

Small Wars Journal

www.smallwarsjournal.com

COLONEL HUSEIN ISKHANOV

General Aslan Maskhadov's ADC during the 1994-6 war

Elected deputy to the Chechen Parliament in 1997

Presently ADC to the Chief of Staff, Mumadi Saidaev

Interview: June 1999

I became Maskhadov's ADC at the beginning of the war. I received the grade of colonel at the end of the war. Before the war, I had some combat experience gained in fighting against Bislan Gantemirov's¹ units and during the operation of 26 November 1994. This was the first serious military operation of the campaign. The Chechen opposition backed by 50 tanks led by Russian officers of the Taman Division and Russian contract troops entered Grozny. In less than one day, the tanks were destroyed, and 20 Russian officers were taken prisoners. It was the beginning of the war.

A CHRONOLOGY

The invasion

The great war began on 11 December 1994. The Russian army moved on Grozny from 3 directions. We had no aviation to defend our borders. The first fighting took place in the village of Lomaz Yurt in Nadterechny raion where we had some defences to protect the frontier. We managed to delay the advance of the Russians for a few days. Our men blew up 2 APCs but because of lack of ammunitions were forced to withdraw. We did not plan any large-scale operations – trying to stop the Russians columns near the border would have been pointless because we did not have enough troops. Our “army” was a joke compared to the invading army. We decided to fight in Grozny – we already had the experience of 26 November and their tanks did not scare us any longer. The spirit was good at the time, thanks to the Russians themselves. I remember how on 26 November

¹ In August 1999.

men in *Zhigulis* armed with grenade launchers and *mukhas*, chased Russian tanks. It became a hunting sport. Of course the 11 December invasion was a more serious affair, there were airplanes, helicopters.

After Lomaz Yurt, another battle took place in Dolinsky. Maskhadov, a former artillery officer, decided to use GRADs directly against the Russian columns. It was a novel method of using GRADs. Nobody before Maskhadov had thought of putting them to that use. Later, when we started negotiations with the Russians in 1995, they admitted that they had lost up to 200 men in Dolinsky.

The next heavy battle took place in Ermolovka. We lost some equipment there. At the beginning of the war we had 18 APCs and tanks (T-26) but they were old models and we did not have enough ammunitions. We also had some Howitzers (D-30) but we realised quickly that they would be of little use. Their impact was minimal because our positions were bombed by air and we had no anti-aircraft weapons. Our artillery-men were not trained for such a situation - it is one thing to use long range artillery if you are positioned 10 or 20 km from your target, but when you are facing a column of tanks close-up it is a different thing. It was difficult to transport the artillery under air fire. We did not have enough tractors and lorries. Men were busy evacuating their families to safety. Most of the transport was used for the evacuation because the government had not called a general mobilisation. We had overlooked that we would need transport for our equipment and had none readily available. We abandoned our equipment, taking the mortars (minamety) on wheels which were easy to move, as well as some artillery equipment. It was no great loss because we had no ammunitions.

We had an acute shortage of ammunitions right from the start of the war. We also lacked ammunitions for grenade launchers, RPG-7, we lacked patrons for 7-62 calibre automatic AKM rifles, we had no 5-45 for AK 74. I remember how Maskhadov and I were in the HQ cellar of the Palace before the Russians' attempts to storm Grozny on 31 December 1994: we had two beds and a desk, with poor lighting provided by a small diesel motor. It was destroyed later in the bombings and we switched to a small transportable electrical

engine powered by petrol or diesel. That was used for lighting and to power our radio batteries. That day we had 34 rounds of ammunitions for RPG-7 left under our beds. We felt great, but there were times when we had only 3 or 4 rounds. The fighters came constantly to ask for ammunitions. We were lucky, somebody always turned up bringing ammunitions when we most needed them.

After Ermolovka our units retreated to Grozny. The pressure was very strong and most of the fighters were inexperienced volunteers. We had few commanders and officers. Maskhadov decided to call all available units and volunteers to the centre of the city to make the best use of our experience of 26 November. We saw no other way to put up a defence. The buildings would provide cover to fire at the enemy and we would be better protected from the constant artillery fire.

We built some concrete obstacles in Staropromyslovski road, near the factory “Electropribor”. They were primitive but we were hoping that they would slow-down the tanks – we knew it was not enough to top them. We expected the Russians to advance from Staropromyslovski. We waited for them, wishing them to come that way because it was a narrow corridor, surrounded by hills and five-storey buildings. It would have been easy to wipe them out there. But obviously they feared such a situation and waited before moving the tanks into the city. They were also remembering their experience of 26 November. Instead they made a detour through the hills, took Grozny in a circle, and used long-range artillery fire. Meanwhile our units were using “attack and retreat” tactics and night raids. Wherever the Russians found themselves at night-time, they immediately dug themselves in, buried their artillery and tanks. It was the best time to attack them. We used our knowledge of the territory and our experience during military service with Russians. We knew how Russians built their defences; we knew Russian habits and language. The raids caused much panic but the Russians’ reaction was interesting: they refused to engage our units; instead of fighting off the attackers they turned their guns on Grozny or Argun aiming at residential quarters. Obviously, it was in the hope that the population would turn against us. Most of the casualties among the civilians were due to such indiscriminate bombardments.

The assault on Grozny

Eventually the assault on Grozny began. The Russians moved slowly closer to the heart of the city. We did not have adequate forces to stop their Armada. According to our preliminary data, they had engaged 600 tanks and APCs and a large contingent of infantry. The 131st Maikop Brigade was the first to move in. It broke through to the railway station, some 500 metres from the Presidential Palace. The Russians thought that if they captured the Palace our resistance would end and we would run away.

After the war, I checked the journal we kept for 1995. According to our data, we had 350 men defending Grozny at the beginning of 1995. This was the number of men who had registered with HQ. I would add to that some 150 men who did not register with us or with the commanders, men who came to shoot for a couple of hours and went home afterwards. We had no more than 500 men fighting for Grozny.

As I said earlier, we used our knowledge of the Russians. We also had the same communication system and radios. Our head of communication, Colonel Taimaskhanov [killed shortly after the beginning of the war] had served as signal officer in the Soviet army. He knew his job perfectly. General Babishev had threatened to hang Taimaskhanov on the first lamppost when he caught him. We had a special room in the Palace for the radio operators. Whenever we had a moment, we would go there to “talk” to the Russians. We listened to their call-up, waited for the moment when they were giving orders having determined who was in command and who was a subordinate. Then we intervened, giving different orders in a confident manner, providing false positions, and so on. As a result, the Russians suffered more losses at the beginning of the war through friendly fire than through our efforts. They lost direction in the town – it was the usual Russian chaos (*bardak*). Babishev who later behaved as a great conqueror threatened Taimaskhanov with hanging because of Russian losses through friendly fire.

The 131st Maikop Brigade

The 131st Maikop Brigade was under the command of the unlucky Babishev. He was the officer responsible for sending the men of the Maikop Brigade to their death. Practically the whole Brigade was annihilated in one night from 31 December 1994 to 1st January 1995, although some fighting continued on 2nd January. The Russians claimed that 100 soldiers had survived but I do not believe it because we captured the crew of the last remaining APC of the Brigade. The commander of the Brigade was killed, his second in command was captured with that last APC and its crew - 10 or 12 men in all. When we questioned them, they told us that they had decided to break through but luck was not on their side.

Afterwards during negotiations with General Romanov in Khankala, Lt General Shumov (MVD) asked me how many *boiviki* we lost. I answered "approximately 2000". That was my own estimates for our losses from the beginning of the war till the negotiations of 1996. I questioned him on their losses. He answered that according to official preliminary estimates they had lost 1800 men. I asked him: "where did you hide the Maikop Brigade and the 81st Samarski?". He laughed but added nothing. Russians always concealed their casualties. In Afghanistan, they also claimed that losses were insignificant. Their tactics were always to crush the enemy through sheer weight, using their soldiers as cannon fodder when lives could be saved with better thinking. The generals had no pity for their young troops. They threw them in the line of fire without any compunction. They did not care if they lost one soldier or one thousand.

Fighting in Grozny in 1995

Heavy fighting went on in the beginning of January 1995. The Russians continued advancing on the Presidential Palace from the direction of the airport along Pervomaiskaia Street. We allowed the Russians to penetrate, then destroyed the first APC of the column, the last one and a couple in the middle. The Russians were squeezed because it was difficult to manoeuvre tanks and APC in the city, visibility was bad, drivers could not see where they were going. We surrounded them and destroyed almost a whole regiment. We also took prisoners. That was how the 81st Samarski Regiment

perished. According to our estimates, they had lost between 4000 and 5000 soldiers between the Maikop Brigade and the Samarski Regiment.

The Russians persisted with a determined attack on the Presidential Palace. At the same time they bombed the hospitals and all educational establishments, institutes, schools, cultural centres, libraries and so on. Little by little they got nearer the Palace. That success cost them dearly. Towards the middle of January, there was heavy fighting within 100-200 metres of the Palace. The Russians occupied a five-storey building in front of the Palace and the building of the National Archives across the road. This was the situation until 18 January.

In the first 2 weeks of January, we used mainly snipers. Because of lack of ammunition, we gave the order to use automatic machine guns as rifles. I remember distributing ammunition: I would give 3 rounds of 7-62 or 5 boxes of ammunitions with 30 patrons each for AK 74. With that our men were supposed to stand against the Russian army. We had another handicap: the men were reluctant at first to use tracer bullets because they feared that they would reveal their position. I exhorted them to imagine the fear of Russian soldier– he saw the bullet and knew that it would hit him. Gradually our men got used to the idea. They had to as we had little else. And it was indeed true that these bullets created greater panic among Russian soldiers than ordinary ones.

When Russians heard single shots, they believed that were snipers shots. We had snipers rifles but very few, we got them from the APCs and the tanks that we shot. We also transformed the guns from the Russian tanks to use them as hand-held guns. We got most of our ammunition during combat operations. We also got many automatic weapons at the beginning of the war. There was not that many around before December 1994. Once we armed a unit with 12 grenade-launchers. By our standard, it was considered a very powerful unit. As a rule, a group of 10 men had only one grenade-launcher. Our average units numbered 10-20 men – there was no point in having larger groups because HQ was not in a position to feed and supply them. Also, it was difficult for large groups to move around in the city.

18 January 1995

Conditions were not easy in the Presidential Palace. On 5 or 6 January, the fourth and fifth floors of the Palace caught fire. We used 3-litre tins of water to put it down. On 18 January, the Palace suffered massive air and artillery attacks. We counted that almost every second the Palace was hit by rockets. It was an easy target because it stood well above the surrounding buildings. Finally the Palace was hit by a depth bomb – it went through 11 floors and destroyed the ceiling of the camp hospital in the cellar. Fortunately there was nobody in the hospital at the time. Because of the damage we could not be sure how many got killed.

It was a precision bomb. It hit within 20 metres from Maskhadov's HQ. The Russians could have got the information on the precise location of the HQ by anybody – we had many people in the Palace at that time, we let anybody in - journalists, Duma deputies, soldiers' mothers and POWs. A scouts' company had occupied a hotel near the railway station. Our men besieged them in the top twelfth floor. There was a stalemate and we were negotiating with them. The commanding officer, a captain, was brought to the Palace. This was stupid but people were still very naïve then. He came with a radio and contacted Babishev from the Palace. Babishev and Maskhadov met in the hotel. By then we had nothing left around the Palace, we had no armoured vehicle or ordinary transport, all had been destroyed, although Shamil Basaev's unit beyond the Sunzha still had some heavy equipment. The Russians send a APC to take us to the negotiations. We discussed the case of 65 POWs whom we held in the Palace. We agreed to release them while keeping their weapons. Maskhadov kept on demanding that the Russians should take away the bodies of their dead soldiers. He offered a cease-fire of 2 or 3 hours. We were scared of epidemics - you could not move around without stepping on a dead body. Each shot APC had on average 10 or 11 corpses. There were lying around half burned or eaten by dogs.

The Russian command could not give a damn. Maskhadov tried to appeal to their finer feelings, asking how they could face the soldiers' mothers if they did not bury their sons.

But it did not work, the generals were unmoved. Babishev left, we released the POWs as we had agreed, as well as the scouts' captain who had been in Maskhadov's HQ. He was probably the one who gave the position of the HQ, although there were plenty of other possible spies in the Palace.

There were two hits, the first just missed the Palace. I was on a platform on the first floor when it happened, in radio contact with units in the Sovmin building and in the Hotel Kavkaz opposite the Palace. (We could not communicate from one cellar to another because our antenna on the roof of the Palace had been destroyed. Without a transmitter the Motorolas had a range of only 500-600 metres.) I saw an aircraft do a piqué and expected a rocket attack, not a bomb. The man who was with me had just gone back inside. There was a massive explosion. He was killed instantly. Everything was black, dust and fire everywhere. People were screaming for help. I ran downstairs to check the HQ. It was dark. I could not see anything. We put handkerchiefs on our faces to breathe normally. In the evening we took the decision to leave. It was becoming too dangerous – another such attack and we would all be killed.

We left at night in small groups. Journalists wrote that we had escaped through tunnels, that the Palace was built as a military bunker. Believe me I had explored the whole Palace and there were no tunnels. It was not built as a bunker - ordinary 122 mm rockets could get right through the roof of the cellar which jutted some 20 metres beyond the building itself. The roof was made of ordinary cement tiles.

The beginning of the retreat from Grozny

Our next line of defence was beyond the river Sunzha. We tried to blow up all the bridges as we left but could not destroy the bridge on the main road because of lack of explosives. The frontline was set along the Sunzha. We spend nearly a month facing each other across the Sunzha. We controlled the right bank, the Russians the left. There was no close combat, we used mainly sniper rifles. The Sunzha gave good protection because the Russians were afraid to cross the river with their APCs. For some time their forces remained concentrated around the Presidential Palace where they celebrated their victory.

Incidentally, they only dared enter the Palace 3 to 4 days after we left. They were positioned 100 metres in front of the Palace but had not realised that we had gone.

Who was fighting?

Not all men with weapons were fighting. Many were holed up in the district of Minutka. Perhaps they gave confidence to the residents of Minutka but they were no use to us. They were a nuisance because food supplies and ammunition were diverted to them by suppliers under the assumption that they were fighters. They remained in the cellars of the apartment blocks. Most of them were people from the villages. They had chosen their own commanders and came to Grozny's rescue! Many for various reasons never reached the frontline. They spend a week or two in the cellars and returned home telling their wives how brave they were. They were people like that, not all the nation was fighting.

I will give you an example: at the beginning of January 1995 Maskhadov send me to Minutka to gather volunteers. When I got there, I rounded up the men, made a stirring speech, sent a group to Salamov, an aid of President Dudaev. They went through the railway line crossing Belikovski bridge because it was dangerous to cross the main bridge – the Russians had just reached the Petrol Institute and there was fighting on the main bridge. After sending them off, I gathered another group of 70 men. I lead them back to the Presidential Palace through the main bridge. When we got near the bridge heavy mortar fire began. I told the men that we must wait 15 minutes for the shooting to abate and then cross rapidly in groups of 4 or 5. After 20 minutes I was left with one man. All these brave resistance fighters had gone. I sent the man back to Minutka but he did not manage to get anybody back. I had to return to the Palace alone.

Fighting in Trampark

After retreating from the Palace, we moved the HQ to the cinema "Youth" near the tunnel on Lenin Street. We spent 3 days there but Russian mortar and artillery fire was so heavy that it became dangerous. To avoid casualties we moved further away from the centre to Minutka. I was responsible for choosing a building for HQ and decided on the City Hospital No 2. My choice was determined by whether the building had a cellar

where we could live and secure approaches. The hospital was a large building surrounded by small one-storey houses. It was destroyed but the cellars could be used.

For the first time after a month of heavy fighting the infantry moved into the city centre as far as the University, some 60 metres from Lenin Street. If the infantry managed to reach Lenin Street our units still remaining on the other bank near the Palace would be surrounded. We immediately threw additional forces into Trampark (tramway park) area. For the first time since the beginning of the war we managed to repel the enemy pushing him to the outer circle road of the city in Microraion. I must stress that we had no anti-tanks weapons and no artillery, only grenade launchers, mortars, and light weapons. It was our first offensive. It gave us much encouragement and confidence.

Unfortunately the usual happened: a Chechen observation unit stationed on the Sunzha had left without notifying HQ. The Russians managed to cross the Sunzha, and penetrated the district unnoticed following the river-bank. The Russians observed Chechen movements carefully and immediately occupied the positions that our units left. Lack of professionalism and discipline was a great handicap for us at the beginning of the war.

There were approximately 100 APCs in Trampark. Fighting was heavy. The Russians used mortar fire, 80 and 122 mm. Our positions on the right bank stretched to the railway bridge. It was convenient because there were no more other bridges beyond. We had to defend that bridge because we failed to blow it up completely - one side collapsed but APCs could still cross. A subdivision of the DGB (Department of Government Security) commanded by Geliskhanov was guarding the bridge in Voikov near "Krupskaia House of Culture" by the railway. After being bombed Geliskhanov's subdivision left without warning HQ. Russian infantry was able to cross the river and approach along Saikhanov Street getting closer to our position. We only realised what had happened when the infantry was within 200/300 metres of HQ. We tried to repulse them calling several units to the rescue. The first to arrive was the Presidential Guard, which had remained with Dudaev. But we lost contact with them. I tried to call them throughout the night but could

not raise them on the radio. In the morning information came that they were surrounded or captured. The information was false. We sent other units to the rescue and fighting broke out on Saikhanov Street. We learned later that the Guard got lost somewhere near the bus station.

The *okhrana* (body-guards) of the General Staff who had fought well in November 1994 was dispatched next. They also got lost. Maskhadov sent me to Basaev to get reinforcements and went himself to Minutka to find volunteers. We got as many people as we could to strengthen the frontline. The fighting was fierce. Mumadi Saidaev was left in charge of the defence. He did his best to organise the frontline. He replaced Lt Colonel Isa Ayubov, as the Commander in Chief's deputy. Ayubov was killed, torn to pieces by a grenade while protecting a nurse with his body.

We had some moderate success - in places the Russians retreated. They had reached a school on Saikhanov Street. In order to dislodge them we had to use tanks. We still had 3 tanks left but there was a problem: our tank crew was scared of being shot down by our own units. Today people say that tanks for Chechens were like a red rag to a bull, that all tanks were supposedly Russian which was why we shot our own tanks by mistake. Personally, I think that our tanks were shot deliberately by Chechens serving the Russians. That was why our tank crew was scared to get near the frontline, even with a large Chechen flag on the tank.

During the fighting we moved HQ to another hospital nearby, leaving the wounded with a medical team and a unit to protect them. The unit was under the command of a man named Aindi from Novogroznensky. For some reason he left his men and went home. The men did not organise a watch. At nightfall, Chechen informers brought the Russians to the hospital. They occupied the ground floor. The medical personnel and the wounded were in the cellars. Two men went out for a smoke and found themselves face to face with the Russians. Shooting broke out. One man died, one was wounded. A unit of 10/20 men was passing by and heard the shooting. They came to the rescue, kicked the Russians out, and brought the wounded and the medics to HQ.

Fighting continued along Saikhanov Street. In my opinion, we had strengthened our positions sufficiently to counter-attack the Russians and force them to withdraw to their previous position beyond the Sunzha. There was a strong subdivision of 40 well-armed men near the bridge not far from Shamil Basaev's position. I asked them for reinforcement but they refused claiming that their commander was absent and that they had his consent. They left, and the always vigilant Russians drove their tanks across the bridge to support the infantry on Saikhanov Street.

It became difficult to defend the area. If we failed to stop the Russian attack at once we risked being cut off. The Russians had broken through the village of Gikalo and Microraiion. There was fighting in the suburbs. The road to Atagi from Gikalo was already cut as well as the main Baku highway. The only exit from Grozny was through Chernorechie along Pavel Musor Street in the 12th District.

We took the decision to lift the defence of Trampark and withdraw our forces, approximately 400 men. We spent 2 or 3 days in the 12th District but it was impossible to build defences there because the houses were too small. The Russians occupied most of the city. It did not make sense to fight for Grozny after the centre had been captured. Shamil Basaev was left in Chernorechie to protect the retreat. HQ were to be moved to Argun.

The evacuation

Shamil Basaev left a week later. We evacuated everybody and everything we could. The wounded were sent to Atagi where we set up a field hospital, the POWs to Shali. Maskhadov went to report to Dudaev. Mumadi Saidaev and I evacuated the HQ through Sary Atagi. We had a small APC (caterpillar type) to carry whatever little supplies we had.

Maskhadov told us that Zelimkhan Yandarbiev would help the evacuation as Sary Atagi was his home village. Shall I tell you how Yandarbiev met us? We arrived at night. I

expected him to run out to greet us. After all, we had fought for 2 months! When we arrived in Stary Atagi it was marvellously quiet, we had forgotten what peace and silence could be like. We were hungry and tired. I sent for Yandarbiev. He came and we met in the street. He promised to send a lorry to drive us to Argun. We waited sitting all night in a shed with only a piece of bread we had found. Nobody invited us home. The next day I waited until lunch-time, I sent people to Yandarbiev asking him to hurry up. There were promises but nothing else. Finally, I sent one of our fighters to stop a Kamaz lorry. The first one he stopped was carrying a load of potatoes. The driver agreed to help us willingly. We put all our belongings on the lorry, towed a 122 mm mortar, and left for Argun.

Argun

Argun was left relatively quiet during the battle for Grozny. We stayed in Argun for some time. We had prepared our defences in Argun while fighting in Grozny. Trenches were dug. The river Argun was a natural barrier. The bed of the river can be crossed easily but one bank is steeper than the other. The Russians could not cross it unnoticed and could not make surprise attacks.

I found a place for the HQ after a day's search. The HQ had to be fairly close to frontline - if it was too far away, panic could start with rumours that the General Staff had run away. Too close was dangerous because of artillery fire. I chose the factory "Krasnyi Molot". It was well reinforced against air bombing and conveniently located for access on the edge of town.

Maskhadov and I had a lucky escape in Argun. It was 3rd March, the day of Uraza. We had 3 tanks left. The idiotic tank crew, probably out of high spirits, fired at Russian positions from HQ. The Russians found our position and began an artillery bombardment. Their aim was accurate. Maskhadov was going somewhere. We were in the car with a body-guard. I was at the wheel. Maskhadov told me to stay in HQ and send for another driver. While we waited, a rocket exploded 6 metres from us. It was a miracle that we

were unhurt. We ran into the building when another rocket hit the car directly. One man was killed and several wounded.

We stayed in Argun if I remember correctly until the end of March 1995. We defended Argun well. The commanders were Khunkar Pasha Israpilov and his deputy Aslanbek Ismailov. The spirit of the men improved. They realised that it was possible to fight the Russians after Grozny. They were not the terrifying adversaries they were claimed to be. At the beginning of the war people used to think that the Russian army was so huge that it could just roll over and squash us, and that nothing would be left of Chechnya. I heard such opinions a few times. The myth of “powerful Russia” was strong.

When the Russians broke our defences in Argun, it happened as usual because of our own carelessness. A unit positioned in the 5th sovkhos left without warning, allowing the Russians to drive their APCs into our rear. We had to retreat to Shali. The retreat from Argun was managed in good order. HQ were moved first to Shali then to Serzhen Yurt.

We did not stay long in Shali. It was due to our parochialism. Up till then the Russians had directed their attacks on our HQ. Russian troops stationed in Ingushetia and in Achkhoy Martan were not yet engaged in operations. It was before fighting broke out in Bamut and Samashki. In those early days people only fought for their own village or town. Grozny was an exception – it was the capital, it belonged to all of us; everybody wanted a part of the action. Furthermore commanders were reluctant to take defensive positions on their home ground due to family pressure. They preferred to fight away from their villages. Shali was surrendered without a fight despite the fact that it had many commanders who later became famous. (The only fighting took place on the bridge.)

Into the mountains

We were forced to retreat into the mountains. The frontline was broken. We were fighting in the mountain canyons: in Serzhen Yurt - the “central” front commanded by Shamil Basaev, in Agishty with Alikhadzhiev; Nozhay Yurt district was quiet. Gudermes was

surrendered without a fight. Salman Raduev was incapable of organising the defence because of local power politics.

With the front divided in two sections after our retreat from Shali, the Russians began a massive two-pronged offensive. Fighting began in Bamut. Gelaev's units were positioned on the road leading to Shatoy. (The command in the Southwest was organised by Mumadi Saidaev because Gelaev was wounded several times and had to stop fighting.) The link between the Southwest and Southeast was broken. Throughout the war communication with the Southwest remained difficult. When we retreated from Serzhen Yurt to Vedenov, we send an operator, Kurgan Tagir, to the Southwest front. He went to Shatoy to set up a transmitter just when Shatoy was captured.

Then came the retreat from Vedenov. A misunderstanding had occurred: Gelaev's units were supposed to protect the river canyon in the direction of Shatoy from Duba Yurt while Alikhadzhiev was supposed to defend the other side, from Selmenthausen. But they were not on their positions. The Russians with the help of a local guide managed to cross this narrow gorge which was not mined because we used the route frequently. It was the main link between HQ and the south-western front. It was convenient because one could drive jeeps, lorries and even buses along the river bed.

After the Russians entered the canyon our units retreated. Russian offensive on Vedenov, passed Elistanzhi, gathered momentum. We tried to stop them, bringing Batalov's battalion from Nozhay Yurt, but failed to close the breach in the face of the sheer number of tanks and helicopters. Although we had fought a position war for nearly 6 months, we were not prepared to fight in these conditions at that given time. We recalled the units defending Serzhen Yurt and Agishty and left for Dargo.

In 1995 during negotiations with the Russians, Maskhadov talked to the general who commanded the offensive against Agishty canyon. The general was complaining about lack of equipment and poor conditions during the operation. He asked Maskhadov: "tell me how many men did you have there?". Maskhadov answered: "I do not remember the

exact numbers, we had 30 or 40 men”. After leaving Agishty, their only retreat was the forest.

The last to leave Vedeno was Shamil Basaev. This was his territory. He mined the road to prevent the Russians pursuing us. But it was unlikely that they would chase us because the road cut through mountains and forests with little room for tanks. However, helicopters followed us during the retreat. From Dargo, Maskhadov ordered HQ to move to Benoy. Dargo was home to members of the opposition to Dudaev’s government, Khazhiev among them. The people were divided and scared, they did not want military operations in their village. A famous bandit, Allaudi Khamzatov (who was killed later), was with us. (He had connections with Ruslan Labazanov previously but showed himself well since the beginning of the war.) Allaudi had a bad reputation, he could kill a man without provocation. He told the population: “If you are not satisfied with the presence of our military units, I will take 3 men, one from the periphery of the village, one from the centre, one from the other end of the village, and I will kill them. And I will kill those who dare squeak.” He aimed the gun of one of the two tanks we had managed to evacuate from Vedeno against the house of a well-known opposition member. Nobody said anything. Dargo is very beautiful, maybe the villagers wanted to preserve that beauty. But I was surprised: Dargo had a glorious and heroic tradition, that tradition should have inspired spirit to its population. In this war, Dargo had nothing to be proud of. When Shamil Basaev set his base in Dargo in 1996, the population did not dare object.

The majority of the population was loyal to us. However, when we were pushed into the mountains after Vedeno and Dargo, we began to have problems in Benoy and Nozhay Yurt. People thought that we had failed, that the war was lost. The attitude of the population became ambiguous. People watched us with suspicion, tried to spy on us. They began saying that we were creating problems for the nation, that we should perish or retreat deep into the mountains, and leave them to lead their lives undisturbed. It was a difficult time. Everything changed after Basaev took the decision to march on Budennovsk.

After Budennovsk

Until Budennovsk we had our back to the mountains, there were no more villages beyond. The enemy was within 5 or 6 km. The Russians were firing GRAD from Vedeno on Benoy. Basaev's raid changed the course of the war. We gained time. During several months of negotiations in Grozny, our confidence grew. The population's mood changed, once again we were welcome everywhere. When we drove for the first time to Grozny with Maskhadov an enormous crowd had gathered to greet us in Novogroznensky, everyone wanted to touch us, as if we were saints!

In my opinion, the Russians made a mistake when they insisted on Grozny for the negotiations rather than a more neutral territory, such as Argun or Urus Martan. We arrived in Grozny like the Mongol hordes. At first, Maskhadov was only allowed to cross Russian posts with 12 bodyguards in 5 cars, the number and type of weapons carried by his bodyguards clearly specified. On the first occasions we respected these requirements but it soon changed. We got to know the men in the military posts along the road; our fighters began to show their contempt for them; they entered the posts, took photographs. Soon they drove through the roadblocks without stopping. In Grozny I met the ADC of General Romanov. We got friendly. He used to give me blank passes. (I think he was killed later, it was a pity he was a nice chap.) I ordered through friends in Moscow a copy of the Russian High Command seal. We used it from time to time to bring our men into Grozny but mostly we used personal contacts with the Russians. Our units began to infiltrate Grozny from all directions. Grozny was filled with our men.

Communications

Today many people claim that the defence of Grozny was spontaneous. In reality, the HQ coordinated all combat operations in Grozny. Besides Russian radios we had 13 Motorola radio transmitters. In the Presidential Palace, we used a radio from an APC. However, it used a lot of energy and was difficult to transport so we destroyed it before leaving the Palace. The Motorolas were a great asset. We used them increasingly in the course of the war. At the beginning of the war, the Russians did not know what type of radio we had. Later they managed to lay their hands on a transmitter and worked out our wavelength.

At first, they made no attempt to monitor our communications systematically or to interfere with them. It seemed the Russian military in Chechnya was not equipped for that purpose. Only in the second year of the war did they begin to interfere. But the jamming was done by voice - silly sounds, swear words – it was primitive and ineffective.

We usually spoke in Chechen which was difficult for the Russians to understand. We had a kind of code for our communications. To identify an area we would refer to a particular event that took place there. We never mentioned names. If the Russians or the Chechens working for them listened, they could not understand the meaning of our conversation. In the Soviet period we saw films featuring Russian cipher experts who supposedly could decipher any code. It gave us the idea to use a numerical cipher. It was not sophisticated but we changed the numbers frequently. When using the numerical cipher we still disguised the meaning of our messages.

In the first 6 months of the war until Budennovsk, we had difficulty getting information on the situation in the zone under Russian control. We could not bypass Russian forces to attack them in the rear; controls on the road-blocks were dangerous; we had no organised communication network; no agents travelling to gather intelligence. Later during the war, we used the civilian population besides our own agents. But the information provided by civilians was not detailed and we had to check it.

As mentioned above communication with the Southwest was difficult. I made several trips to the Southwest on Maskhadov's behalf so that the link would not be severed completely and to maintain his authority. During the negotiations in Khankala the Russians provided us with a large and heavy radio transmitter. After the attack on General Romanov we moved the transmitter to my house in Grozny. We used it for 2 months to report to Maskhadov on the situation in the Southwest. Later the south-western front complained that it did not have direct contacts with HQ. I moved the transmitter to Urus Martan with the help of the (pro-Russian) militia. I set up the transmitter, called all our radio operators, introduced them to each other, and instructed them to report twice a

day, morning and evening. But they never did it. They told me later that they were afraid of indicating their position to the Russians. But in my experience, the Russians never attempted to locate our radio transmitters. They did not have the necessary equipment and know-how. In war conditions, it was practically impossible to locate transmitters because the Russians were themselves using the same equipment and wavelength. They could not distinguish between their transmitters and ours. But the Motorola radios were safer because one could move around with them.

Supplies

In Grozny the supply and distribution of ammunition and food was already well centralised because we were using the reserves of the Shali Tank Regiment. Throughout the battle of Grozny we received ammunitions from Shali. All the Russians had to do to stop the supplies was to cut the Baku highway. But they did not do it until the last moments. In fact, they cut the road when the supplies in Shali had run out. I saw Russian military and FSB maps. Their estimates of our forces were usually wrong, on a par with Grachev's claim that they could take Grozny in 2 hours. They were not assessing the situation realistically. That was probably why they never attempted to cut our supply route from Shali during the fighting in Grozny.

Preliminary conclusion

I consider that the defence of Grozny was amongst our brightest examples of military skill and bravery. It was the beginning of the war, we had no army to speak of only a bunch of braves who went on resisting despite the military might deployed by the Russians. It was the defence of Grozny that made Budennovsk and Pervomaiskaia possible. It was in Grozny that men learned to fight. Those who went to Budennovsk and Pervomaiskaia knew that it was possible to fight the Russians and how to do it. The Russian high command was incompetent, their plans and tactics ended in the death of hundreds of their soldiers.

