

Galina Kovalskaya (Moscow)

Der Sturm und Foolishness

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A military operation to capture a large city is not a trivial event even in modern history. We present recollections of our columnist, Galina Kovalskaya, who witnessed what happened in Groznyy nine years ago.

This is how the city quarters looked like just a few hours after the street fighting had begun. (Photo by AP).

The combined smells of burned cloth and meat that hanged over the Groznyy railway station is one of my most terrible memories. In the end of December 1994, we, journalists, human rights activists, and Duma deputies, came to Chechnya to find for ourselves what was going on there. By then, Groznyy had been already bombed several times, and while Russian generals claimed that only military targets were being bombed, the Chechens were saying that bombs were hitting residential buildings and hospitals. The first Chechen war had already begun, and federal troops were steadily advancing on Groznyy, but it did not occur to any of us that the troops would actually storm the city.

We were promised that President Dudaev would receive us on December 31. Huddled together, more than a dozen strong, we barged into what they called the Presidential Palace, the former regional headquarters of the Communist Party, a huge building towering over the city. Later, storming of the city would reduce it to a hollow skeleton, and still later it would be demolished on the orders of the Russian military command.

Bearded men armed with automatic rifles – security guards and “fighters of the Presidential Guard” - were loitering about the palace. They were not yet called “militants”: this name would appear in a few hours, in the first reports on the fights in Groznyy. Most of the Guardsmen had left in anticipation of massive bombardment, and, by some estimates, there were no more than two – three hundreds of them still in the city. A few dozens of them were deployed in the palace. They obviously did not know what to occupy themselves with. They were loitering on the stairs; chain smoked, and traded jokes. We were taken to a large room and told to wait – President

Dudaev would see us there as soon as he is free. We waited for several hours. Those who had been in Chechnya before counseled us not to worry: nothing in Chechnya happens on time. Suddenly, there was a terrible noise, and then several voices behind the door cried out. The door opened and a security guard flew in: “Everybody to the basement. There are tanks in the city.” He led us through narrow corridors and down stairs, and, as we were walking down, suddenly the walls trembled from an artillery salvo, and from then on our descent was accompanied by incessant sounds of artillery fire. In the basement, we discussed the situation, and everybody agreed that in a few hours the fighting will be over: Russian forces would take the palace, which would effectively mean the end of the Chechen “independence”. As I remember, none of us was very supportive of the Russian military operation that went under the slogan of “restoration of constitutional order”, but the Dudaev’s regime did not evoke much sympathy either.

In about two hours, an excited, out of breath Chechen fighter carrying a rocket launcher entered the basement: “Want to see the tanks burn? Let’s go!” In small groups, one by one, we climbed the stairs, and crunching broken glass underfoot made our way to the palace entrance. We were not allowed to step outside, but were invited to look through the doorway. In the square before the palace, there were tanks burning like torches. In confusion, it did not occur to us to count them, but they numbered about a couple of dozens. Chechen fighters armed with rocket launchers were standing on the front steps. One of them turned to us and said joyously: “We destroyed all of them! We shot them down! Let them try it once more – we’ll destroy them again. We’ll fight for our freedom, all as one.” And another added “The invincible Russian army is burning!” They were happy and did not notice at all that we were not in a hurry to share in their joy.

Soon they started to bring to the basement freshly taken Russian prisoners. First they brought three, then four, and then more and more, so that we soon lost count. Many had been wounded and were immediately given medical attention. A Chechen surgeon was working in the basement, behind a screen, treating both the Chechen fighters and the Russian prisoners, busily removing bullets and shell fragments from their wounds. The prisoners were given water and some watery soup, the same soup the Chechens were eating themselves and feeding us. Beating POWs and cutting throats of “contractniks”¹ – these would come later, with the war dragging on, with no end in sight. But then, in the euphoria of the victory, and with the Moscow guests present, the Chechens wanted to be generous and humane. The captured soldiers were telling the same story: they were given the order to follow the vehicle in front (either a tank, or an armored personnel carrier); they were moving in a single file, then the tank in the front caught fire; before

¹ Soldiers who volunteered to serve in the army for pay, as opposed to regular draftees.

they had a chance to figure out what had happened, their tank was also burning. They jumped out and were immediately taken prisoners. They did not know the city and had no maps.

A couple of days later, a captured lieutenant colonel, Zryadnyy, told Sergei Kovalev and Oleg Orlov, representatives of “Memorial”², that initially the units commanders received an order to remain at the outskirts of the city. General Konstantin Pulikovskiy, the future President Putin’s representative in the Far East, held a meeting, at which he assured the commanders that they would not enter the city, and that it would be the Internal Ministry forces who would do the job there. However, within an hour after they had been deployed at the outskirts, they received the order to enter Grozny. Zryadnyy’s battalion was to take the railway station district. They were not told whether they could return fire, or how to disarm the adversary. Not even the commanders were issued maps of the city.

Sergei Kovalev borrowed a radio from Dudaev’s guards and appealed to the Russian soldiers to give themselves up. For this, Sergei Kovalev would be later called “traitor”, would be denounced by the Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, and General Troshev would mention him unfavorably in his book.³ However, then and there, all of us, including Kovalev, saw the same: our boys were burning in tanks. And they only could be saved by surrender.

Suddenly, there turned up an old Russian man from a nearby house. He broke through the street fighting to the palace to tell the Chechen fighters that he needed to see “the chief human rights defender Kovalev”. There was a real battle going on in his house, and his 70 years old wife got unwell. There was no way he could get a doctor. He himself could not even use the stairs; he used bed sheets to climb down from his second floor apartment. On the way, a shell fragment had scratched his arm. He wanted Kovalev to help him somehow, but Kovalev could offer him nothing but his sympathy. We tried to convince the old man to wait out the fighting in the basement. But he was anxious to get back. He said he was afraid to leave his wife for long and would chance the way home.

By evening, firing around the palace subsided somewhat, and a few of us decided to venture outside. The center of the city was littered with disabled or destroyed tanks. Two men, looking as ordinary civilians, were walking down the street. They spotted a tank a half the block away that looked unharmed, but instead of running for cover, they continued nonchalantly on their way expressing loudly their regrets that they didn’t happen to have a grenade launcher handy. Dead bodies were lying everywhere. We did not know it then, but the dead soldiers were those from the 131st Maikop brigade and the 81st Samara regiment that comprised the force that was

² A human rights organization. Sergei Kovalev, a former Soviet dissident and political prisoner, served as a Duma’s member and as the Ombudsman for Human Rights in the Yeltsin’s government.

³ Gennadiy Troshev, a former supreme commander of federal forces in the North Caucasus, in the book “My War. Diaries of a Field Commander”, Vagrui, Moscow, 2001

attacking Grozny from the north. They were under command of that same General Pulikovskiy. He had followed to the letter the General Staff's plan: to advance in columns, three tanks abreast. The planners based themselves on the experience of capture of Baku in January 1990⁴ and were not expecting serious resistance. In the evening of the 31st, there was a news report that Grozny is taken and that Russian soldiers are feeding Grozny residents porridge from the field kitchens. But the most monstrous and incomprehensible event happened the next day. January 1st proved to be a repetition of the day before: the troops had again entered the city in columns, they again had been allowed into the center of the city, where they were then methodically destroyed by rocket grenades. Again, as the day before, Chechens were bringing to our basement bewildered and confused young Russian soldiers. Those were the remnants of the 131st Maikop brigade reinforced by marines and paratroopers.

On January 2nd, one of my colleagues and I ventured outside the palace. There was still gunfire on the streets: the soldiers who managed to take cover in the neighborhood houses were fiercely defending themselves against Dudaev's fighters. We were approached by one of the fighters: "Are you journalists? I'll take you to the railway station; there are a lot of destroyed tanks there." The gigantic square before the station, as far as we can see, was densely packed with burning out armored vehicles. From time to time, there was a deafening boom made by exploding ammunition. A choking, revolting smell that immediately made us queasy hanged over the square.

Fighting for Grozny continued until the end of January. Command of the operation was assumed by General Rokhlin, who finally stopped the joy rides into the city in column formations. Instead, he was advancing his forces under the cover of heavy fire, killing anybody alive in his way. On January 19, they first flew the Russian flag atop the palace, as a symbol of victory over the rebellious city, but battles over the southern part of the city would go on for another two weeks.

The New Year eve storming of the city took lives of about a thousand Russian soldiers, some of whom are still counted as missing in action. About 25 thousands peaceful Grozny residents were killed.

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⁴ On January 19, 1990 Soviet troops entered Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, ostensibly to stop Armenian pogroms, but, as many believe, the goal was to quash the separatist movement there.