

Small Wars Journal

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AHMAD ZAKAEV

Commander in the South-West

Formerly a theatre actor,

Appointed Minister of Culture by Dudaev and later by Maskhadov's government, member of the negotiating team in Moscow in 1997, had special responsibility for relations with Georgia

Interview June 1999

[Zakaev, a close and trusted collaborator of Dzhokhar Dudaev, was the only member of his entourage who made it as a military commander although he obviously did not have the necessary skills and expertise. His role was diplomatic. Among the commanders, he was Dudaev's "staff officer", one of the few members of Dudaev's government who did not disappear when war started. He had the respect of his men and relied heavily on his HQ, which included several former army officers who left him the role of nominal commander in homage to Dudaev. Zakaev's talent was in being an intelligent team player. His interview was disappointing. Zakaev was incapable of giving precise information or analysis. The interview confirms the fact that Dudaev did not take any active part in the planning and operative side of the war. As an actor, he gave a very convincing performance of a general – the young Bonaparte. I witnessed the beginning of the battle of Goyskoe - the battle was carefully planned in co-ordination with Maskhadov's HQ. Maskhadov had sent his ADC, Husein Iskhanov, to Urus Martan a month beforehand to co-ordinate with the local commanders and the staff of Zakaev.

"The propaganda war" section is not directly relevant to this study. I have added it however, as an example of "collateral" activities, which accompany military conflict. The excerpts cited are from a recent directive but documents similar in spirit were produced during the course of the 1994-6 war, some of them in my possession. MB]

It will be difficult for me to speak about military affairs because I had no military experience before the war. It was the time and the situation that compelled me to take part in military actions. By inclination and education, I was not prepared to take part in such actions. However, psychologically I was ready for war. I knew that we would be forced to fight for our independence. As a child, I read books about the North Caucasus, heard our elders recount tales of the 18-19th century Russian conquest. I always regretted that I did not live at that time and did not have the opportunity to defend the freedom of our land. God Almighty may have heard my prayers and gave me the opportunity to prove myself through this ordeal!

I lived and worked in Moscow where I had my own business enterprise before the war. In October 1994 it was clear that we were going towards war. It was not difficult to forecast - Russian media made it imminently clear that the Russian Government was determined on a military solution of the Chechen problem. Yeltsin needed a blitzkrieg victory to strengthen his power after disbanding the Russian Parliament. I think the complacency of the West, and especially President Clinton's acquiescence towards a war with "not too much blood", encouraged Yeltsin in his determination. Unfortunately, it is not easy to forecast how much blood will be spilt once you begin killing people.

In November 1994, Dzhokhar Dudaev offered me the post of Minister of Culture. I told him that I did not mind in what capacity I returned to Chechnya because I wanted to defend my homeland in the event of war. Dzhokhar still did not believe that Russia would engage in a large-scale conflict. He was convinced that the international community would not tolerate a conflict of any magnitude and would put pressure on Russia to safeguard the freedom of a small nation. His conviction was determined by Russia's efforts to impress the world with its new found democracy and a state of law. Until the last moment, he did not believe that the conflict could degenerate to such massive military operations. However, he changed his mind in the first days of December 1994. Afterwards he would say that the war would last a very long time, and he tried to prepare us to withstand a long and cruel war.

In March 1995, Dzhokhar wanted to send me to Turkey to arrange humanitarian and financial aid. I categorically refused, telling him that I wanted to live and die in Chechnya. If I remained alive after the war, I wanted to have a clear conscience. I did not want to return and be pointed out as a man who had found a soft job during the war. The next day I received an order to take the command of the 7th Front in the raion of Urus Martan, and was given the rank of lieutenant colonel. The decision was unexpected but Dzhokhar was a non-conformist. This area was a stronghold of Russian collaborationists, people like Bislan Gantemirov, and of the former Soviet nomenklatura. My task was to organise resistance units and set up a clear front line between Russian and Chechen forces - not a simple assignment. There was no front [as in the East and Argun], and no organised resistance forces. Small groups - no more than 12 people maximum, were operating independently outside any organised structure and command line. We used to call them "Red Indians". In one month, we set up 3 important bases in the mountains. Dzhokhar visited them and gave us instructions on how to operate from uninhabited desert areas with no infrastructure.

After Budennovsk, I received an order at night to immediately come to Shatoy to meet Dudaev. I walked from my camp to Shatoy. I met Dzhokhar at midnight. He ordered me to go to Grozny with Usman Imaev* the next morning as part of our negotiating team. I took part in the very first meeting, which was led, on our side by Imaev and on the Russian side by Semenov.

I had not been back to Grozny since February 1995. I was shattered having forgotten the amount of destruction. I found it repulsive to negotiate with these vandals. The worse was that the Russians denied all responsibility for the destruction. They tried to pretend that somebody else was at fault and that they were trying to put things right. They uttered these disgusting lies looking at us innocently. I found it curiously frightening. I told

* Imaev was chairman of the Chechen Central Bank and later Minister of Justice in Dudaev's government. The account of his dismissal given in *Chechnya. A Small Victorious War* is incomplete. At some stage in 1995, Imaev was detained by the Russians for a few weeks and according to Dudaev and Maskhadov was

Usman that I did not want to meet the Russians again. I felt so incensed that I was afraid of losing my temper. With time, I got used to behaving like a diplomat. Dzhokhar helped strengthening my resolve. I learned how one had to speak to the Russians. It became very satisfactory later in the negotiations when we managed to enrage them by our calm. The sight of Anatoly Kulikov running in and out of the negotiation room in a white fury shouting, “I will teach you” was indeed adequate compensation!

Grozny offensive – March 1996

My first important military operation as a commander was the March 1996 offensive against Grozny. I was not part of the HQ during the battle for Grozny but a simple resistance fighter. In March, I was responsible for taking control of a third of the city. This operation was crucial for the future course of the war in terms of strategy and tactics. This was our first major offensive and it was successful. Before the offensive against Grozny, we naturally had dissension on how best to wage war. There were three trends: 1- Khattab’s school that favoured diversionary raids; 2- the conventional military approach of those commanders who wanted to hold and defend territory; and 3- the group that prevailed after March 1996 who advocated an offensive strategy both inside Chechnya and in Russia itself.

My group was among the first to enter Grozny in March and the last to leave. On 8-9 March, Dudaev came back to Grozny to visit my HQ in Chernorechie. I was prepared for his visit. We controlled a corridor into Grozny for our units but I had also prepared another secret route in case of his visit. But Dzhokhar came through the main corridor with only 3 bodyguards. It was tremendous for our morale. When he heard that the Chief of Staff [Maskhadov] had been given the order to withdraw from the city, he commented “if there is an order, it must be obeyed”. He stayed another 2 or 3 hours in Grozny and

“turned”. Maskhadov told me that Imaev was dismissed from the negotiating team after an important decision known only to himself, Dudaev, and Imaev, was transmitted within hours to the Russians.

left. We withdrew from Grozny on 9th March but the Russians remained very tense, seeing *boiviki* in every corner of the city until the end of the month.

Goyskoe

On 19 March, I was ordered by Dzhokhar to organise the defence of Goyskoe. From a strategic point of view, this village did not present any particular interest, except its proximity to Russian controlled Urus Martan. But the Russians were trying to seal their front line in the area and we wanted to prevent it. It was also a question of nerve, of testing each other's strength anew, to see how each side would endure. The terrain in Goyskoe is flat, with 2 or 3 main streets well spread out. Our men showed extraordinary heroism in Goyskoe – the battle lasted 45 days, 45 days of continuous 24 hour fire from long-range artillery and air. The losses were comparatively small on our side – 16 men killed and 24 wounded.

My orders from Dzhokhar were to withdraw after one week to prepare another operation elsewhere. But on 21 March Dzhokhar was killed and we decided to hold on – so the Russians should not think that we were in disarray. The battle of Goyskoe had a great impact on our resistance forces. Everybody was used to the fighting in Bamut, Staroe Achkhoy, Orekhovo, Iandyrka and so on. But to show that we could hold positions for 45 days on a flat terrain in the very heart of the pro-Russian region, was very encouraging indeed.

Dudaev's death

Many re-arrangements had to be made after Dzhokhar's death. The commanders met immediately. There was no panic in our ranks. The Russians expected that the death of Dzhokhar would end the war, as the country would be leaderless. Like all their calculations, it was primitive. In fact, his death had the opposite effect of stimulating us because we saw that we could all meet, agree, and continue the work. His death happened at the time when we were beginning to taste victory. We had understood by then that we

must not rely on outside help from the Muslim or the Western world. We knew that we were left face to face with a terrible monster that had only one aim – to destroy us. But we also knew how to fight the Russians, how to hit them where it hurt most, and how to demoralise their troops. We knew that this army that the whole world feared could be thrashed, that it was not that complicated and difficult.

Russian propaganda machine went into top gear immediately after Dudaev's death, betting on this or that commander in the hope that it would cause a split in our ranks. We understood Russian games perfectly. According to our Constitution, we swore allegiance to Zelimkhan Iandarbiev, the vice-president, and swore to continue fighting.

The propaganda war: post-war/pre-war 1999

Today we have lost and wasted the achievements and authority we had gained. We know the scenarios of the Russian services for destabilising Chechnya. On numerous occasions, we have appealed to our commanders and population not to let themselves be led astray. Unfortunately we are not ready or mature enough to confront the skilful underground war that Russia is waging against us today, although we understand perfectly well what is happening.

We have received a copy of Moscow's instructions to their intelligence services on "How to eliminate separatist groups in the North Caucasus". Precise recommendations are set out, including kidnapping journalists. I will read you some extracts:

"Islam must be associated among the Chechen with Arabisation"; "large scale ideological work to this end must be backed by measures taken by the secret services on the territory of Chechnya for creating, in the first stage, an information blockade of Chechnya." This should be followed in a second stage by "total isolation".

"In such a beggarly republic it should not be difficult to find people who want to earn a lot of money fast. This can be achieved with the help of journalists and humanitarian aid

workers. They must become exchangeable goods.” In the second stage “anybody and everybody who has money should be used as goods. The greatest impact will be achieved if the neighbours of Chechnya become the main targets”.

“For our part we must implement energetic military and psychological measures directed against the separatists. The aim must be to prevent the appearance on the world map of a so-called Chechen-Ichkeria state. We should show no pusillanimity as to the choice of means. The moral consideration that should prevail is that it would be immoral to loose [parts of] Russia. The defence of the state (*derzhava*) should be the highest ideal for the Russian people and their political elite. The refusal to defend Russia, under the pretext that our necessary activities in Chechnya are immoral, is criminal because it can deal a deadly blow to Russia itself.”

This is the policy that we have been unable to counteract to protect ourselves, our people, and our political image. But I do not think that everything is lost. We have managed to survive in worst situations in the past. We will manage to extricate ourselves from this situation as well. I believe in my people, in their common sense, and I believe in our future as an independent nation and state. God who has preserved us all these centuries without allowing our destruction will not tolerate our self-destruction. I want to believe that we will come out of this situation.

Conclusion

We will continue struggling. Every generation has been inflamed by new ideas. We have to burn ourselves out so that the next generation can live in peace and bring to fruition what we have set out to do – achieve our independence. Unfortunately after the war, power and wealth have tempted people. Our weaknesses are always more evident in peace-time when people let themselves go.

We are facing the same enemy who fought us in the past, whether in Tsarist, Soviet or democratic Russian guise. During the Tsarist empire, it was Dadi Yurt and many dozens

of villages razed to the ground by Ermolov's scorched earth tactics. The Soviet period saw the deportation and the autodafé of Khaibakh. Today, democratic Russia remains the same empire that wants to destroy us at all cost. When Russia could not destroy us physically, it tried to eliminate our *adat*, our traditions, which are our very nature. As long as our traditions live, our nation will live. On no account, could Russia tolerate that we should become a nation, because it is impossible to win a war against a nation, we had to remain one of the many nationalities of the Russian Federation.

Today a novel approach is being tried, using Islam. Shariah is brandished to fight our *adat*. There is little difference between an Islamist and a Communist. Communists in the past disliked our *adat* as much as Islamists do today. Like the Communists, the Islamists want amorphous masses that would not question their ideas. It is a new assault against our nation. But fortunately Chechens are great individualists who likes to think for himself. It is impossible to influence or lead them against their will. When a Chechen commits a crime, he does it knowingly.