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ASLAN MASKHADOV – Interview June 1999

All the rules of war were turned upside down in Chechnia!

The Russians did not wage war properly, they were just prepared to take enormous losses and destroy everything. They did not value their soldiers, whereas we counted every man. For example: the storming of Grozny on 31 December 1994 - there were loud boastful announcements by the Russian minister of Defence, Pavel Grachev, that the city would be taken with one commando regiment. The Russians entered Chechnia with approximately 3/4 divisions. They were positioned in the Dolinsky valley, Tolstoy Yurt, Argun and Achkhoy Martan. They had elite troops and commandos, tank regiments. Our first problem was to avoid retreat and engage the Russians in battle. The first battle that we fought was literally on the doorstep of the Presidential Palace. My headquarters were in the cellar of the Palace. The 131st motorised brigade and the 31st Samara tank regiment and other units were able to enter Grozny without opposition. We had no regular army to speak of to oppose the Russian forces, only some small units trying to hold various points in the city. The Russians were able to ride into Grozny on their APCs and tanks without using infantry as if they were on parade. They surrounded the Presidential Palace, the city was filled with tanks. I was at my HQ, surrounded by Russian tanks. I decided that we must engage battle. I gave the command to all the small units we had in and around the city to leave their positions and come to the Presidential Palace. They did not know that I was surrounded but I knew that when they arrived they would face the enemy. Our units started arriving, saw the Russian positions and the battle began. The Russians did not expect it. They were sitting ducks, most of their troops positioned as if on parade around the Palace and on the square opposite the railway station. Their tanks and APCs were burned down in less than four hours. The Russians were on the run, hunted across Grozny, by our units with grenade launchers, even by boys with Molotov cocktails. This lasted for 3 days – all the Russian hardware - some 400 tanks and APCs, that entered Grozny, was burned. The city was filled with corpses of Russian soldiers. It was a tremendous success.

One of the reasons for the success was the operation of 26 November when Chechen opposition stormed the town with 50 armoured vehicles. The officers and crews were Russian contract troops. They reached the Presidential Palace where the first tank was destroyed. After 3 hours all the hardware was burned or captured including 11 tanks. This battle was a kind of rehearsal. People lost all fear of Russian tanks – they were mere match-boxes. This first success gave confidence to our men – on the 31 December when they saw a tank, they considered it their duty to burn it. In some cases it became a competition – “leave this tank, it is mine”.

When all the Russian hardware was burned around the Presidential Palace, my next decision was to defend the Palace. Fighters and volunteers began to arrive from every corners of Chechnya. I registered them and told them: “Here is a house, you have 40

men, defend it and do not move from there”. Thus little by little, defence was organised around the Presidential Palace.

General Babichev’s commando division which was stationed near Achkhoy Martan moved along the mountain ridge and approached Grozny, other Russian units were called up, the battle raged around the Palace for every house, every quarter of the city. Our units behaved well, they repelled the attacks. The Russians were reluctant to use infantry. I had the impression that they were scared, all they wanted was to dig themselves in a defensive position, hide in their tanks, but it was impossible in these conditions – on the contrary it was more frightening. So the tanks and APCs burned and soldiers perished in them. There was no effort to defend or camouflage the tanks or accompany them with infantry. They just advanced in a huge mass and as they advanced they were destroyed. Afterwards battle raged around the Council of Ministers building, the hotel Kavkaz, and the old “Neftianny” Institut, where we had 12 fighters. The building was surrounded by tanks firing relentlessly. My men asked me for help, but I could not provide it. “Allah will help you” I told them. One hour later, they blew up one tank, then another. The Russians’ nerves broke, they retreated. This is how we fought.

We defended the Palace for 18 days. Only the shell of the building was left after constant mortar fire, all the trees in front of the Palace were flattened. Nearby in the quarter of the National Archives building some 20 metres from the Palace, Alpha and Beta units managed to break through around 5/6 January (1995). They occupied the building which stood at the corner of the Presidential Palace. I expected an attack and from this direction and kept my best units on that side. They tried several time to break through but could not make up their mind on a full frontal attack. Then around 18 January Russian aviation send depth bombs on the Presidential Palace. Three bombs hit the cellar where we had our headquarters – one hit the corridor, another the infirmary, and a back room. Fortunately, the day before the women and the doctors were evacuated, only the soldiers of the Presidential Guard remained.

We were left with the sky above our heads and we decided to leave the Palace. I planned the withdrawal at night, around 10 pm. Those of our fighters who were surrounded in the city or who were positioned further away on the outskirts, had to retreat first beyond the Sunzha river. Those covering the retreat and the Presidential Guard were the last to leave at 11 pm. Yandarbiev and I left at 10 pm in the direction of the Sunzha. We had 4 men with us. Basaev was waiting for us beyond the Sunzha where we set up another HQ. All those who managed to withdraw from the city crossed the Sunzha. The Russians of course did not realise it. They continued bombing the Presidential Palace for 3 days, seemingly unwilling to advance their troops.

The next decision was to put all my available forces along a line of defence along the Sunzha. While Russians were still bombing the Palace, we rapidly took positions and built up defences on every bridge of the Sunzha which divides the city in two. We could only spare 5 to 10 men on each bridge. I set up my HQ in the town hospital No 21. We

¹ The reason for choosing hospitals or schools for HQ was due to the fact that in some areas they were the only large buildings with cellars.

strengthened our positions with new units freshly arrived. We managed to hold our ground there for another month, with attacks and retreats, attacks and retreats. On the opposite side of the Sunzha the Russians razed every building, but could not drive their tanks over the bridges because of our defences. However, they managed to break through from the direction of the tramway station, to attack us in the rear. We were virtually surrounded.

It was then that we decided, against all military logic, to counter-attack. It was a first in terms of military tactics and we forced tank units to retreat. How was it done? Our soldiers did not know how to dig trenches, they considered it humiliating, but there was no choice – the houses were too small and fragile, they could not withstand a tank attack. So we made a line between the Sunzha and Minutka, dug trenches, and with approximately 40 / 50 men facing the tanks we advanced meter by meter, digging more trenches as we crawled forward until we reached the tanks and burned them. We pressed them until the tanks retreated, then we build more trenches and advanced further. It was highly unconventional trench warfare!

Meanwhile more frightening developments were taking place in the direction of Voykovo bridge (a suspension bridge). Tanks along the river were giving covering fire to infantry which managed to cross the bridge. They advanced (from Levandovskogo direction) within 200 meters of my HQ. I threw all my available forces against them but did not manage to stop the offensive. They had already reached Minutka. We decided to move our headquarters further back and abandon our positions along the Sunzha. The withdrawal was organised in the same manner as the withdrawal from the Presidential Palace – each unit knew in which order and at what time it had to withdraw. Our rear was in the 12th district (uchastok) formerly commanded by Shamil Basaev. At 6 pm. we had all retreated to our third line of defence in the 30th 56th districts along the mountain ridge.

When we held Grozny we had a feeling of exhilaration. We also feared that if we left the city, we would be vulnerable in the lowlands. We had no armoured units and could not survive there. Whatever happened it was easier to fight in the city, so we fought for every house. We held there for approximately two weeks. I left Shamil Basaev and moved my command to Shali and set up defences along the river Argun. We moved everything we had, a few tanks and canons. We held for a while then we had to give up Shali and Argun, we did not want to fight there as we did in Grozny, it would have condemned these towns.

When the Russians crossed the river Argun we retreated towards the mountains. Knowing that we had the mountains behind us gave us a degree of confidence. We did not defend the villages between Shali and the mountains to avoid unnecessary destruction. The mountains were our last hope. We set up our defences along Serzhen Yurt, Bamut, Agishty, along the mountain gorges. We held there a couple of months because the Russians could not make up their mind to mount an offensive in the south, although of course air bombing continued all the time.

[In May 1995] we had withdrawn to Veden. That was when we were betrayed. We were holding the heights above the Vashtary canyon – it is such a narrow gorge that two men with grenade launchers could hold a whole division. I had 100 men there and I was 100 per cent sure that tanks could not pass when, suddenly, 400 tanks moved on Mekhketi in our rear. This was the most difficult situation we experienced during the war. We could not understand how it could have happened. We still do not know the full story to this day. We were forced to abandon Veden.

Budennovsk was followed by cease-fire negotiations which gave us a respite. The cease-fire agreement was a moderate success although Dudaev was not satisfied. The Russians had tried to marginalise our resistance by pushing us in the mountains. Therefore, I insisted during the negotiations that there should be self-defence “militias” of up to 20/30 men in every town, village and settlement of Chechnya. [General Anatoly] Kulikov agreed. Three months later when it became obvious that the cease-fire was frequently violated, he complained to me: “We are not disarming but re-arming you”. I had 5000/6000 fighters before. With the self-defence units it brought our numbers of armed men to approximately 10,000/12,000. But the most important thing was that once again we were masters in our towns and villages. The smaller villages provided companies, larger ones battalions and regiments, each district had its commanders, our numbers grew. Thus everything the Russians had tried previously was wasted.

After the bomb attack on [General] Romanov, fighting resumed. The Russians launched a political offensive with the pretence of disarming and pacifying the villages, and installing a puppet administration. How did they do it? For example the case of Gerzel they surrounded the village with 400 tanks. We had some 30 fighters in the village. Our order was that they should not defend the village but hide inside. If the Russians moved into the village, they should burn as many tanks and APCs as they could, then retreat. The Russians gave an ultimatum. Generally they did not dare enter the village when they knew that our fighters were inside but would stay on the outskirts. Then one or two of their militia men would appear and would take photographs pretending that negotiations were taking place about disarming the village. Such scenarios were repeated in many places.

We decided to counter-attack in Novogroznensky in December 1995. We fought for a week there. At first our tactics were to engage the Russians, then leave and take position between villages and along the roads, hit them along the communication routes, then re-attack Russian positions in the towns, then retreat again. Later we launched commando operations to cut lines of communications.

[In Spring 1996] we were again pushed deep south into the mountains. Russians, occupied Dargo, Benoy, Shatoy, Bamut. We had to retreat as far as Itumkale. Later came the Nazran negotiations when both sides agreed to stop military action. However, the Russians had no intention of respecting these agreements. When I returned from Nazran with my delegation, we were attacked three times on the main road. Practically all the roads were mined, it was a miracle that we managed to get back alive.

On 9 June we met in our HQ in Mekhkety a representative of Lebed (Kharlamov). After the meeting, there were major air attacks on all my bases (Alleroy, etc). Commando units were helicoptered in and occupied the mountain ridges (Mekhkety etc). It was a last and desperate attempt on the part of the Russians to gain the upper hand. We were surrounded, our back against the mountains, under artillery and air fire. I managed to cross the mountain passes on foot and retreat through Uluskert. Shamil Basaev broke through to Sharoy Argun. We crossed the river Sharoy Argun, passed Dacho Borzoy, and reached Nizhny Atagi. We escaped by a miracle. It was clear afterwards that there would be no peace, that everything was starting all over again. That was when we took the decision to recapture Grozny.

I was planning this operation 6 months before. I always felt that the war would end with the reconquest of Grozny. I thought about it continuously, did some radio rehearsal, provoking Russian officers². I studied the maps, the positions of every Russian units, the approaches, which routes our commanders should take, etc. I had everything ready. We had meetings with our commanders who gave their reports, gathered intelligence, and reconnoitre the routes. We knew the positions of the Russians in Grozny, their numbers, where the roadblocks were.

On 3 August (1996) I gave the order to move on the town. At the time the Russians were everywhere, even in Dargo. We moved between their positions from every directions, even from beyond the Terek. On 5 August we meant to enter Grozny. Amazingly on that day Russian media announced that the Chechens would enter Grozny. I was worried because there were two areas in the 56th district of Grozny where it would have been be easy to ambush our troops, but it was too late to stop the attack.

820 men took part in the operation. I gave the order that every commander should lead his men, whether he had 20 men or 200. They had to be in the forefront. I considered that most important. If they died we would all die.

The attack began at 5 am on 6 August. All our targets were met. It was a success. Our men moved through different routes into the city, they had to approach their targets - the posts, bases, kommandatory, the garrison in Khankala, hit them by surprise, then move on to cut the roads and not let anybody through, leaving a few snipers and a machine-gunner. Each unit knew precisely which section it had to operate in. In a very short time all the roads in the city were cut as far as Severny airport and the Russians tied up. When Russian columns tried to move in from outside, it was too late. All the bases were captured or disarmed. We could not take the government building and the MVD, we burned them instead.

² It was done to put psychological pressure on the Russians – the Chechen high command would announce that they would undertake a certain operation. As a result a number of Russian troops would be tied up while they attacked elsewhere. Alternatively the Chechens would announce in advance an operation they intended to mount. This was the case the with recapture of Grozny in August 1996. The double bluff worked, the Russians did not believe it and were unprepared.

The next day Lebed appeared unexpectedly at 2 am in Starye Atagi. He offered negotiations. The offensive following our meeting in June in Mekhkety was his prompting - "he came riding on a white horse as a conqueror", but in Atagi he understood he must come in the guise of a peace-maker. He told me "If you leave the city, I give you my word as an officer that soon there will not be a single Russian soldier left on Chechen soil". My answer was "I will never leave the city - it is useless, even if I wanted to leave the city I would not be allowed to do so - lets talk differently". I suggested to him that the Russians should withdraw their troops from the mountains to the lowlands. For each regiment that they withdrew, I would withdraw one of my units, and we would establish joint military komendatury. He could not agree "the President gave me a task". He left in a huff. This was followed by Pulikovski's ultimatum - we should withdraw or he would raise Grozny from the face of the earth. It was probably Lebed's initiative.

I had met Pulikovski in the meantime - he came to Atagi. He was in a dreadful state, highly nervous. "What have you done, there are women and children in Grozny, how could you do something so terrible?" We argued for 2 hours. I told him he was the aggressor, he entered my capital with an armada, I was liberating it from the Russian barbarians". This argument went on for 30 minutes. He understood it eventually. I reiterated that we would not move out of Grozny. The conversation was surreal - Pulikovsky was amazed that I would not obey the orders of the Russian president. I pointed out to him that had I been prepared to obey Yeltsin's orders there would not have been a war. We parted without agreeing. When the deadline of the ultimatum was up, Lebed reappeared, claiming that "the boys had made a rash statement, without referring to higher authority, etc". Pulikovky was replaced by Tikhomirov

Lebed agreed to our terms. We signed a cease-fire. Russians began to withdraw their troops from the mountains, Shatoy, Benoy. Then we selected the city districts they should withdraw from. We set up joint komendatury. Lebed commented: "The town is yours, if a komendatura has only two Chechens, it is enough to be in their hands". I reassured him "don't worry I gave the order to my men not to bully your soldiers".

On 30 December, I went to Khankala to discuss the Russians' final withdrawal. The mood was festive, champagne. When I asked them when they were leaving, they replied "In one week". The next day I needed a helicopter, I send a man to request one but the Russians had left in the dead of night. The same was the case with all their smaller garrisons, Achkhoy Martan and others. In one night there was not a single soldier left. It was the only successful operation of the Russian high command! They ran away! They were probably scared to stay around Grozny on the anniversary of the first storming of 31 December 1994.

Question - to what extent were the Russians deliberately lured to the South to immobilise part of their forces there?

There was some of that but we also tried to hold up in the mountains as long as we could. We mounted some successful operations at that time in the mountains - in Yarishmardy

where we destroyed a large column, also around Serzhen Yurt and Zhalk along their lines of communications.

War along the lines of communications (dorozhnaia voia)

This was well organised in the second year of the war. We had no mines, so we took ammunitions from howitzers, took the detonators out, turned them over so that they would explode when tanks would ride over. My men became experts in mining, explosives.

By in August 1996, we gave up counting how many Russians troops were stationed in Chechnya. Their main garrisons were at Khankala and Severnyi airports. Their collapse had nothing to do with the level of training. It was morale – strakh, a gut fear which gripped them after the December (1994) storming of Grozny when they saw their comrades eaten by dogs and cats. When the first vehicule in a column was blown up, the others lost heart and stopped.

Lessons of the war

Spirit is the most important factor. For example: as commander of resistance unit, I tell my men: “You stay in this house and do not move”. They considered it humiliating to just sit and wait. After two or three days they would not stand it any longer, they would automatically make a sortie, try to destroy something. Afterwards, they would explain military tactics to me. I responded: “Russia has thousands and thousands of tanks. The fact that you burned 10 APCs will make no impression. Also, it the only army which does not count its casualties. Therefore I beg you, stay in your position as long as I order. If you go, at least let me know”. Nevertheless, it was difficult to keep them on their positions for more than 3 days – they were overactive! Every Chechen is a general, a strategist and tactician, each one has a plan to defeat Russia! So I had to allow a certain amount of initiative. This was the recipe of our success. It was due to the mentality and character of our people.

There was also the religious factor. As a military man I knew the capacity of the Russian army. When a Russian column was advancing and you had no proper ammunitions left and you were waiting for them to move 200 or 300 meters to destroy them and you succeeded – these were miracles. That was when the religious factor came into play. You began to believe that the outcome was in the hands of God. I remember feeling like that in Vedenov (May 1995) when Russians bombers were like a swarm of flies. Also in Argun, where I had my HQ during Eid: some elders came to complain about the firing around their villages. I was furious and refused to see them in my HQ; I went out of my cellar, there was a zhiguli, I opened the door and 2 rockets fell 10 meters away. The men were blown to piece but I did not have a scratch. There were many other occasions when I survived miraculously when hunted down by fighter planes...

There was another factor. Analysts said that we had 5000/10,000 fighters, but we always felt that it was important to show that the whole nation was fighting. We lacked everything but each house was a haven. Everywhere we were fed and could rest. Of course it was dangerous for the people but nobody refused to give us refuge. Each

household had reserves. The Chechens are rich because they always have reserves, they do not live day to day. We asked people to hold demonstrations, block the roads, etc. This was the struggle of the whole nation.

The rest was immaterial. I was often criticised and advised that we should switch to partisan warfare. Dudaev advised hit and run “Afghan” style tactics. These were the tactics of the foreign volunteers [Khattab]. I was against it because in a small territory such as ours, had we used such tactics we would have been pushed to the depth of the mountains in less than a week. During the whole war we kept a line of defence, whether in the city or in the mountains, we always had a territory to retreat to. In the beginning our tactics were purely defensive, then we switched to offensive manoeuvres, later on to commando tactics and war along communication lines. I was never keen on raids such as Budennovsk and Pervomaiskaia. We had to fight with honour, to show not only courage but also the quality of our people. The rules of war should apply despite our small numbers.

I wanted to show the superiority of our code of honour as well as our military skills. I think I succeeded. I did not approve of operation such as Pervomaiskaia - I knew that victory would be ours anyway. Budennovsk was more important: it brought the Russians to the negotiating table. It was the first time when people in Russia understood that there was a war. It was very important psychologically – Russians could not believe that civilians could be killed in broad daylight in “peace time”. What kind of peace was it? They still did not believe that war was raging. It was important to demonstrate that people could also be killed in Russia. Budennovsk opened the eyes of ordinary Russians.

In Vedeno we had a group of 30 mothers, I was talking to them, reassuring them, when a massive air attack hit us. I was enraged, while I was kind to these women who had send their sons to kill my brothers, these barbarians hit us. The mothers understood that I was furious and left. [Until then they had not taken the war seriously although they wanted to protect their sons.]

Question - How would you have fought if you were a Russian general?

C’était le bordel chez eux! No discipline, hopeless little soldiers, mercenaries with gold chains who did not want to die for the homeland or Russian hegemony. Lack of talent, mistakes, ignorance among Russian generals and officers. I cannot imagine myself on their side.

As a Chechen officer, I had to re-adjust all ones concepts, become another kind of professional. All our men were volunteers, I could not even give them a machinegun or pistol. All had their own ideas about tactics, as I said earlier. It was impossible to give them orders, much diplomacy was needed. When men explained to me how to fight, I had to listen politely for 30 minutes, praise them, then impose my will. This was a different approach from the Russian army.

I will give you an example: one day Dzhokhar came to the HQ; the commanders gathered, they attacked him “What kind of war is this? We have nothing!”. He looked at them and said “So what can I give you if we have nothing”. I felt very sorry for him. He stood up and said: “Have I ordered you to fight? You came of your own free will. You are fighting because of Allah” and left. Had he promised anything it would have been more difficult. We knew we had nothing, we knew we could not expect help although the outside world spoke of foreign mercenaries, Arabs, “White thights”, Afghans. But there were so few of them, a few dozens at most. The weapons we managed to get with great difficulty from outside were pitiful -next to nothing. The best sources were the Russian supply warehouses.

The use of weapons by the Russians – the case of Pervomaiskaia

Our men became quite expert engineers, they knew how to set their defences. Fire from GRADs did not affect them much and Russian infantry did not have the morale to fight. Russians surrounded Pervomaiskaia with a triple ring and thought that there was no need for an infantry attack. I moved my HQ to Novogroznenski and brought all my supplies, NURS, GRADs, etc. From there we made a diversion in the direction of Sovetskoe to help the men in Pervomaiskaia, and divert fire from the outer ring on us. We then got them out by a narrow corridor on the other side, along the Terek from the Shelkovsky raion while the Russians thought that we would attempt a rescue from Sovetskoe.

They brought out all the hostages and prisoners. Had my men been Russians they would have pushed the prisoners ahead on the mine field, but on the contrary they were leading. Three or four hostages perished. We lost 90 men.

The operation was a mistake, they were deceived into moving to Pervomaiskaia. They should have stayed in Kizliar.

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