“If there is a hell on earth, I am in it”

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IF THERE IS A HELL ON EARTH

Fifteen years ago, in summer 2000, the so-called “active phase of military operations” of the Second Chechen War came to an end. Akhmat Kadyrov was appointed head of the Chechen administration, and control of the republic’s territory was gradually transferred from the Russian military to local self-government and self-defence forces. It was a slow process, and only nine years later, in April 2009, was the regime of a “counter-terrorist operation” on the territory of Chechnya terminated. Since then a further six years have passed and the situation in Chechnya today is completely controlled by the administration of Ramzan Kadyrov. To this day, however, there are still hundreds of Chechens incarcerated in Russian prisons who were only indirectly involved, or in many cases completely uninvolved, in the bloody confrontation between the local insurgency and the federal Russian armed forces. The conditions in which they are held are appalling and their hopes of release vanishingly small.

"We will help you die. Signed: the Riot Police and Internal Affairs Directorate of the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Territory"

Only her limpid blue eyes enable you to recognize the once charming and energetic Elima in this battered woman who has lost interest in life. It is difficult to believe she is only forty-two years old. Of these exactly one third, fourteen years, have been devoted to trying to rescue her only brother, Adam, taken from their home during a security sweep in Grozny and sentenced to eighteen years in prison. She has recently been diagnosed as having an inoperable brain tumour and the doctors predict she has not much longer to live.

“I have no tears left to weep and my heart no longer aches,” Elima tells me as we walk in a small town near Prague. I imagined she would continue to speak only in brief phrases like that, but I was wrong. We were able to talk at length.

There was a brutal start to the Second Russo-Chechen War. Apartment blocks, whole neighbourhoods, districts and villages were surrounded and everyone was taken prisoner. Violence and the practice of ransoming people beaten half to death or selling dead bodies back to families were commonplace. The Russian military even took money for “information” about missing people that they knew was false, and then drove away with obscenities relatives whose sons, husbands and brothers had been spirited off to unknown destinations.

Adam was taken from his home in a private sector of the October district of Grozny. Late on 16 April 2000, UAZ jeeps and an armoured personnel carrier stopped at his gate. Soldiers in masks burst into the house and immediately started beating the young man.

The soldiers took particular exception to the fact that Adam was reading Boccaccio’s Decameron. One flung it to the floor and with disgusting swearing began stamping on it. Another unzipped his fly in front of everyone and urinated on it. Adam’s father was outraged: “How dare you behave in that manner?” Blows from rifle butts left him unconscious. No attention was paid to Adam’s mother, who was crawling on the floor by the wall after suffering a first heart attack.
At dawn a neighbour of Elima’s parents came rushing to tell her of Adam’s arrest in the night and that her parents were in a very bad state. She advised her to take a lot of money to rescue her brother from “these Khanty-Mansiysk monsters”. “If you don’t do it today, you’ll find no sign of him later,” she said as she ran away.

“**The system is constructed so that you are nobody and some unwashed lout with a rifle holds your life in his hands. I learned later that the whole financial side was very well organized. You give them money and they stop saying, “Haven’t seen him, never detained him.”**”

“I was a good seamstress and we did have money,” Elima continues. The Russian Federation’s Interior Ministry operational group in October district occupied a three-storey building that previously housed a residential school for deaf and dumb children. When she and her husband reached the main entrance, they found other Chechens already there whose sons and brothers had been taken during the night. On the facade, on a window frame behind bags full of earth, someone had daubed in white paint, “We don’t give a toss about your grief”. The walls were covered with the names of towns and members of the riot police who had come to the Chechen Republic. One graffito particularly stuck in her memory: “We will help you die. Signed: the Riot Police and Internal Affairs Directorate of the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Territory.”

“The system is constructed so that you are nobody and some unwashed lout with a rifle holds your life in his hands. I learned later that the whole financial side was very well organized. You give them money and they stop saying, “Haven’t seen him, never detained him.” The money seemed to be binding us in an agreement of some sort. They never refused it.”

That day Elima had US$ 2,000 taken off her but her brother was not released. They told her to come back for him the following morning, but the next day demanded a further $ 1,500. After waiting until late into the night, Elima again left without her brother. The next day she found that the contract police officer who had taken the money and promised to “put in a word” had gone back to Khanty-Mansiysk. The member of the operational group who imparted this news demanded $ 5,000. “It is going to be more difficult now. They’ve opened a legal case so there will be a trial. But don’t you worry, your brother is alive,” he said.

The $ 5,000 she had borrowed and handed over to that official did not enable Elima even to see her brother. The riot police very willingly accepted parcels of food and clothing, but she later learned that they kept it for themselves. She cannot remember now who advised her to engage a lawyer or how much she paid him, but she does remember that a lot of money changed hands. Every penny she possessed at the time of Adam’s arrest she spent trying to save him. Her parents both died before the “trial”. The Chechens say in such circumstances that someone has been burned up by grief. Elima sold the family home and Adam’s car for next to nothing. “I had no more money,” she says. “My hands would not obey me. I couldn’t sew.”

The day of the court hearing arrived. “They led into the courtroom something twisted and dishevelled which, oddly placing its feet and supported by the guards, shambled towards the cage for the accused. When I realized this creature being dragged with splayed legs was my brother, my brain and heart exploded. I seemed to be dreaming some hideous nightmare peopled with monsters and thought I must surely be about to wake up. When I cried out, the guards at the door first
stiffened, then trained their rifles on me. The lawyer took money, but did not once visit my brother! And they had been torturing him ...

"They hung him from a horizontal bar with his hands and feet tied, which dislocates the joints. While he was hanging there they put a plastic bag over his head and tied it at the neck with string."

“They charges had been hastily thrown together and were manifestly absurd. It was the judge’s duty to acquit Adam and release him there and then in the courtroom, but he did not dare. He read out the sentence in a monotone: eighteen years in a strict regime penal colony for terrorism and murder. Adam never killed anyone! Through my customers, I heard that the Russian my brother was accused of having killed had been a drunk all his life and died of natural causes. He was buried by good people and I found them. I found the place the man was buried and photographed that. The witnesses were insistent and swore he had died naturally. I took what I managed to find out piece by piece to the lawyer, but suddenly strange things began to happen. One by one the witnesses started denying everything they had told me. I could see they were scared to death. The lawyer “lost” my photographs, the witnesses’ particulars, and my notes of what they had said.”

As she tells me about her brother’s torture, Elima clenches her fingers convulsively.

“Before his arrest, my brother was 1.90 m tall. He was a handsome young man, twenty years old, with a thick mop of hair. They beat up all his innards. They broke his fingers. Adam refused to sign a blank form. They hung him from a horizontal bar with his hands and feet tied, which dislocates the joints. While he was hanging there they put a plastic bag over his head and tied it at his neck with string. When he was suffocating and lost consciousness they took him down. When he was jerking about because of the suffocation he caused himself unimaginable pain. They put him facing the wall with his hands outstretched and forced him to stand with his legs wide apart. Then they beat him in the crotch and shouted that he would never have children. They inserted a tube in his anus, pushed in some barbed wire and removed the tube. The barbed wire was left in the rectum. The others came running to watch the barbed wire being yanked out with his intestines turned inside out! They called it “the rose”. They forced his mouth open and burned the inside with a soldering iron so he could neither eat nor drink. The riot police hung a cross made out of rails in the boarding school gym. They tied the detainees to it and tortured them with electric shocks. Those who survived were dragged back to the cell and thrown on the cold floor by the door. The ones who broke down quickly, and signed incriminating statements against themselves and acknowledging receipt of their sentences, they carried on torturing for fun. The riot police would get drunk, and then abuse themselves.”

Adam was also unlucky in being tall. He was beaten for being Chechen and for being tall. As they beat him they said, “You will never have children now! We are taking you out of the breeding pool!” While Elima was in desperation, an FSB officer who had been deployed to Chechnya, and who introduced himself as Sergey Bobrov, came to their house for “chats” and to ask when she would be putting on the explosive belt of a suicide bomber. When she looked baffled he said that in her place that is what he would do, to take revenge on those riot police who were “completely out of order”.

When I told Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow about Adam, she cried. I said all this into her dictaphone at the Novaya Gazeta offices. She was going to write a long article about Adam and other
Chechen prisoners and give speeches in Europe. Our lads wrote to her from prison a lot. After she was murdered the authorities found and threatened me. There was everything on the tape about our family, how Adam was seized, the torture, the trial, who I had bribed to ease Adam’s suffering and how. First I was “shaken down” by the Federals and then they brought in Kadyrov’s lot.”

Elima travelled over almost the whole of Russia, more precisely, to cities which have prisons. She had no money and would take any job, from hospital orderly to cleaner at a railway station. The atmosphere was heavy with anti-Chechen hysteria and she was obliged to conceal the fact that she was Chechen. Fortunately, nobody ever wanted to see her identity documents or register her employment, so as not to have to make pension and social security contributions.

Elima’s minimal earnings were spent on food and medicines, not only for Adam but also for his cellmates. Later she had the added expense of paying for a mobile phone, which the prison staff would regularly confiscate and then sell back to the prisoners.

She would sleep wherever she could. If she was lucky, in an empty ward, but most of the time in cupboards for dirty hospital linen. Elima managed to visit Adam for the first time more than a year after he had been sent away.

“Half our healthy, clever boys have been thrown into prison illegally, just so that one grey little KGB nonentity should be able to rule a vast country and provide security for everything stolen by his drunken predecessor and his own entourage.”

“I took Adam’s hands, put them to my cheeks and closed my eyes. He was ashamed of his broken fingers but joked that they would heal before his wedding. I was putting on a brave face, assuring him everything was fine with me. We reminisced about our parents, our childhood, going swimming in the river, going brambling in the forest. We even talked about Muska the cat and our dog Tarzan.

Knowing we were being eavesdropped on and spied on, I got him to lay his head on my shoulder and pretend to fall asleep. It was in that position, with the lights off, that he told me about the atrocities and torture. I stroked his head and felt how completely covered it was with sores and bumps. What had they done to my brother? Curse the lot of them!”

Adam will not give in, and so he is constantly in punishment cells. He is fighting not only for himself but for lads who are in even worse condition than he is. He has studied the Penal Code and the Constitution of the Russian Federation and resists them intelligently. He gets regular visits from FSB officers who tell him straight out that he is never going to be released.

Adam told Elima that Chechen prisoners are forced to admit even to crimes committed after their arrest “They don’t care in the slightest about appearances, that things simply don’t add up!” Elima exclaims.

“Why are our young people becoming radicalized?” she asks rhetorically. “The rest of the Chechen population is doomed to live a wretched life. Some flee secretly to Europe, others to Syria, which is completely alien to them.”
In the course of many years, Elima has visited hundreds of young Chechens she did not know but who have no family left. She brings them food and news. At her request, I am not mentioning the city or number of the prison where Adam is detained. As she says, there is not one prison in Russia where no Chechens are held, accused of terrorism, gangsterism and illegal possession of weapons.

A Phone Call from Hell

He rang in the dead of night and said, “I am phoning from hell.”

Movsar, forty-seven, fought in the First Russo-Chechen War. Now he is in prison in Arkhangelsk province, sentenced to twenty-four years of strict regime forced labour for terrorism and sedition of the state system and subverting the integrity of the Russian Federation. The verdict coincides word-for-word with those handed down to thousands of other Chechens captured during security sweeps in the first years of the Second War.

Movsar does not regret having resisted, but cannot forgive himself for the fact that, instead of actively involving himself in the republic’s politics after the Khasavyurt Accord, he set about rebuilding his destroyed family house. “My first priority was to make the site of the house secure,” he says.

The twenty-seven-year-old drove in his father’s old car to defend Grozny in mid-December 1994, wearing a sheepskin coat and knitted cap. On the way he stopped at a cafe and bought a basinful of Chechen curd cheese buns and some thermos flasks of tea for the defenders of the capital. He picked up his uniform and assault rifle the following day in the streets of Grozny. The fighters in Dudaev’s army did not want to put the lives of Chechen civilians at risk, and tasked them only with assisting the wounded and distributing water and food. When bombing and shelling drove the Chechen Resistance out of Grozny, Movsar makes no secret of the fact that he joined them. “I defended my country against occupying troops. The Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, openly invited everyone to ‘take as much sovereignty as you can eat!’ After centuries of humiliation the Chechens decided to secede. We did not fire a single shot on the territory of Russia. They came to us with arms and we met them with arms. If they had come with music, we would have got out our musical instruments. I am still clear that I was fighting against Russian state terrorism,” Movsar says.

Masked soldiers came for him early in the dank morning of 26 February 2000. He was dragged, half asleep, out of bed, hauled outside and thrown face down in a puddle of slush. A furiously barking dog was shot dead by a soldier who was casually smoking while holding down Movsar’s head with a heavy boot. “You Chechen cur, that’ll teach you to keep you jaws shut,” the soldier snarled, and stubbed out his cigarette on Movsar’s head. Movsar’s hair has not grown back where he was burned.

Meanwhile, soldiers were ransacking the house in search of weapons. They found nothing. Completely openly, they brought a sack of firearms from their APC, emptied it out and listed the contents as being Movsar’s. To the shouting of his mother and wife and the crying of his two small children, they threw him into a truck on top of cold, naked bodies bound hand and foot, and drove away with him. Along with Movsar, they took a large carpet from the sitting room, cast iron frying...
pans, a cooking pot and jars of pickled cucumbers from the cellar. They drove for a long time, stopped for a long time, and finally brought him to a military base. Two contract soldiers climbed in, pulled back the tarpaulin and started playing a grim game of “alive - not alive”. They booted the bodies in the flank, just below the ribs. It was clearly not the first time they had done this. If the body groaned, it was alive. If it stayed silent, they rolled it over to the edge and threw it off the truck.

Only two of them were still alive: Movsar and a young man, one of whose eyes was black and the lower half of his face shattered. “The boy tried to open his lips, which were stuck together, and say something but they smashed a rifle butt into my head and I lost consciousness. I didn’t see him again. Most likely, he died. I came to in a cage where I could neither sit nor stretch. I spent just under three weeks there. Your chin was pressed down on your chest and your bent knees were at ear level. You were allowed to go to the toilet once a day. It was so cold I just wanted to die. There were a great many cages and people in them. Every half hour one of the guards would come round and bang heavily on the top of them. There was no way you could doze or fall asleep. You were taken from these cages for interrogation, where they tortured you with electric shocks.

The screw would come, open the cage, and you were supposed to crawl out quickly, straighten up and run. Needless to say, I couldn’t straighten up, let alone run. They beat you brutally. If you stumbled and fell, they set the dogs on you. The question they always asked at interrogations was, “Where is Maskhadov?” Even if I had known I would not have said. They demanded the names of men who were or had been fighting. They pulled your skin and nails off with pincers. They suspended you by the feet, put a plastic bag over your head and smoked into it. They burned your heels with a soldering iron. Beating your kidneys with bottles of water was the least of it. They would take you outside naked, hose you over with water and force you to stand there. They would take you to be hanged. When you stopped twitching they took you down. Again and again. If you lost consciousness, they gave you injections.

People died in the cages by the dozen. Every day the bodies were pulled out by other prisoners. The hands and feet of the dead were broken and mangled, ears cut off, jaws broken. The bodies were freakishly black from the beatings and torture. We were ordered to stack them in piles and put explosives among them. All that remained of the bodies after they had been blown up was dust, nails and teeth. “No body - no crime.”

In late March, we were all let out of the cages and taken to a field. The soldiers were particularly vicious. They lined all of us up in a long row, half-naked, stinking, and told us to walk forwards. We did not know we were on the edge of a minefield. We thought they were going to shoot us in the back. One prisoner suddenly ran off like a madman, and the soldiers were too scared to go after him into the field. We were all forced to walk after him and the explosions began immediately. Bodies were flying up in the air, torn apart. We were instantly covered in other people’s blood and guts and pieces of scorched skin. The “madman” kept running as if he were in a trance. Perhaps at that moment I was hallucinating, but I saw the rays of the sun had come out from the clouds and were shining only on him. I prayed and kept walking and suddenly I was thrown up too. But it was another Chechen next to me had been blown up. I was just stunned and wounded by shrapnel.
When everybody had crossed the field, they sent a second line of Chechen prisoners to make sure there were no mines left and to collect the remains of what had been human bodies. They were forced to dig a trench and bury it all in a single heap. I prayed I might die there, but for some purpose survived. They did not put me back in the cage. My wounds began to fester and I washed them with the water they brought me to drink. Suddenly, about a week later, I was sent to Chernokozovo. I was beaten some more there then moved to Pyatigorsk. Then, a court appearance and 24 years.”

Movsar has already served thirteen and a half years. The court did not count the six months he was being tortured, evidently considering, as Movsar joked bitterly, that he had been on holiday. To the question of how he endured all the torture, cold and hunger, he has one answer: “Only the Almighty knows. I died long ago, and I am not the person I used to be. If there is a hell on earth, I am in it. Only the Almighty will help me and the other Chechen lads who are rotting in prison, in the most literal sense of the word.

One time I was hanging in a cell for about twenty-four hours, handcuffed and naked, in unbelievable cold. To say I was in pain is to say nothing. I was yelling and twitching, and then I whispered some prayers and wished I might die. I cried out to the Almighty and I had a feeling that, where I was, He was absent and that my prayers were striking the wall and slithering down. I could see it happening and realised I was losing my mind.”

Movsar is one of the Chechens who have not been broken. He does not agree to collaborate, to carry out dishonourable tasks for the prison administration. He has written no appeals, has no intention of applying for parole, and generally behaves like someone who knows he will never get out of prison alive. He spends nearly all his time in a punishment cell where, from 6.00 am until 10.00 at night, he has to stand in the darkness. There is a layer of ice on the walls and water drips from the ceiling. There is always dirty, stagnant water on the concrete floor up to his ankles.

In early August last year, FSB officers came to see him. They said they bore “warm greetings from Ramzan Kadyrov” and proposed that he should go to fight for Russia as a volunteer in Ukraine. For this he was promised his freedom, if he survived. Movsar chose prison. The main point, he says, is that it proved to him that Ramzan Kadyrov was fully aware that thousands of young Chechen men are rotting in prison for no reason.

Since mid-August of last year I have lost all contact with Movsar.

“They think they hold sway over life and death”

The overwhelming majority of people who work in Russia’s prisons have fought or served in the Chechen Republic on contract. That affects the way they work when they return. The torturing, tormenting and psychological oppression of Chechen prisoners perversely raises their self-esteem and helps them move up the career ladder. I managed to interview a middle-ranking prison officer who is unlike his colleagues. He could have become a human rights activist, but believes that by working behind the barbed wire he can do more to alleviate human suffering.

We shall call him Alexey.
Alexey: Right, then, I am going to name no names, positions, or, obviously, the name or location of the prison where I work.

**AU:** A few months you would not agree to talk to me. What has made you change your mind?

Alexey: There has been a lot of injustice in my life and it is a vicious circle. I realized I have to start with myself and I want to make amends. I am not without sin.

**AU:** Why are you working in prisons?

Alexey: How can I put it, because of Chechnya or in spite of it. I found myself there several times, on two or three month assignments. Before that, after I finished my army conscription I had joined the police. That was the only work there was in our town. We were sent from the police to the Chechen Republic on contract. We had very specific psychological training. I could not wait to get there. I wanted to send them all to hell, but saw the reality instantly. I took part in special operations to arrest terrorists, accompanying the snatch squads. Along with a “terrorist” they had beaten to death, the lads helped themselves to property from the houses. They would even take cars, and our superiors turned a blind eye to it. When I came back, psychologists worked with us and calmed me down. I even went to see a priest in church, but either he did not understand me or I did not understand him. But then I decided all the same to find out what it was with Chechnya and these Chechens, what was biting them. I borrowed books in the library and found a lot of information on the Internet. On my next trip I was thinking and seeing very differently.

**AU:** How many other people among the contract soldiers were asking questions like you?

Alexey: No one. At least no one I met. A licence to do anything you want without fear of punishment detaches a person from reality. I never gave my fellow servicemen or superiors the slightest hint I might be interested in anything more than the authorities thought I should be.

**AU:** When did you have this change of heart?

Alexey: It was in Staropromyslovsky district, on Precepts of Ilyich Street when we went to capture someone who was helping the fighters. One of our Chechen informants, we called them “bitches”, had denounced him. We arrived: there was no one there. We sat around in an ambush: no one appeared. The lads were hungry, angry and decided to take it out on the occupants of the house. They broke down the doors and rushed in. In our work the main thing is surprise, shouting and psychological disorientation. Swearing is deliberately used, the filthier the better. I noticed that paralyses the Chechens. The little apartment was tidy and modest. There was a woman of about fifty and her son. The young man was unnaturally pale, thin, neatly combed hair and enormous eyes, half lying on a couch. His mother was feeding him with a spoon. Ours thought he was a wounded gunman and that the woman was nursing him.

At the shout to “Stand up!”, “Move to the wall, bitch!”, “Hands on your head! Legs apart! Move it!” she stood up and looked at us disapprovingly. In the midst of all the shouting and swearing she said quietly but clearly that her son was an invalid, could not walk, and she would show us his certificate of invalidity.
At this moment, her son had an epileptic fit, but the guys pounced on him, dragged him and his blanket to the floor and started kicking him. He was tossed up to the ceiling as light as a feather, folded in the middle and fell back down. His mother threw herself at them like a tigress. They punched her so hard she hit the wall. The boy was bleeding from his ears and nose and his eyes were wide open, as if in surprise. They stepped over his body and went to the kitchen and seized whatever food they could find. They went off on a rampage of destruction and killing. That day the group left more than twenty people dead, and seized fifteen young men from their homes. I was ashamed and disgusted. I did not kill anyone, but I stood by and did not intervene. I stopped going out with the snatch squads. Afterwards I traded the corpses.

AU: Explain what trading corpses means?

Alexey: Just that. They would bring a half-corpse, already done over by ours. Many of those detained in harsh conditions did not survive. In the prison truck people were tortured with electric shocks. The torturers would get so stuck into it that people’s skulls would literally explode. They burned people with blowlamps. They pulled their nails out with pliers. We had some who liked tying live people behind a tank and driving them along the roads and over fields. They brought back corpses stripped to the bone.

“We knew the family did not, as a rule, have that sort of money, and that it would be collected by relatives, neighbours, and even the whole village clubbing together. The money had to be shared with your superiors.”

Pits of various sizes were dug to contain detainees. Lime would be poured in and the prisoner lowered in there. Lime is corrosive. The top of the pits was covered over with logs. There could be five or six people in the larger ones. The dead would be down there together with the living for several days. The Chechens are very respectful towards the dead, but they would place a body face down and squat on its back. You can’t stand up straight in a pit and they had to defecate in there. It was intolerable to walk past the pits because of the stench. People died like flies.

Their relatives would come for the bodies but you did not just return the corpse to them. Forms had to be filled in and all that. The Chechens knew we had orders not to return bodies and would offer us a lot of money. We knew the family did not, as a rule, have that sort of money, and that it would be collected by relatives, neighbours, and even the whole village clubbing together. The money had to be shared with your superiors. I did not keep any of the ransom money myself. I just took it and handed it on up. There was not much I could do. The system draws you in and compels you to do things.

AU: Why would you not just find a different job?

Alexey: Do you think they would allow that? I would die of “heart failure”, or they would invent God only knows what sort of compromising material. But a human rights activist could not be doing as much as I am.

AU: How are you helping?
Alexey: I don’t help everyone. I don’t help outright villains. You can tell straight away whether someone is guilty or not. There was one episode. They brought in a young Chechen lad. They had seized him in the street in Moscow, a university student. They just jumped on him because he looked like someone from the Caucasus and he ended up in the meat grinder. I’ve seen a lot of bad things but what they did to him ... The boy was very young. They raped him with a champagne bottle so that it broke in his rectum and they pulled it back out along with his innards. They did not call a doctor for a couple of days. I don’t know how he did not bleed to death or die from the pain. They tortured him for a week and he signed everything they put in front of him in the hope that he could retract it during the court hearing. The court just accepted at face value what had been extracted under torture and slapped a 20-year sentence on him. I asked the guys guarding him: why did you do that? They said it was just his fate, and burst out laughing. You know, they think they hold sway over life and death.

I beat people up, too, and yell and swear at them, but when no one is watching I do what I can to help them. If I leave, my place will be taken by some sadistic brute. A lot of them are psychos. They’ve failed in life, been unemployed, forced to give bribes at every turn. Some officials have got it made and set themselves up nicely abroad. And these guys tell themselves, I’m no worse. Nobody tells them not to beat and torment and torture. You can do it without the least fear of reprimand. All that happens is you meet your targets better. Your boss doesn’t give a monkey’s how you meet your targets. You improve his ratings and he rewards you with privileges, bonuses and promotion. And his superiors, in turn, open the way for his career to progress and give access to all sorts of goodies.

Prosecutors and judges are fully aware of what is going on. All that is required of investigators is not to leave obvious traces of their “work” and the rest takes care of itself. If they do get exposed then, without a twinge of conscience, they will sentence the likes of me so we are never heard from again. Chechen prisoners who do not break, and refuse to give the investigators the testimony they require, are sent off to prisons in places like Irkutsk, Vladimir, Kirov, Sverdlovsk, Krasnoyarsk and Omsk provinces, to Karelia and Khakassia.

In these camps there are “discipline squads” or “quarantine squads”. The discipline squads consist of murderers and thieves with a string of convictions. The prison administration give them privileged conditions and an easy life. They have their own gymnasiums, right there, in the camp. They are allowed a large number of parcels from the outside world, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, women, television, mobile phones. On top of all that, the prison officials write favourable references for them and get them out of prison on parole.

AU: How else are you able to help prisoners you believe are innocent?

Alexey: I get them telephones, medicine, food, warm clothing. Many are very ill and suffer from the cold. I help them to get their own back on the men of violence in the discipline squad, and I put a spoke in those bastards’ wheels when I get the chance.

“For the former and current regimes Chechnya has been manna from heaven. Now the problem is not just Putin. The whole system feels it is above the law and has lost touch with real life.”
AU: Do you think there is any possibility of a review of the criminal charges brought against thousands of Chechens?

Alexey: Yes, but only if Putin’s regime collapses and the military are stripped of their ranks, and positions and brought to justice. Not just the current lot but the former ones who are now in “honourable retirement”. For them, Chechnya has been manna from heaven. Now the problem is not just Putin. The whole system feels it is above the law and has lost touch with real life. They only look after their cronies, and then only in their own selfish interests, so that they don’t pull everyone else down with them. Even if you get rid of those at the top, the situation in the prisons will not change immediately. This issue needs to be thought through very carefully. If they did start to review the cases, the ones who would immediately benefit would be the most nimble and agile, the real bastards. The prison administration would write up good reports for them. Bureaucracy is form-filling, long, drawn-out procedures. These lads are in bad shape, very bad. Here you and I are, talking about it, while at this very moment they are being tortured, violated and killed. When they are not being tortured, they are in punishment cells. Do you know what goes on in Russian prisons? They use the murderers, thieves and professional criminals to help them break those who have been wrongfully convicted, to get them to sign self-incriminating statements. Those villains are the ones who get out on parole and who, once they are free, will again rob and murder.

AU: It is difficult to convince people on the outside that what you are talking about is true and that this sort of thing really is going on.

Alexey: That is not the problem. The problem is, who today can make the Kremlin to take notice of Chechen prisoners? Who cares about them?
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