

**Russian Officer Views Abkhaz Conflict**  
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[Interview with unidentified officer of the Transcaucasian Military District by Mariya Dementyeva; place and date not given: "Abkhazia Is Buying Arms From Georgia"]

[Text]

[Dementyeva] It seems that they never run out of arms in the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Yet the transfer of Russian arms to Georgia, for example, was halted by a decision of the parliament of the Russian Federation back in October of last year. Where are they getting their weapons?

[Officer] In spite of the decision of the parliament of Russia, the transfer of arms to Georgia ended on 4 April 1993 in keeping with the agreements of the Tashkent meeting on 15 May 1992. As of today the following have been transferred to Georgia: from the 10th Motorized Infantry Division—108 tanks, 111 BMP's [infantry combat vehicles], 19 BTR-80 [armored personnel carriers], 48 MTOB (small light armored transporter), eight BM-21 (Grad) installations, 90 guns from various systems, 20 mortars, 18 PTUR combat vehicles, more than 200 "Strela-2" PZRK [portable anti-aircraft missile system], 13 ZSU23-4 ("Shilka"), 18 ZU23-2, and 12,000 automatic rifles; a division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs turned over eight tanks, six infantry combat vehicles, 18 armored personnel carriers, 12 BTRM, and 2,000 rifles. Russia also gave them an air defense system, including surface-to-air missile complexes of the Krug and Kub types. Georgia bought 800 units of automatic weapons from Romania. Additionally, the Georgians seized from Russian military units 25 infantry combat vehicles, 10 100-mm mortars, 18 85-mm caliber hail-storm [gradoboynyye] anti-aircraft weapons, 16 Alazan units for MTOB's, and also about 1,500 rifles.

And Abkhazia is buying the arms. One of the channels is Chechnya. There is information that tiny little ships like fishing craft are transporting arms from Ukraine. And, paradoxical as it may be, it is a fact that weapons—rifles, automatics, grenade throwers, PZRK's—have arrived from Georgia through commercial structures, and from Ingushetia, where Georgia has been actively delivering arms lately. The traders try to sell the Abkhazians the worst ones, the ones nobody wants, those that are worn out and require expenditures on repair and adjustment. All of their aviation—helicopters and airplanes and even "sushka" (SU-25)—is in extremely bad shape.

[Dementyeva] What is the situation with mercenaries? There is talk of a Russian battalion in Abkhazia.

[Officer] There is no Russian battalion in Abkhazia. There is an Armenian one, made up of Armenians living in Abkhazia, and there are Chechen and

Northern Caucasian battalions. There are a few Cossacks and there are Russians—mainly Russians who live here permanently. Incidentally, there are not so many coming to help the Abkhazians; the problem has been exaggerated—by the Abkhazians themselves, in order to show how strong their support is, and by the Georgians, in order to fan anti-Russian sentiments, and by the Russian government, in order to put pressure on the Northern Caucasians.

In general, the number of mercenaries in Abkhazia is not worth mentioning. Here they are fighting not for money but for the idea of independence—they come to help out of a sense of kinship, out of a feeling of friendship for those who have been attacked. Similarly to the way the Slavic ideal drives some people to help the Serbs and the Muslim ideal forces Turks to go and fight in Bosnia.

But what ideal could move a Russian or Ukrainian to go out and spill his blood "for the territorial integrity of Georgia?" That is why the Georgians have to enlist mercenaries. They need them for many things—as pilots, artillery experts, communications specialists, air defense. Thus, for example, they recruited Sergey Rodin, a captain, and a first-class SU-25 pilot. The recruitment is going on in Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltics. Thus about 500 people have joined the Ukrainian battalion—it was recruited in Ukraine by the former deputy commander of the Carpathian Military District, who is currently the deputy minister of defense of Georgia, Kamkamidze. The recruitment is continuing. In Yalta, for example, a certain millionaire named Lagvilava is handling this, and in Nikolayev—Chediya and Shuyev. In Russia, according to available information, they are using the official administrative-military structures, in spite of the law that was adopted forbidding the use of mercenaries.

[Dementyeva] What are the costs?

[Officer] I do not know, but it is difficult to believe that they pay \$5,000 per operation. There are a lot of difficulties in Georgia now since many of the mercenaries' contracts will expire in April, and Georgia is not in a position to extend them since it has not paid them yet. Obviously, a problem is arising, the mercenaries will abandon their positions and demand payment, and situations of conflict are possible here. Now the Georgian leaders are hurrying to arm the local militia as quickly as possible, train them, and replace the mercenaries after taking away their weapons. New units are also being brought into Sukhumi—battalions from Akhaltsikhe, Gori, and Tbilisi.

[Dementyeva] People are saying that during the defense of Sukhumi they placed detachments at the rear of the frontline detachments to kill people trying to retreat, a method used by Stalin near Moscow.

[Officer] Yes, during first night of the Abkhazian attack a battalion of Svans who were defending Ochandara began to retreat and 50 percent of them were shot by Georgian units positioned behind them: that is how they tried to get the Svans to return to their positions. And

when the Mengrels were fleeing to Novyy Rayon, the Georgians occupying positions here tried to force them to return to the front line by firing above the heads of the fighting men and then right at them, but they did not succeed.

[Demytyeva] How can one assess the fighting experience of the two sides?

[Officer] The Georgians fight well mainly with artillery. They use roving batteries, which do not do well in combat but are there for "emergencies," and most of their firing is done with Grad installations. True, there is one tricky aspect here—the Georgians are putting their gun emplacements near residential buildings similar to the way during the war the Germans placed guns in hospitals in the hope that the enemy would not fire on inhabited buildings. Otherwise, they try to fight by the book: the artillery fire from a maximum distance and are constantly changing their tactics. But not very many have died from artillery fire. It is not well coordinated, and here one can see the effects of the fact that the artillery men do not have good nonvisual target acquisition, information about the situation, or data on specific targets. It is interesting that during the last attack the Abkhaz artillery neutralized two artillery batteries and, although their fire was more intensive, not a single Abkhaz artillery unit was neutralized.

As for the rest of the troops, the Georgians gained significant offensive practice in Gagry when they were able to put down a landing party and defeat the poorly organized Abkhaz militia. And the Abkhazians gained good experience in the Sukhumi operation. But in general we cannot speak about significant military experience—for example, Georgian troops have overwhelming superiority in tanks and artillery, and so far they have been unable to carry out a single tactical assignment in Ochamchirskiy Rayon, where they are being opposed by poorly trained and poorly armed partisans who are tormented by hunger and a constant shortage of ammunition. This particular situation is instructive in that the troops were not separated by a river but are constantly in contact and engaging in battle.

[Demytyeva] What are the prospects for this war?

[Officer] The future looks bad and it is not likely to come to anything for either side. Georgia was counting on its lightning speed. But now that they have clearly formed lines, one can see that the Abkhazians will not back down. Georgia has ended up in a very difficult position. Even if they succeed in conducting some kind of military operation and reaching Adler, the population might flee but the Abkhaz troops will go into the mountains. And through the mountains they maintain contact with their allies, and all of the Northern Caucasus will flare up. Georgia will have to engage them in a prolonged war, in which there will be no lull: It will be easy for merchants to deliver arms to the North Caucasians over the highways. Both missiles and tanks will appear here. Georgia will be blocked and will have a partisan war on its hands with all the terrorist acts, sabotage, and—complete paralysis of economic life.

The Abkhazians have the prospect of going as far as the Inguri River and digging in there. But their weak point is "human resources." They must not allow themselves to sustain losses, and the only way to solve their military problem is through attack. Of course, it is possible to close off the road, but the partisans are exhausted; they will hang on for a day or two and then leave, sustaining losses—they need supplies of ammunition. Nonetheless the existence of two fronts for the Georgian grouping, the constant threat of having the road closed, and the instability in Western Georgia give the Abkhazians the opportunity, if they can accumulate a sufficient quantity of material resources, to go over to the offensive, regardless of how undesirable it may be for them in terms of inevitable losses. A great deal will also depend on the internal political situation within the territory controlled by the Georgian side. It is a bundle of contradictions now. In Sukhumi, for example, there is a multitude of various political units—the militia, the Kitovani guard, Ioseliani's Mkhedrioni, Karkarashvili's spetsnaz, the Okhalaya military police, the Afghantsy [Afghan war veterans] battalion with its unknown allegiance, the regiment of internal forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and, finally, the mercenaries. Datuashvili is trying to take over all of them but not with much success because they reflect the interests of those to whom they are attached in Tbilisi.