

TOREADORS

The Major, the commander of the Second Company, was oddly obstinate: he couldn't stand subdivision into 'gangs'. He was firmly convinced that fighters in the various subdivisions of the Company, staffed by him taking into full account – as he considered it – character and ties of family and friendship, shouldn't have been divided into still narrower circles and groups of friends. 'All of you in the companies and platoons be on friendly terms, with no taking of sides,' he would say to the boys, but he could never stand it that they didn't carry out his commands. He didn't count it as taking sides the fact that he trusted more than others his brother-in-law Koba and the latter's two classmates, Dato and, especially, Mamuka, well-known for his seriousness, and he didn't consider that he himself was giving an example of division into 'gangs'. Nor did he trouble himself to clarify why others shouldn't have the right to place special trust in someone. Dropping in before an attack he would say exactly the same thing to everyone: 'Watch it, there should be no unauthorized or group activities.' (What he meant was that we shouldn't be divided or broken up as we saw fit during the battle.) 'Show me some respect, just do the right thing by me in this attack, and I know how to show you my respect afterwards,' he would say with a smile that was both chiding and coaxing. He would say it in approximately the same tone as a teacher admonishing pupils taken on an excursion: 'Just don't spread out on me and I won't give you a poor grade when we get back to the school.' It was as if they were going on an outing to the seaside from which all would return healthy and unharmed, and not on an attack and to die. This relieved the boys' tension before the attack. 'He knows how to treat people,' said Mamuka of the Major. For some reason headquarters had planned the attack for midday.

It was the personal doing of the Major that the Second Company had been blockaded. He hadn't kept to the general plan worked out in advance, he had shown too much eagerness and enthusiasm for a fight, and had made the boys overstep the bounds.

At first it looked like everything was going well. The Major had plenty of information on the commander of the opposing company stationed opposite his position – past middle age, as they said, a man who had lost two sons in this war – some of it obtained through reconnaissance, more picked up through his own channels. According to the Major, the commander of the opposing company, to whom he himself gave the nickname 'Old Khottabych' was no fool: his level of discipline was adequate, but his thinking was conventional, he was largely lacking in audacity, and he had trouble with taking decisions.

The 'Major's Lads', as they called the boys in the Major's company, moved their position forward to the next ravine in line with what had been worked out. If truth be told, the new position was significantly more disadvantageous than the old one, but the general disposition of forces – not only at battalion level but overall on the scale of the perimeter – would improve and become more favourable. The First and Third Companies (the latter was called the 'Carab-ineers' on account of 'Carbine', the company commander) had to endure some heavy fighting to take possession of that sector of the slope allocated to them. But the Major's Lads made their adversary retreat relatively easily and quickly.

The company opposing the Major's Lads abandoned their grenade launch-ers as they retreated. But instead of strengthening their newly captured po-sitions as demanded by the general plan worked out before the attack, the Major advanced even further. The Major's Lads crossed the second ravine, found themselves on the top of a hill and they again fired down on them. For some reason almost all started working with hand grenades. The Major's Lads could clearly see their opponents and were throwing hand grenades directly aimed at them like stones. Finally the Major's shouting succeeded in stopping them: 'Spare the grenades!' he said, and they yielded the theatre entirely to the machine-gunners, but snipers with no less enthusiasm than the Major again showed their initiative and were more effective than the machine-gunners. At first two brothers, both machine -gunners, descended the far slope of the hill and the others followed behind them. Koba dashed to the Major (his wife's brother) and yanked the latter's military jacket so tightly, he almost tore it into pieces. 'Where are we creeping off to then?' Koba yelled at him.

'Let the boys blow off steam! Let's give a little help to the Third. Let's strike at the Carabineers' adversary from the side. What could beat wiping them out! We'll make mincemeat of them in half an hour! Isn't that right, boys?' asked the Major. He stood puffed up like a turkey, as if he wanted to show what a strong and terrifying commander he was. The boys tolerated these leaps of his, as the Major was a kindly man and, unlike other commanders such as Carbine himself whom he was now about to assist, he himself would lead attacks from the front. He would open his eyes wide, he would raise his sub-machine gun pathetically like a flag (both Koba and he had short, 'gangster's' sub -machine guns), yelling 'After me, rabbits!' and without a care for himself, not dodging the bullets, he would run off like a Soviet political supervisor who had been plied spirits to bursting point.

'You're out of your mind, Klimentich!' yelled Koba, but it was already too late, the boys were already letting off steam and neither the Major (or Klimen-tich, as Koba called him) nor even our Heavenly Father could bring them back, only the enemy could, but they were too busy for this: they were running away, a part of them had tried without success to join up with the company opposing the Carabineers.

'He's driven us up shit creek!' Koba yelled again.

Yelling, they followed the machine-gunner brothers, they descended into the third consecutive ravine. The enemy was down on its knees. The animated Major was like a madman, guffawing and yelling:

‘Take the devils alive, alive!’

But no one obeyed the Major, they even shot those on their knees; they would pause, put the sub-machine gun barrel in the mouth and fire. At the same time some were also guffawing like the Major, or it may be that they were having an orgasm. The only one keeping calm was Mamuka. The Major ran on ahead, he led the way and directed the boys towards the right. Those who had already penetrated the enemy positions quite deeply struck the Carabineers’ opponent from the side, or ‘tickled him’ as the Major referred to it. They needed just one attack. The flank attack had confused and scattered the company opposing the Carabineers. But these soon came to their senses, they divided up in an organized manner for two-way defence, and in a very short time they turned out to have aspirations of launching a counter-attack directed not against the Carabineers, but against the Major’s Lads. The Major left these to the Carabineers: ‘They can take care of these from now on, we have to see to our positions,’ he said, but they couldn’t get back in time, since the Carabineers themselves had opened fire on the Major’s Lads.

The Major’s Lads lay down flat under some trees and they went over to a two-way defence like their opponents, although they didn’t return the Carabineers’ fire. But the Carabineers didn’t consider for an instant why one of the two opposing companies had not answered their attack and they calmly continued massacring the Major’s Lads.

The company opposing the Carabineers had retreated a little so as to come to their senses, and the Major’s Lads had just relaxed a little, when the latter’s first and real opponent in retreat came forward again and opened light fire to sniff out the situation. It appeared that they had received reinforcements and that their commander, Old Khottabych, had taken the necessary decision on this in good time. It was then that Carbine’s boys retreated and returned to their positions as set out and defined in the plan of attack.

‘We’re in the deepest shit, boys!’ the Major said. Everyone realized that he had already exhausted his capabilities.

Koba made the fullest commentary on what had happened:

‘You’re right, Major, war is shit, the main thing is manoeuvres!’ He articulated this with dangerous calmness, and after these words he nearly shot at his brother-in-law, but the boys didn’t let him.

The firing stopped. The opponent’s three companies retreated, apparently to hand over the theatre to the artillery, but the Major’s Lads didn’t realize this; it seemed to them that two enemy companies, those opposing them and the Carabineers, were in contact with each other and that the general plan of subsequent action was being implemented.

‘The most intelligent thing would be to take advantage of the temporary calm to split up into a number of small groups and try to get out of here like that,’ said Mamuka. Even the Major was already prepared not to be offended by this news that his boys from then on considered Mamuka as their commander. Recognizing Mamuka as their commander turned out for them to be forced, like devising battle tactics based on chucking hand grenades down from a vantage point over the second ravine. Mamuka personally assigned his fellow fighters to mobile groups. His mind worked at an amazing speed and his composition of these groups was quite clever: he assigned the weak, the aggressive, the tired and those who still had a desire for battle (ordinary ‘contractors’, and ‘customers’ or ‘brains’) so equally, that each group had a similar hard-hitting and command core. Before then, they had to attempt one more attack and, if it didn’t work out for them, they would break up into groups as agreed in advance, that is to say, they would ‘become partisans’.

Mamuka gave the order to attack.

‘Godspeed, guys!’ he shouted and then the artillery started to fire.

The enemy mortarmen and those ostensibly conspiring with them hit only the Major’s Lads and were right on target. At long last the Major’s Lads realized that Carbine’s boys had retreated when a runner had gone to them and let them know that the artillery was beginning to work on the opponent’s position. The runner went to the Major’s Lads’ position too, but they were not there to meet him.

Then a mortar shell hit the Major when he had started to take the remaining pistol cartridges from his pocket and set about loading them into a cartridge clip. There was nothing left of the Major. Before that Mamuka had crawled along to the Major as he had wanted to find out what he had meant when he was shouting that the grenade launchers be placed on the right. He was probably arranging the pistol cartridges in the cartridge clip to calm his nerves. He died without anyone hearing what plan for a tactical manoeuvre had flashed through his now prematurely grey head and why it seemed to him that the grenade launchers would still have any ammunition remaining, or that the grenade launchers themselves would still be alive. Neither had Mamuka heard: he hadn’t enough time to ask the Major before he too was killed. His voice rattled loudly before he died. For an instant it seemed to Dato that Mamuka would not die if he were to go to him and stop up his perforated neck with his finger. He had vomited up blood and pus. Up to then Dato had not seen how men ill with pleu-risy from lying in the trenches vomit up blood and pus before they died. At this time they are very weak and you feel sorrier for them than for yourself.

Someone stood up and yelled at the top of his voice: ‘We’re going to die anyway, so let’s stand up, boys, and try to get away.’ No one stood up. Even if they had stood up, Dato wouldn’t have followed, since he felt that the bombing would soon stop.

First our artillery fell silent, then the adversary’s, who were helping our boys massacre the

Major's Lads. Mamuka's eyes had not yet become empty. Dato suddenly took fright, it seemed to him that Koba would also be dead. If he were alive, he would have begun to poke around in the Major's remains, if nothing else, he's his wife's brother, he thought. He looked all around and caught sight of Koba coming towards him. Koba, it seemed, knew where Dato was. He was coming and shouting something to his friend, but Dato couldn't hear anything, the sound of the shells had deafened him. Meanwhile two more stood up. One was a sniper, he wore fingerless gloves. Dato recalled the machine-gunner brothers, they wore gloves like these, but he couldn't see the brothers anywhere.

'Where do you want to look for that man now?' asked Koba.

At first Dato didn't grasp whom Koba had in mind, then he realized that he was talking about his wife's brother.

Dato went over towards Mamuka. Mamuka's eyes were getting cold and going blank. Dato couldn't get near. Koba again shouted something. He had cast his sub-machine gun aside and had picked up a machine gun. He seemed rather calm to Dato. Koba indicated to the others with his hand that they continue on their way and he came over to Dato.

'Let's take his papers at least!' Dato said to him.

Koba went to Mamuka, he went down on one knee and took his papers from his pocket. Dato thought that he would also loosen his wristwatch, but he didn't. Dato loosened the wristwatch and handed it to Koba, but Koba had stood up in the meantime. 'He didn't even notice it when I handed him the watch,' Dato thought, but later, when Koba asked Kote to give him the watch, he realized that he had noticed.

'Where can I see the Major now?' Koba asked. 'He means the Major's papers,' Dato understood.

'Let's go!' Dato said. He looked in astonishment with his green eyes at Koba, it probably seemed to him that he had taken leave of his senses. It is not easy to see how in the twinkling of an eye nothing remains of your wife's brother.

'Where the hell are you going, you faggots?' Koba suddenly shouted at the others. 'Can we leave the wounded, shouldn't you have a look at them at least?'

Dato realized that Koba's first shock had passed.

'Search for the wounded. I'll have a look around and then I'll come back!' Koba said.

'What will we do with the wounded?' asked one who was a friend of the machine-gunner brothers. He wasn't a great fighter, but he did at least try to overcome his fear.

'Don't ask me what the hell we should do with them!' said Koba. 'Let's kill anyone who can't walk so that they're not taken prisoner!'

Dato grabbed his friend's shoulders and shook him violently, as if he had decided to churn his brain. Koba struck him with his hand and, so that he wouldn't try to shake him

once more, he placed the barrel of his machine gun directly under Dato's chin to bring him to his senses.

'Everything's all right, isn't it?' Koba asked his friend calmly and he calmed down. 'I'll go off to the right, someone go to the left. Note the time, we'll be on reconnaissance exactly ten minutes. Until we get back the others will look for the wounded and whatever remains of the Major, if they can find anything. Those of us on reconnaissance will return and we'll work out in which direction to retreat!' he said to Dato. He tried to speak as calmly as possible, so that Dato wouldn't start shaking him again.

Dato was convinced with difficulty that Koba was of sound mind.

'Where is Kote Alasania?' Koba asked and Kote immediately responded. He was a man of around forty who moved as rapidly as quicksilver, he had all the qualities of an observer, but the Major for some reason didn't use to send him on reconnaissance, saying he was a fidgeter who couldn't stay in one spot. But in Koba's view, Kote was an ideal choice for reconnaissance work.

'You go left and I'll go right. Note the time. We'll be back in exactly ten minutes. Understood?' Koba asked Kote and the latter began to nod his head. 'Off we go, note the time!'

'Ten minutes is a long time!' Dato said.

'It's not a long time. We'll go forward slowly. Five minutes is enough for us to get back. We'll come running!' Koba answered.

'I don't have a watch!' Kote said. Koba turned to Dato and told him to lend Kote Mamuka's watch.

Kote put the watch into his trouser pocket and then slapped his pocket with his hand as a sign that he was ready to complete his task.

Those going on reconnaissance set off. No one was looking for the wounded. They were standing mutely in one spot, wishing they couldn't hear the groans of the wounded and that they wouldn't be burdened unnecessarily, they were yearning for them and, owing to this, it was as if they were ashamed to look one another in the eye. 'Why did we group together in one place? Let's break up and position ourselves for circular defence,' someone said in the end.

After a short while Koba's feet no longer trembled. He felt the whooshing of blood in his ears. His heart was beating like it would almost burst. His hands would turn cold as soon as he thought that they really were ensnared in a trap. This was fear, but still he went forward. Quick dashes from tree to tree at first, then simply moving in zigzags without pausing, while trying to keep close to the trees just in case.

It was as if time had almost come to a standstill. Fear again seized him. 'It's quite possible that the area has been mined', he thought, but in his heart he felt that there would be no

mines and he tried not to think about this.

‘At least five minutes will have passed since I set off on reconnaissance,’ he estimated roughly. He very much wanted his supposition to be proven correct and, indeed, so it was. This calmed him down for a short while. The return of his ability to sense time increased his self-confidence.

Before him stood the face of Carbine, the commander of the Third Com-pany, with his black hair combed back and his quivering nostrils.

‘You motherfucker, Carbine!’ he said. Then still more enemy fighters appeared. Koba lay down flat.

He already regretted having organized this reconnaissance. ‘If we had all left together, we could have attacked them and easily broken through the blockade,’ he thought. The blockaders were being rather cautious. He did come up with one thought: ‘I’ll ambush them,’ he said. ‘I’ll take three of them out at least and I’ll be able to get back.’ He was lucky in that the blockaders were approaching slowly. They were explaining some things to each other with their hands. As Koba observed, they must have been inexperienced and were playing at being experienced fighters to overcome their fear. It was like a pantomime.

Koba got up and ran back. He was dog-tired. He ran crouching, he was so tired that his kneecaps were knocking against each other. When he felt himself in a safe place, he took a short rest. He continued on his way upright. ‘If they kill me, so be it, they kill me and everything will end,’ he thought. Then firing broke out again to his right. He realized that Kote Alasania had run into someone. He began to run. His lungs were at bursting point. His back was burning and he was in a cold sweat. It seemed to him that someone was aiming at him.

To the right, the firing gradually abated and finally stopped. When everything had quietened down a hand grenade exploded. Koba supposed that Kote had blown himself up. Three single shots were heard, and then the shooter fired a four- or five-bullet burst and finally another single shot. That would be their password. He couldn’t understand exactly what it meant, but he understood that Kote Alasania was already a corpse. His reconnaissance debut had flopped.

‘They’ve knocked the boy off!’ he said of Kote. This was exactly what Kote used to say when he was upset over someone’s death. He called everyone at least a year younger than himself a ‘boy’. Of course, this felt like he was teasing Kote, and the feeling came over him that he had died because of him.

He was cursing the Major for the tangled tactical moves that had entered his grey head. Firing broke out again, this time from the direction in which he was heading. They were firing at Dato and the group that remained with him: altogether there might have been

thirty of them at most. Soon the bullets being fired at them whistled in Koba's proximity.

The attackers were hurrying and had captured advantageous positions. Koba began to fire too. He couldn't see the attackers, but he still fired to rouse his comrades to action. The attackers directed their fire towards Koba, but they couldn't reach him and they soon gave up. At first it had probably seemed to them that yet another unit was coming from that position from which Koba had answered them, but they later understood that Koba was on his own.

The Major's Lads were down on one knee firing whilst retreating. Koba still couldn't see the attackers. He didn't even look towards his comrades. He didn't want to see how they would die. 'If these are killed, I'll be on my own,' he thought. Fear of remaining on his own overcame fear of death, he got up on his feet and, bent forward and down, he ran towards the boys, shouting to them to lie down and at the same time firing as he went. Finally and with difficulty, the Major's Lads paid attention to Koba and he pointed out to them in which direction they should retreat. He also indicated that they were approaching them from behind. He couldn't glimpse Dato anywhere. 'He's dead,' he thought and again lay down flat.

When he raised his head, he caught sight of Dato. He was running towards him and the others were following him.

Dato looked tired than Koba, so Koba himself took on the responsibility of leading the others.

'Follow me!' he shouted and dashed off. A little later he looked back and saw that the boys were running forward at intervals right behind him, managing somehow or other to follow the established law of taking turns and substitution while drawing fire on themselves. This meant that they had not yet messed it up out of fear. If they were very scared they would have gathered together and come forward as a group.

'Where are we going?' Dato shouted.

'To our mother!' Koba answered and moved off again. He seemed confident and so they followed him blindly, it seemed to them that he knew where he was going. But he was operating more intuitively than with a plan prepared in advance. All the same, there was nothing intuitive or especially pre-planned here. The enemy was to the front and to the rear, they had unexpectedly come across Kote on the side of the mountains and opened fire on him. So only one side remained, and Koba was rushing there. He realized that they must now work rapidly, that they must get out in time before their opponent completely encircled and blockaded them. Koba ran with all his strength. It was he who had misled those four men who had decided to remain in place. It had probably seemed to them that fear was making Koba run off and they had decided to part. They changed their course and ran off in that direction from which a short time earlier Koba had returned from his reconnaissance. The sole sniper still alive, and then the others, followed the four fighters who had gone off to the

side. Koba began to roar 'Don't go there!' He wanted Dato to shout too, he might perhaps have been able to make them take heed, but it seemed to Dato that Koba was panicking.

'We must make them come back!' Koba shouted at Dato, but he wasn't listening, he was dragging him back to where the others were running.

Those Koba had encountered on his reconnaissance appeared. They unleashed a hail of fire directly at those coming towards them. The attackers began to work more energetically from behind. Koba and Dato lay down flat in the grass. They were on open ground. They crawled their way as far as the trees. They turned round and chose firing positions.

Koba and Dato started firing at the same time. Their adversary was confused and fell silent. In the silence that descended for an instant, one of the Major's Lads shouted forsakenly, 'I surrender.' The attackers probably didn't want to lose time, they thought they would easily kill him, and at that very moment they showered him with bullets. They soon found time for Koba and Dato. 'Let's go!' shouted Koba.

Those being blockaded weren't offering resistance. Nothing could help them. 'Now they'll shower us!' Koba shouted and at almost the same instant it started to rain bullets in their direction.

'We'll die!' Dato shouted, he turned round and crawled into the depths of the forest.

They had a short break when they got out of the way of the bullets directed at them

'I didn't think we'd make it!' Dato said, tears falling from his eyes.

'Let's go, I don't want to look at how they're massacring our boys!' Koba said and he slipped away. Dato followed behind.

At first they crawled, then then ran crouching down side by side. They took short breaks, they rested, they caught their breath using a deep breathing method they had learned from the Major, they stood up and continued running.

'Where are we going?' Dato asked.

'I don't know!' Koba answered. He was leaning against a tree and barely breathing. Dato hung his sub-machine gun on his shoulder like a Tbilisi neighbourhood tough.

The firing stopped. After a few minutes the sound of short bursts could be heard. Clearly they were shooting those still alive.

'Look what the Major has done to us!' Koba said a short while later.

'It's interesting, who'll now fight in our place?' Dato asked. 'I'm convinced that Carbine won't trouble himself with this. He knows exactly when to talk bollocks and when to give a bollocking, if it's a bollocking that's required.'

Suddenly the sound of a helicopter reached them. 'The "flying dragon" is coming,' said Koba.

The helicopter flew almost above the friends' heads and fired at the ravine from which the Major's Lad's attack had begun in the morning.

'Now that's why their artillery didn't do its work. They were sending us their "flying dragon" and were taking precautions so that they themselves didn't ac-cidentally bring it down!' Koba said.

The helicopter returned, flew in a tight circle, again rushed off towards the ravine where the Major's Lads were and dropped another load of shells.

'He's hit us very hard!' Koba said. 'Do you see where they're striking?' 'Our boys have retreated,' Dato answered calmly. Mission accomplished, the helicopter went off.

'He flew away, but promised to return! We have suffered all in vain. They've returned to their positions. They've crammed us in again to right where we ex-tricated ourselves from!' Koba began to speak with the aggression of a helpless man.

'Everything will be OK!' Dato said to him.

'A crappy enthusiast!' Koba said of the Major, in such a tone as if swearing at him. Behind the Major's back they disparagingly called him 'The Enthusiast', but it didn't seem to Dato that Koba knew that nickname existed. 'He was a worth-less shepherd, a useless strategist, and a poor draftsman!' he all but yelled.

Before the war the Major had been a painter, a man troubled by ideas, like all painters, and when reading military maps, he would use such terms as 'per-spective' and 'projection' as if to mark his profession humorously. He was very proud of his painting.

Now, thought Dato, he would start to weep if he mourned the Major, but Koba didn't cry. He pitied the Major, perhaps more than any of the others, since he had disappeared without a trace, as if this had some meaning after his death.

'There is no Major! He was and he is no longer!' said Koba and he stood up, he set about inspecting his surroundings, but he very soon stopped. 'What re-connaissance measures I started then! When only Kote and I set off, we should all have set off together, we would have broken through the blockade. They would be alive now!'

'No one knows in advance what would be better and what not!' said Dato. 'Everything will be all right.'

'They act as if they knew in advance that we would thump them, and they had drawn up a very detailed plan for a counter-attack!' Koba said. 'If I could, perhaps I might have looked for what is left of the Major. I'd probably find his papers! Let's go!'

'Where?' Dato asked him.

'To our mother!' Koba responded. 'We're now like so many Pitkins, aren't we? As a child, when I was watching a film, I dreamed several times of being a Pitkin or a Schweik who ended up in the rear of the enemy... It doesn't matter which, does it?'

'Probably not!' Dato answered him.

Trying to be seen by each other as keeping calm was already irritating them. 'The enemy's rear is like a harem: You can expect a bang, but you don't know when!' Koba spoke

again and laughed. 'It's a good joke, isn't it? Aren't I great?'

'Keep quiet!' Dato shouted at him. Shouting appeared to bring some relief. He calmed down and he was already more aware that he was alive. He looked at Koba, interested in whether he was also feeling something similar. In Koba's case, it seemed he had already overcome that feeling of joy at staying alive that he had felt earlier than his friend.

'Aimless walking is better than pointless standing still!' said Koba.