Tanks in Grozny

By Vladimir Voronov

Translated by Arch Tait
Twenty years ago, the trigger was pulled to start the First Chechen War.

Early one Saturday morning, on 26 November 1994, over 3,000 “militia volunteers” entered Grozny from several directions with the support of 40, perhaps even 50, tanks. Most of the tanks were crewed exclusively by serving soldiers of the Russian army.

The start of the First Chechen War is generally dated from 11 December 1994, the day columns of regular Russian troops entered Chechnya. In fact, however, the trigger to start the “main” war was pulled on 26 November, when tanks of the so-called “Armed Opposition” invaded Grozny for a second time.²

Immediately after the ignominious failure of the assault of 15 October 1994 and the flight from Grozny of the “Opposition” leaders, Yevgeny Savostianov, Deputy Director of Russia’s Federal Counterintelligence Service (the FSK) and Head the FSK Directorate in Moscow and Moscow region, conducted a debriefing in Mozdok. According to Ruslan Khasbulatov, who was invited, Avturkhano and Gantamirov reported to Savostianov on the previous day’s debacle and “requested additional armaments, including tanks”.³ Khasbulatov claims that “about two weeks after the ignominious flight from Grozny of Avturkhano and Gantamirov [...] Mozdok stopped supplying arms to those individuals.” He also claims that Moscow “made it a condition for resuming supplies of arms to the Opposition that Khasbulatov should leave Chechnya”.⁴

Clearly there was an operational pause, with Moscow needing to analyze the causes of the defeat and to work out new approaches after deciding its future policy and who to back. This by no means amounted to a cessation of funding of the so-called “Opposition”, or of supplying its fighters with arms and equipment. Arms were not always forwarded directly from the Russian military, but also through an intermediary, namely Interior Ministry troops.

General Anatoly Kulikov, commander of the interior troops, was disturbed by reports that “the Opposition have no people trained in the use of flamethrowers, fixed grenade launchers, heavy machine guns or crew-served armaments.”⁵ The problem of specialist training for the Chechen fighters was speedily resolved: it would be undertaken by the Russian army. This was openly admitted in October 1994 by Akhmed Kelimatov, appointed commander of the “Opposition militia of Priterechiye and deputy of Commander-in-Chief Avturkhano”, who wrote, “a Chechen Opposition detachment of 120 men commanded by officers of the 33rd Motorized Rifle Regiment is undergoing one-month training courses at the Prudboy base of the Eighth Volgograd Army Corps of the Russian Army”.⁶ Here Mr Kelimatov is possibly being disingenuous: far more than 120 Opposition fighters were undergoing training at the base, and Chechens, usually in

¹ This paper was written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. It can be accessed at, Voronov, V. ‘Tanki v Groznom’, svoboda.org, 26 November 2014, available at: http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26707956.html
² For more detail on who set up the anti-Dudayev opposition and how, and on its false start on 15 October 1994, see (in Russian), Voronov, V. ‘Shturn, kotorogo ne bilo’, svoboda.org, 17 October 2014, available at: http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26641302.html
⁴ Ibid., p. 263.
⁵ Anatoli Kulikov, Tiazhelye zvezdy, Moscow, 2002, p. 238.
⁶ Akhmed Kelimatov, Chechnia v kogtiakh d’iavola, di Na puti k samoani/hrozheniiu, Moscow, 2003, p. 357.
batches of 150 men, had been trained there at least since the summer of 1994. The courses normally lasted two weeks.

Despite that, neither their “military leaders” nor their masters and handlers in Moscow had any illusions regarding their combat readiness, with or without training at Prudboy. Kulikov himself commented that, “I carried out my orders, but my heart was not in it. I knew it took only a change in the political breeze for part of the Opposition, which up till then had been professing pro-alliance sentiments, either to lose heart or, at best, to sell their weapons in the bazaar.” 7 A fundamental inability to undertake independent, even marginally effective, action was graphically displayed in the disgraceful aftermath of the raid on Grozny of 15 October 1994. That was evidently when it occurred to someone that the dearth of military expertise in the ranks of the “Opposition” could best be overcome by seconding Russian professional soldiers.

According to Kulikov, the idea was floated at a meeting by Savostianov, who was in charge of the Chechen problem within the Federal Counterintelligence Service. “Some people thought this was an extremely good idea: on the one hand, whatever the outcome, the reputation of Russian officials would be untarnished; and on the other, some generals still had sweet music ringing in their ears in the form of assurances by Asturkhani and Gantamirov that all they needed was a couple of dozen tanks, with crews who knew how to shoot, for all the problems to melt away.” 8

President Yeltsin’s Administration saw the anti-Dudayev forces as expendable, and as having a very specific function: to provide an excuse for large-scale deployment of Russian troops in Chechnya. If they could hold even just the centre of Grozny for a couple of days, or even hours, that would be sufficient to create the illusion that civil war had broken out, leaving the Kremlin with no option but to resort to direct military intervention “to protect the civilian population”.

A Price List for Death

On 1 November 1994, Directive No. 312/1/0130 Sh of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was issued, providing for the North Caucasus Military District to transfer 40 T-72 tanks to the Chechen “Opposition”. Even earlier, in October, in accordance with instructions from President Yeltsin, Russian Defence Minister General Pavel Grachev gave orders to establish an operational group on Chechnya in the Main Operations Directorate (GOU) of the General Staff. Its task was to develop scenarios for the use of force against Chechnya, including direct deployment of troops and military operations. In addition, the group was tasked with coordinating the efforts of the army, armed police units of the Interior Ministry, border guards and intelligence agencies in planning and preparing an invasion, and collecting and analyzing information on the size, deployment and armaments of Chechen units. The group was headed by First Deputy Chief of the General Staff’s Main Operations Directorate, Lieutenant General Anatoly Kvaishn, and Deputy Chief of the Directorate, Lieutenant General Leontiy Shevtsov.

7 Kulikov, p. 238.
8 Ibid., pp. 238-9.
On 3 November 1994, officers of the Federal Security Bureau’s Military Counter-Intelligence Directorate began recruiting “volunteer” tank crews among units of the Moscow Military District: the 2nd Guards (Taman) Motorized Rifle Division, the 4th Guards (Kantemir) Tank Division, 18th Motorized Rifle Brigade, and students on the Vystrel Advanced Officers courses. The secret police managed to recruit a total of 82 tank crew members. Most were officers ranging in rank from lieutenant to major, but there were a number of corporals and conscripts. All this was done, of course, on the orders of and with the approval of the heads of the Ministry of Defence (Pavel Grachev), the General Staff (Mikhail Kolesnikov), the Moscow Military District Command (Leonid Kuznetsov), the FCS (Sergey Stepashin), and the Office of Military Counterintelligence of the FSK (Colonel General Alexey Molyakov).

Captured tank crew members subsequently testified that they were given a written contract on behalf of the FSB under which they were paid an advance of one million rubles (US$ 324 at the Russian Central Bank’s exchange rate of 2 November 1994), and they were promised a minimum of a further three million rubles ($ 972) on completion of the operation. Such, at least, was the information provided after his capture by Warrant Officer Nikolai Potekhin of the Guards Kantemir Tank Division, whom I had occasion to meet in Grozny. Officially, this was only a contract payment for moving tanks from Mozdok to Chechnya.

A separate column stipulated remuneration for taking part in military activity and for destroying enemy equipment: a light wound was priced at 25 million rubles ($ 8,103), a wound of medium severity paid 50 million rubles ($ 16,207), severe injury brought in 75 million rubles ($ 24,311), and the soldier’s death was worth 150 million rubles ($ 48,622). The government official responsible for ferrying the volunteers from Moscow’s Chkalov military airfield to Mozdok was Deputy Minister for Nationalities and Regional Policy Major General (later Lieutenant General) Aleksandr Kotenkov a former army political officer.

On 10 November 1994, the leaders of the “Opposition” were given notice by Mozdok that the decision had been taken to send troops into Chechnya but, as Kelimatov puts it, the “procedure for deployment” would be determined on Saturday, 12 November 1994. Also on 10 November, a “Government of the Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic” was formed under the leadership of Salambek Khadzhiev, former USSR minister of the petrochemical industry.

Everything then followed the plan. The “volunteers” arrived in Mozdok and began readying tanks for deployment to Chechnya. On 17 November 1994, the first twelve T-72 tanks and two truckloads of weapons were moved the short distance from Mozdok in North Ossetia, Russian Federation to Zhnamenskoye in Chechnya. That same day a large contingent of generals and officers arrived in Mozdok from Moscow, headed by Colonel General (later General of the Army) Mikhail Kolesnikov, Chief of the General Staff. Day-to-day management of the operation was formally entrusted to Major General Gennady Zhukov, deputy commander of Eighth Army Corps, although in reality the reins of management were in the hands of General Kotenkov.

*Kelimatov, p. 358.*
Meanwhile, the leaders of the “Opposition” were busy organizing a pretext for invasion by engineering a spoof civil war. With Russian air support they conducted an operation to capture the village of Bratskoye. As his boss, Umar Avturkhanov, told Kelimatov on 5 November 1994, “It is time for us to go straight through Bratskoye to Mozdok.” 10 The “commander of the Priterechiye militia” was promised Russian helicopter backup. These fired at the positions of Dudayev’s forces in Bratskoye at 15.30 hrs on 18 November. This was followed by mortar and artillery attack by those who had been trained at the Prudboy base and, as night fell, a tank column arrived. Such was the rehearsal which enabled Sergei Filatov, then head of the Presidential Administration, to claim in his memoirs, “civil war was spreading in Chechnya.” 11

Four Thousand Knitted Hats

The final war council before the attack on Grozny was held at Mozdok on 22 November 1994. Leaders of the “Opposition” were brought from Znamenskoye in Russian army Mi-8 helicopters. The meeting was chaired by Generals Kotenkov and Zhukov. The plan was to mount an assault on Grozny using 40 (another source says 50) T-72 tanks with Russian and mixed Russian-Chechen crews, 26 armoured personnel carriers, and at least 46 GAZ-66 trucks with “Opposition” fighters on board. Communication with the command post in Mozdok and between units was to be provided by 80 R-105 M backpack radios and 4 command and staff communication (CSV) vehicles, one of which was promptly handed over to “peace mediator” Ruslan Khasbulatov. 12 In the event of radio communication failing, Kotenkov suggested using flares and tracer bullets as a backup.

There was to be a total of 3,500-4,000 troops in the “Opposition” groups attacking Grozny. At least, that was the number of self-coloured knitted hats issued on the eve of the attack. These had been specially commissioned to facilitate identification of who was on which side. Grozny was to be stormed from two directions, with sixteen departure points to the north, from Priterechiye and under Kelimatov’s command, and from two positions to the south-west, from the direction of Urus-Martan and under the command of Gantamirov. Each of the main columns would consist of 20-25 tanks. A further 18 assault groups would be held in reserve.

Kotenkov announced the plan for the assault groups at the Mozdok meeting. “Eight to 12 men will go ahead as a reconnaissance and discovery unit. Their task is to find concealed enemy firing points for attack by the group’s main forces. They will be followed, at a certain distance, by two tanks, a little behind which there will be a communications armoured personnel carrier. Behind that, 40-60 infantrymen will provide cover for the armour, followed by transport vehicles and a first response ambulance. At the rear of the assault group will be a second communications APC. Drivers of the fighting vehicles will be in communication both among themselves, with commanding officers, and staff headquarters.” 13

10 Ibid.
12 Kelimatov, p. 362.
13 Ibid., p. 363.
In order to avoid confusing their tanks with Dudayev’s, Kotenkov ordered Kelimatov to paint the tank turrets all the same colour, but only 30 minutes before beginning the advance. “To this end, we shall issue tank commanders with tins of enamel paint at the appropriate moment. The colour of the paint is presently being kept secret.” 14

Commanding officers of the assault groups and tanks were ordered to don workmen’s overalls a day or two before the operation and scout out their routes on foot, from their point of entry into Grozny to Dudayev’s presidential palace. It was subsequently clear that almost none of them did so. According to Kelimatov, the plan was developed entirely by Russian intelligence and only handed down to the field commanders of the “Armed Opposition”. “Kotenkov presented us with the perfected (!) plan for seizing the presidential palace and the taking of Grozny by opposition forces.” 15 When somebody asked the entirely legitimate question of who exactly would be present at staff headquarters and where it would be located, Kotenkov cut him short: “The headquarters will be constantly in the air! I will be in charge of the operation personally.” 16

Khasbulatov claims that, besides Kotenkov, the operation was developed in Mozdok by a group of generals headed by the Chief of Staff, First Deputy Commander of the Interior Troops of the Ministry of the Interior Anatoly Shkirko, while the political decision on military invasion under the banner of the “Opposition” was taken a few days previously at presidential level. 17

The “Opposition” units, reinforced by Russian armour manned by Russian crews, were to break through into Grozny and then, as Khasbulatov admits, “a puppet Chechen government of ‘national revival’ was to issue a special decree legalizing entry into Chechnya of regular troops of the Russian army. [...] As regards Djohar Dudayev, he was to suffer the same fate as Hafizullah Amin in Afghanistan, who was shot during the storming of the presidential palace in Kabul. Such was the plan of those embarking on this manifest aggression.” 18

Kelimatov’s group advanced on Grozny from the village of Tolstoy-Yurt, where Khasbulatov’s “peace mediation group” had its headquarters. It was also where the “Armed Opposition” had placed its temporary headquarters for the night. Khasbulatov claims he tried to dissuade Avturkhanov and Khadjiev from marching on Grozny. “It was to no avail. They admitted that the decision to occupy the capital had been taken in Mozdok and there was nothing they could do about it.” 19 Khasbulatov also mentions a conversation with Khadjiev on 24 November. Referring to the leaders in Moscow, Khadjiev said he was strongly opposed to the Extraordinary Congress of People’s Representatives which Khasbulatov was trying to organize. “No elections, no people’s congresses will be tolerated by Moscow. Do you think they gave me tanks only to hand power over to the people or its elected representatives, whoever they might be?!” 20

14 Ibid., p. 361.
15 Ibid., p. 361.
16 Ibid., p. 362.
17 Khasbulatov, Vzorvannaia zhizn’, p. 309.
18 Ibid., p. 311.
19 Ibid., p. 271.
According to the Mozdok plan, the assault groups were to move on Grozny at 04.30 hrs on 26 November 1994 and by 06.00, two hours before dawn, have Dudayev’s presidential palace surrounded. This was the building formerly occupied by the Checheno-Ingush regional committee (called at that time, the republican committee) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In addition, the plan was to take control of the television station. Ground troops were promised air support from strike helicopters and attack aircraft.

**Tanks in Search of Diesel**

As usual, the plan fell apart from the outset. When at 03.00 hrs “Priterechiye Commander” Kelimatov assembled his battalion and assault group commanders, it was obvious the fighters were not ready for action. “The unresolved issues were those for which Avturkhanov was responsible. There was not enough transport for everyone, the batteries in the radios were flat, and there was no fuel for the tanks. This all became evident at the precise moment we were due to move off.”

The upshot was that, while some had transport, others had to walk, “while the tanks trundled from one filling station to another in search of diesel. There was virtually no communication with the commanders or the rest of the tank column.”

Accordingly, sunrise found Kelimatov’s assault force not next to Dudayev’s palace where, according to the plan, it should have been, but still on the Ter Ridge. There was already fighting in Grozny. By 09.00 hrs the column had only passed the canning factory, by which time the assault battalion had been decapitated, its commander, Yakhia Gerikhanov, having been killed and his chief of staff and the commander of one of his companies having been seriously injured. Gerikhanov’s battalion, the first to reach the presidential palace, found itself in a ring of fire. “The enemy had set up ambushes throughout the residential districts.”

Of course it had! Given the way the attack on Grozny had been organized, it would have been truly amazing if those against whom it was directed had not known about it in detail. How could they not, when tanks and armoured personnel carriers from Mozdok were driving in columns the length of the country, and 3,000-4,000 armed men were simultaneously assembling at a small number of strongholds? Quite apart from the fact that Dudayev’s government had an intelligence service, highly sensitive information was being bought and sold for next to nothing, or just leaking.

The situation was made worse by the fact that the “Opposition” had no coherent plans of its own. When Avturkhanov arrived at the House of the Press building, he halted, set up his headquarters there, contacted Mozdok and reported his achievement to his masters. Instead of providing his assault groups with leadership, Gantamirov also came to a halt there, having lost contact with his units. It was later discovered that his formations were stuck near Chernorechiye and just hung around there for the rest of the day. Two other battalions, subordinate to Kelimatov, seemed in his words to have “been swallowed up by the earth”. In short, there was complete chaos, with no

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6 Kelimatov, p. 372.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 373.
communications, no direction, and nobody who had any idea what to do next. Tanks, meanwhile, were careering through the streets of an unfamiliar city without infantry cover. Mortars were shot at them in ambushes and through gateways. The “Opposition” fighters were totally demoralized. When Avturkhanov came out to address his men, no one listened to him or understood what he was talking about “because the planes and helicopters he and Kotenkov had promised had not materialized, [...] because he had failed to provide transport and communications to back up the fighters, and had put the tank crews in an impossible situation. He had betrayed their trust and their hopes.”

The field commanders of the “Opposition” were not at first particularly bothered, because the Mozdok plan had promised them that, immediately after the incursion by the “Armed Opposition”, Russian troops would be deployed to “re-establish constitutional order”. It would fall to the Russian troops to finish off “Dudayev’s units”. Kotenkov’s headquarters was, however, mute throughout the day. As for the local population, Kelimatov lamented, “throughout the time we were in Grozny, not a single volunteer from the urban militia joined us.”

“What Most Shocked Me Was the Cynicism”

In Moscow, meanwhile, as Sergey Filatov was later to write, “a decree had already been drafted to introduce a state of emergency in Chechnya. The requirement was for interior troops to be sent there to help the Provisional Council retain power in Grozny.” According to the then head of the Presidential Administration, everything was obstructed by Interior Minister Viktor Yerin, who told the president it was essential for all reports from Chechnya to be carefully checked, meaning that it would be best merely to observe how events were unfolding for at least a few days. As Filatov illuminatingly remarks, the FSK had accurate intelligence about the situation but “Yerin never believed their information.” However, Filatov, wide-eyed and innocent, goes on to claim that that afternoon Dudayev’s palace “was captured by Labazanov’s unit”!

Quite apart from the fact that nothing of the sort happened, because Labazanov’s men were too busy with their traditional occupation of looting and plundering retail kiosks, Mr Filatov blithely writes that “Opposition” units invaded Grozny “after heavy artillery bombardment.” In fact the “Opposition” had no artillery at their disposal during the assault. This is an indication of the extent to which the head of Russia’s Presidential Administration, one of the principal organizers of the whole escapade, was in the dark about the situation on the ground.

Already at 16.00 hrs on 26 November, “Khadzhiev, pale and smarmy, turned up at my headquarters in Tolstoy-Yurt,” Khasbulatov recalls. He tried in vain to make contact with Mozdok and Moscow. Around 22.00 hrs, Avturkhanov came rushing back, abandoning his

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* Ibid., p. 373.
* Filatov, p. 254.
* Ibid.
* Ibid.
Opposition” had suffered a humiliating defeat. As Army General Anatoly Kulikov later wrote, “I was told that in the Press building, Avturkhanov was on the verge of pouring out the brandy to celebrate victory when Dudayev’s fighters started shooting up the tanks in the streets. Their crews, mostly Russian soldiers, engaged the enemy but were not supported by Opposition units. Some were killed and others surrendered. Something that from the outset had been pure adventurism was certain to fail.” 29

According to one source, the “Opposition” lost 22 tanks in Grozny that day. Another source puts the figure at 36, while yet another suggests every tank without exception was destroyed. How many Russian soldiers were killed is not reliably known, but we know that 21 Russian tank crew members were taken prisoner: seven conscripted privates and sergeants, one senior warrant officer, seven lieutenants and senior lieutenants, five captains and one major.

On the evening of 27 November 1994, TV channels reported for the first time that the tanks wrecked and captured on the streets of Grozny had had Russian crew members. Minister of Defence Pavel Grachev, with an expression of amazement on his face, denied everything, claiming he had no idea what kind of mercenaries had been trying to invade Grozny, and that quite clearly “only incompetent commanders would try to fight with tanks in a city.” “If the Russian army had been involved in the fighting,” he added, “one parachute regiment would have settled the matter in two hours at the most.” 30

Even General Kulikov, admittedly years later, wrote that what most shocked him about the whole sorry story was “the cynicism with which precisely those officials and military commanders who were responsible for the botched Opposition attack, high-handedly and instantly repudiated their own troops. I do not imagine I was the only person whose heart bled when those prisoners and tank crews burned in combat were suddenly stigmatized as stray mercenaries nobody knew anything about. I do not know what heaps of gold were promised to these soldiers before they were sent to Chechnya, but the living and the dead were sold out with indecent haste [...] One can only describe as a betrayal of their own troops those cloddish attempts by officials to pretend that the prisoners and the dead ‘volunteers’ had appeared in Chechnya out of nowhere and had been fighting solely for the money.” 31

Nevertheless, perhaps the real aim of the Moscow masters of the Chechen “Opposition” was all along to start a fire from which the only escape would be to send in the army.

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29 Kulikov, p. 240.
30 Radio Russia, 11.00 hrs on 28 November 1994.
31 Kulikov, pp. 240-41.
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