of the youngsters home because we had nothing to feed them with. Often young men from one village came to join a unit in another village to avoid frictions if their own village was not entirely committed to the war.

Position battles

In this type of battle the two fronts, Russian and Chechen, would face each other at a distance of approximately one kilometre. The Russians usually deployed their forces outside our range of firing - no closer than 800 metres. They knew that we only had grenade launchers, *pulimety*, and automatics. They used heavy artillery, GRAD, URAGAN, mortar, also tanks and anti-aircraft settings every day, day and night. For a single shot, they answered with the full blast of their fire-power. They were experimenting and training but at the same time they trained and taught us.

In the early days of the war we chose positions in open terrain and dug trenches near vegetation and forest belts. But we quickly understood that this was a mistake because it helped the Russians to calculate the distance between us accurately. It also took us some time to realise the best way to design trenches.

Usually we had approximately 25 men, sometimes only 10 men, sometimes 50, facing a Russian regiment or battalion. The initiative for the offensive was theirs. Our side waited for the Russians to attack.

Tactics and impact of enemy fire

We used every possible tactics and methods of waging war – conventional and defensive position warfare, offensive commando-style raids, hit-and-run ambushes, partisan warfare, and so on. The Russians gave us no other choice. Today the Russians say that we were hiding from them. In some cases we did, in others we attacked. There were urban battles and battles in rural areas, in open lowland terrain and in the mountains. You saw Goyskoe, it is a small village in the plain. For two months, we fought from the trenches we had built around it. The Russians had surrounded the village leaving only the exit road to Urus Martan opened, in the hope that our units would leave. They adopted that tactic after Samashki. Samashki was destroyed to inspire fear - terror having failed to impress, afterwards the Russians always left a corridor for people to abandon besieged

villages. The tactic worked sometimes because our fighters were always dependent on outside supplies.

At the beginning of the war, our fighters used to withdraw as soon as they were encircled. But after the first year, the men did not care any longer whether they were surrounded or not. They knew that it was always possible to escape.

Air attacks were particularly frightening for the civilian population, not so for the fighters. They knew that air attacks never lasted for very long. Mortar fire was what we feared most because there was no protection against it. It was dangerous and effective, even under cover in the trenches. Most of our casualties were inflicted during mortar fire. The bomber planes, the helicopters, the tanks were not dangerous.