

'If Ukraine Loses, War Will Come to Europe': On the Frontlines With the Chechen Battalion Fighting for Kyiv

By [Joseph Roche](#)

January 11, 2024



Nicolas Cleuet

Aslan Mohammed Ocherkhadzhiev has just sat down at a safe house near Chasiv Yar, one of the last Ukrainian strongholds near the city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine.

On the table before him sit stacks of paper coffee cups and cans labeled in Arabic. Lost in thought, he calmly sips a cup of coffee.

With a mechanical motion, the 43-year-old sets down the Makarov pistol he was carrying on his belt and reveals a maimed hand: a reminder of his first war against the Russians in the mountains of Chechnya in 2000 when he was barely 23.

Aslan first served as an instructor for the Ukrainian special forces before joining the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, a unit of Chechen fighters created in 2014 by Mousslim Tcheberloevsky and

predominantly composed of veterans of the Chechen wars for independence from Russia.

Today, he is one of its commanders, fighting Russian troops once again.

In the next room, his comrade Walid faces toward Mecca and begins the Asr afternoon prayer in front of a folding mirror.

Outside, in the destroyed streets of Chasiv Yar, Ukrainian soldiers lean against old T90 tanks in silence, their faces masked by exhaustion. In the distance, the artillery of both sides rumbles, and flocks of birds scatter in the sky.

In late December, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrsky, the commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, [reported](#) that intense fighting was taking place all along the eastern front, and the Ukrainian army, from Kupiansk to Bakhmut, through Lyman, was struggling to resist wave after wave of Russian assaults.

About 10 kilometers north of Chasiv Yar, after months of fighting and at the cost of tens of thousands of lives, Russian forces had [managed](#) to break through Ukrainian positions in the Avdiivka sector and started to encircle the city.

Aslan remains unfazed. He has seen worse. A sniper during the Second Chechen War, he knows what defeat tastes like. While he admits the situation remains complicated, he does not believe in the collapse of the Ukrainian army.

"I pray for victory," Aslan confides with a smile. "And when we have liberated Ukraine, we will go on to liberate Ichkeria," he said, referring to the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, an unrecognized state that existed de facto from 1991-2000.

Exiled in Norway after spending several years in the prisons of Kremlin-allied Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov, Aslan came to Ukraine to fight against invading Russian forces in the summer of 2022.

"I came here to get revenge on my old enemy," he says with a mischievous look.

'The situation for the Ukrainian army is difficult'

In their safe house near Chasiv Yar, Aslan receives us.

On the floor, a prayer rug stretched toward Mecca is surrounded by military equipment. A Ukrainian flag and assault rifles hang on the wall.

"The situation for the Ukrainian army is difficult," Aslan finally admits. "But to be honest, it's also very bad on the Russian side."

Walid agrees with his friend's remarks. Less imposing than Aslan, Walid, with his disheveled beard and long black hair cascading down his shoulders, tries to downplay the difficulties on the front.

"The situation is much better than when we fought the Russians in Chechnya," he says. "They use exactly the same techniques and strategies, the only difference is that today, in Ukraine,

we are better trained and organized. But, most importantly, we still have the support of the West for now."

While both armies are in a dire state, Aslan insists that the Russian forces still have the upper hand.

But more importantly, he explains, the Russian army, which has more manpower, continues to send its soldiers as cannon fodder into their positions.

"It's like the time of Stalin," Aslan says. "They use the same technique in Bakhmut."

Walid and Aslan explain that Russian soldiers are sent in such a way that it's almost impossible for them to retreat, and when they do, they are shot by their superiors.

"They throw themselves at our positions like meat, and we don't have enough ammunition, shells, or men to stop them, so we are forced to gradually withdraw. It's the only strategy they have found to nibble away at our positions, but it works."

"The Ukrainian army lacks everything."

But neither Walid nor Aslan appear defeated. Considered one of the best units in the Ukrainian army, their battalion's soldiers are typically sent to the worst places on the front.

During the Battle of Bakhmut, Sheikh Mansur successfully held the Ivaniske road, one of the city's supply routes and once a top priority for the Russian army.

Related article: [With World's Attention Locked On Gaza, Ukrainian Soldiers Fear Being Forgotten](#)

For Aslan, this is a source of pride.

"Even though we have had many losses since the beginning of the war, we successfully accomplished all our missions," he says.

Walid attributes their success to the fact that they all have a strong military background, with many having fought Russian forces in Chechnya before.

"We know them, we don't underestimate them, but we don't overestimate them either," he says. "We know what they are capable of."

And many of Sheikh Mansur's fighters, organized into tactical groups, knew each other before the war and are well-trained and equipped — allowing them to operate together smoothly and decisively.

In this regard, Aslan and Walid do not complain about their situation. They express gratitude for external donations, especially from the Chechen diaspora, that enable them to buy the equipment they need.

Aslan says he is much more concerned about the state of the Ukrainian army overall.

“They lack ammunition, shells, artillery, aviation, anti-aircraft defense systems, and equipment of all kinds. Ukraine is retreating because it lacks ammunition.”

He also expresses outrage at the reluctance of Europe and the United States to meet Kyiv's requests for aid.

Related article: [Chechen Leader's Special Forces Deployed in Ukraine's Bakhmut](#)

“These are rich and powerful countries, and they haven't even sent Ukraine 10% of what it needed to fight,” Aslan says, his voice tinged with anger. “They haven't given us enough to break the Russian defenses.”

He confides that the Ukrainian army continues to hold on today because of its determination and courage. If this war is a struggle for the liberation of Ukraine and Ichkeria, he says, it is also a battle for Europe and its values.

In the current state of affairs, the two men insist that Ukraine, despite some withdrawals, is capable of holding its positions, but is unable to launch offensives to retake its territory in the absence of more aid.

“Russia is at the doors of Europe, and it won't hesitate to attack,” Aslan says.

“I'm not exaggerating when I say that the future of Europe today is being decided in Ukraine. I repeat, if Ukraine loses it, then war will come to Europe.”

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/11/if-ukraine-loses-war-will-come-to-europe-on-the-frontlines-with-the-chechen-battalion-fighting-for-kyiv-a83667>