RED ROAD FROM STALINGRAD

RECOLLECTIONS OF A SOVIET INFANTRYMAN

MANSUR ABDULIN

Edited by ARTEM DRABKIN

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Recollections of a Soviet Infantryman

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Editorial Preface

'This must never happen again!' Such was the slogan proclaimed after the Great Victory, which became an important principle in Soviet domestic and foreign policy. Winning, together with its allies, the bloodiest war in history, the country suffered enormous losses. Almost 27 million people perished (almost 15 per cent of the peacetime population). Millions of my compatriots were killed in action, ended their lives in German concentration camps, starved or froze to death in besieged Leningrad or in evacuation. The 'scorched earth' policy, which both armies pursued during retreat, resulted in the total destruction of the lands which before the war counted a population of 88 million and had produced up to 40 per cent of GDP. Millions of people lost their homes and were forced to live in abominable conditions. The fear that such a catastrophe might repeat itself haunted the nation. It was one of the reasons that the country's leadership adopted an enormous defense budget, which became a terrible strain for the economy. Because of this very real fear, ordinary people used to store a certain amount of 'strategic products' – salt, matches, sugar, canned goods . . . I remember as kid how my grand mother – who had lived through the famine of war – kept trying all the time to give me something to eat, and was very distressed when I refused! We children, born some thirty years after the war, continued to refight it in our play, in the streets. We divided into groups of 'our men' and 'Germans' and the first German words we learned were 'Hände hoch,' 'Nicht schiessen,' and 'Hitler Kaputt.' In almost every house one could see some reminder of the war. I still have my father's decorations and a German case for gas mask filters standing in the corridor of my flat – it's a good thing to sit on when you're tying your shoelaces!

A desire to forget the horrors of the war as fast as possible, to heal its wounds–as well as to conceal the mistakes of the country's leadership and military chiefs–led to a propaganda campaign based on the image of a faceless Soviet soldier, 'bearing on his shoulders the full weight of the struggle with German fascism,' while praising the 'heroism of the Soviet people.' This attitude meant propagating a simplified, strictly official interpretation of what really happened. As a result, those memoirs published in the Soviet era were strongly affected by both external and internal censorship. Only in the late eighties could the full truth about the war come to light.

That was the decade Mansur Abdulin's book was published. Last year, when I saw it for the first time, I realized that here I held a true confession of the 'heroic Soviet people', written by a highly original man. What makes these memoirs absolutely unique is that Abdulin was involved in front line action for a whole year, while statistics tell us that on average, a Red Army infantryman survived the battlefield for only a fortnight, after which he was either killed or wounded. This period of time allowed Mansur to gain a wealth of experience, which he relates in this book. Being a gifted story-teller, Abdulin, in a frank and straightforward way, describes his life in the trenches. He was perfectly aware that the carnage, which he was forced to be a part of, left him practically no chance of survival. His main goal was to sell his life as dearly as possible, which meant killing others, killing as many enemy soldiers as he was able. The war on the Eastern Front was marked by an amazing degree of hatred and violence, connected largely with the German intentions of totally annihilating the USSR and enslaving its population. The Western reader has already had an opportunity to learn of the experiences of the German side, by reading the books of such veterans as Guy Sajer or Günter K. Koschorrek, while memoirs of Soviet soldiers were almost totally inaccessible. This is why I instantly felt enthusiastic about an English edition.

But how could I find the author? The book was published thirteen years ago and Abdulin must be no less than eighty by now. Was he alive? How could I reach him? It was mentioned in the accompanying text that Mansur Abdulin resides in Novotroitsk, in the Orenburg Region. I called the information office of this small town situated in the Southern Urals. The girl at the other end of the line misspelled the surname at first, and answered that she didn't have such a man on her list. My heart sank! 'What did you say the name was?' 'Abdulin.'

'Sorry, I was looking for "Abdullin". Just a moment . . . Yes, we have an Abdulin M.G.' I immediately phoned Mansur and introduced myself: 'How would you feel about preparing an English edition of your book?' 'Why not? Let's give it a try . . .'

Artem Drabkin,
Moscow 2004

Maps

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'Operation Kol 'tso' (Ring): liquidation of Stalingrad pocket x

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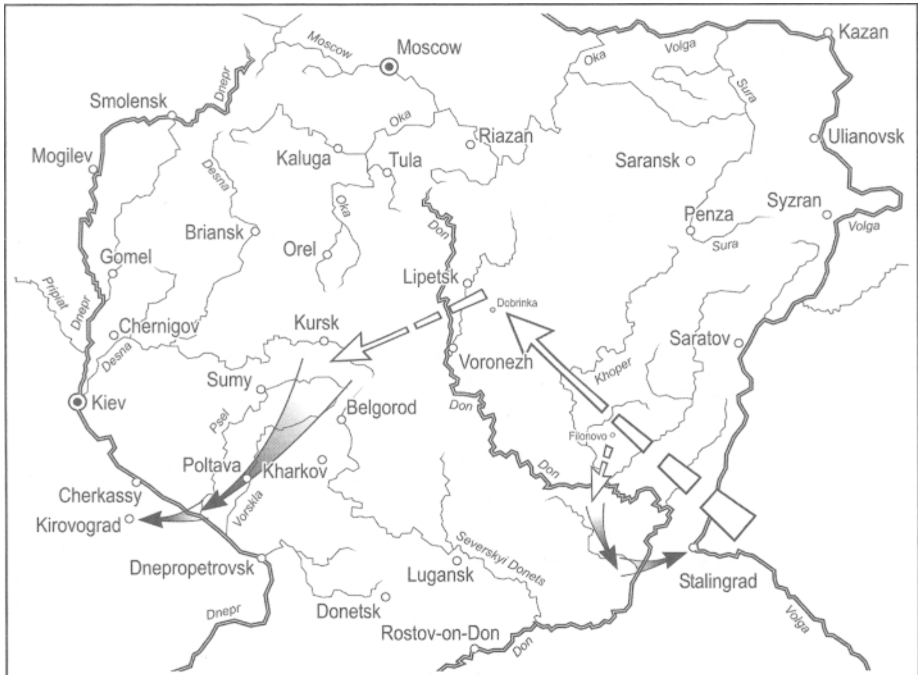
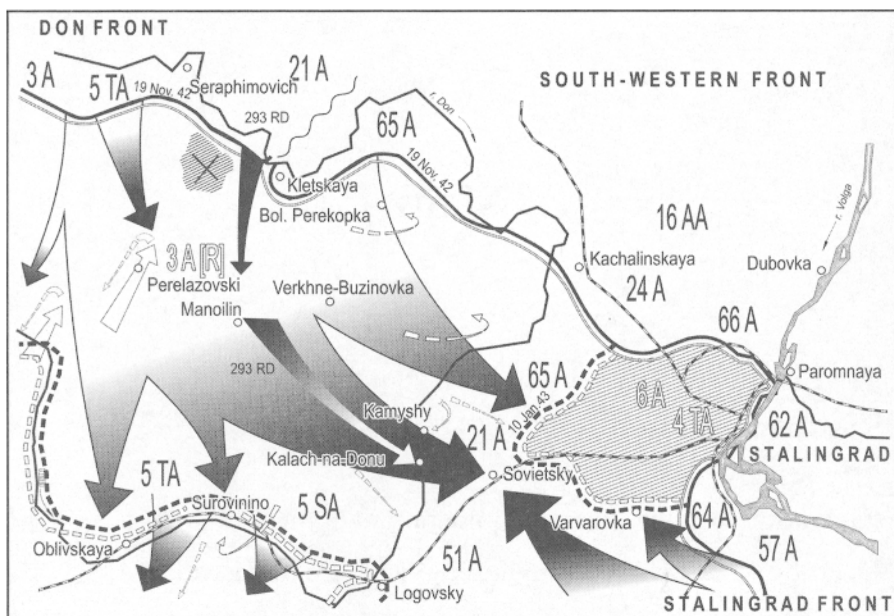
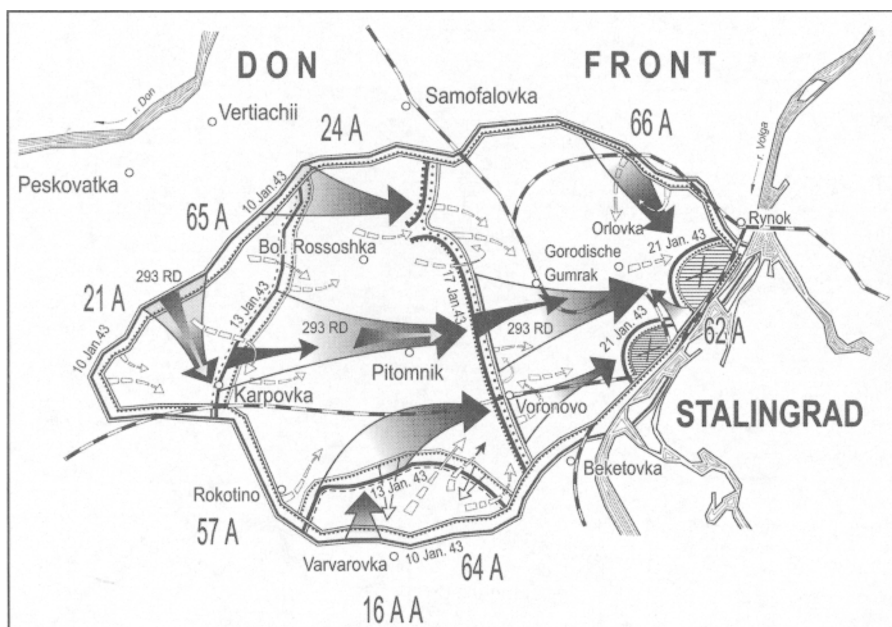


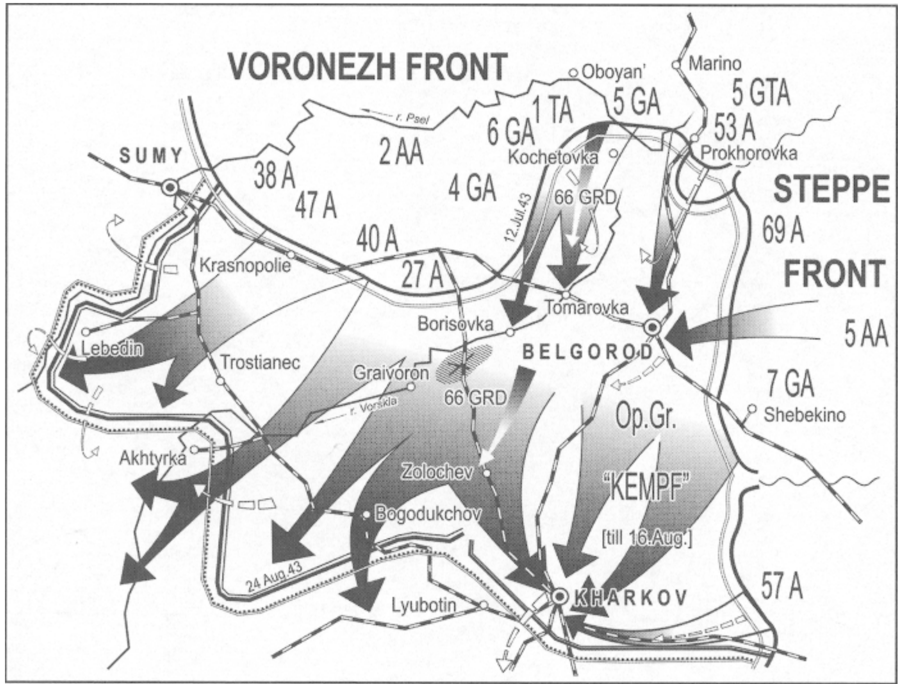
The Eastern Front showing Mansur Abdulin's route



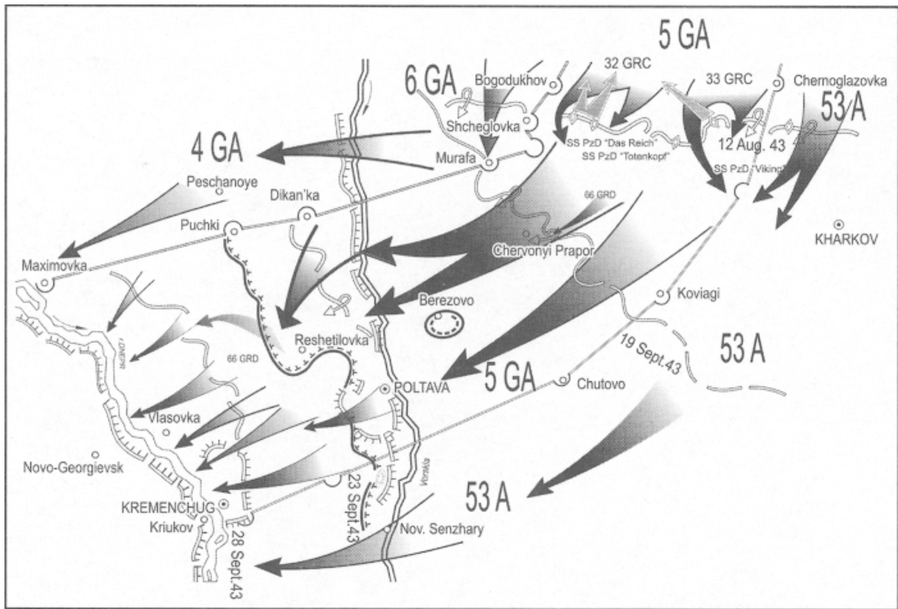
'Operation Uranium': encirclement of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad



'Operation Kol 'tso' (Ring): liquidation of Stalingrad pocket



Belgorod-Kharkov: the 'Rumiantsev' strategic offensive



Advance to the Dnieper: operations of 5th Guards Army in the Ukraine campaign

Chapter One

The Front

The war, the front, means shooting. Mortars, machine- and sub-machine guns, artillery. I made my first shot in action on 6 November 1942, on the South-Western Front, from an autoloading SVT rifle. This is how it was . . .

A couple of days before the attack, every company held solemn meetings, 'dedicated to the 25th Anniversary of our Soviet State.' We took an oath to carry out the order of the Motherland – 'No retreat!' – then we crossed the Don. The river was quiet, the passage went well, and at a rapid pace, we entered a ravine high on the right bank.

'Watch your step!' We keep hearing this warning, and for us mortarmen, it has an important and specific meaning. Mortarmen are loaded with gun carriages, barrels and base-plates: if you are moving fast, and fall or flounder, the equipment – because of the momentum – can crush the back of your skull. I have seen many lightly wounded soldiers stumble, only to be finished off by their heavy load.

We are advancing over a kind of waste ground. We seem to be stepping on old sacks and clumps of grass: in the dark we can't see what's beneath our feet. What bothers us is some stinking smell. We run away from it, forward, forward! A violet flare appears in the sky, and in its light we see the faces of the dead. Both Germans and our own men.

More flares. I furtively look at my comrades: do they see them? Yes, they do. But everyone seems calm. No one makes a fuss. Not even a swear word. War is war. This is how it is. And what can be more natural! I have just turned nineteen and I know that the others are about the same age. Everyone has had a similar experience: a quick course of practice shoots at the Tashkent Infantry School.

I jump over dead bodies, and in my mind flashes a thought: how quickly men become accustomed to things which, at one time, they would have found impossible to imagine. Another thought – and a strange one in such circumstances – I am satisfied with myself. If a comrade glanced at me, he would see nothing but a common expression of concentration. At the front, being like everyone else – that is, no worse than the others – means being assured of one's value. A very important thing for self-respect. However startled I was by the sickening scene illuminated by the flare (the true face of war, its essence, when notices like 'Died a valiant death' are issued), I, nevertheless, am doing all the necessary things, just like the other men: trying not to stumble, ducking down when the whistling bullets fly.

We run the final few metres bent double. The ravine is becoming shallower: now the bullets whizz very low. Eventually I jump into the trench: alive, no bruises, my knapsack and gun right here. A few minutes to catch my breath and I'm ready to fire whenever the order comes.

'What took you so long?' We hear harsh voices, some foul language, then the front line soldiers vanish from the trenches, like ghosts into thin air. Loaded with their mortars and machine-guns, they march past us into the ravine from which we have just emerged. I had anticipated a different reception, and the instant disappearance of the trenches' preceding inhabitants leaves an unpleasant impression. Probably I expected the 'old men' to stay with us a while, to show us what to do. How to fight . . .

'You're making me laugh!' chuckles Pavel Suvorov, our crew leader. 'They must also cross the Don while it's dark, and need time to get to the rear without the Nazis spotting them.' Suvorov's good-humoured crowing convinces me of one thing: the moment we jumped down here we became front line soldiers. And whatever happens in the time to come, no one will remember, or take into consideration, the fact that we are just former cadets fresh from an infantry school.

It is surprising how the instinct of self-preservation works in a man. It seems that everyone else experienced the same feelings as I did: but we can already hear the signallers calling, 'This is "Breech-block", can you hear me? Over!' while battalion artillerymen drag cases of ammunition towards their cannon; and on the breastwork, machine-gunners install their Maxims. In our company the mortars are also ready for combat, and Fuat Khudaibergenov, along with myself (in

Suvorov's gun crew he is the charger and I, the gun-layer), have neatly arranged the shells next to our mortar. Since we have a war, everyone should try to be an efficient cog in the entire fighting mechanism. That's the most important thing.

So now that the hands have done all the necessary stuff, one might have a look around. The trenches seem old, with battered edges: 'This means that we have been here a long time,' explains Nikolai Makarov from the neighbouring gun crew. All the gun crews in our company were formed in the military school. 'Or they were taken from the Germans,' objects Victor Kozlov. Both speak calmly, as though they have been fighting for ages. German flares keep darting into the sky, lighting the bottom of the trench, while machine-guns fire incessantly.

'Afraid of our night attack?' smiles Ivan Konski, and in his eyes, which shine for a moment in the pallid light, I catch an expression of confidence, which finally calms me down. Senior Lieutenant Buteiko, our company commander, has already sent someone to the observation post, and warns me that I should be ready to replace the man on duty at dawn.

'Well, Mansur, are you hot now?' asks the deputy commander of the company, Junior Political Instructor Fatkulla Khismatullin, in Tartar. He has come up to us along with the CO. Before the war Khismatullin was a history teacher, and he used to ask us to explain in detail where we were born and what we wanted to do in life. This was for a future book he planned to write. He translates his question into Russian, so Buteiko and the rest of the men can understand: 'I'm asking him whether he is hot now!' Everyone has a big laugh. The thing is, I was born in Siberia, and during the practice shoots collapsed several times in the Tashkent heat. I was even afraid they would discharge me. We remember how in the school, because of the salt and sweat, we had to wash our blouses daily, and they would tear at the seams every fortnight. How we dreamed: 'Wish I was at the front!'

'Here we are at the front!' concludes Buteiko, looking at his watch. 'Now don't forget what you were taught . . .' The experienced company commander, who was in this war right from the start, taught us, among other things, to use additional charges as often as possible in order to clean our mortar barrels of gunpowder remains. If a barrel is not clean, the shell inside moves more slowly and if, during a barrage, a shell is inserted before the preceding one is fired, it can cause an explosion inside the tube . . .

'You can have a rest now,' said Buteiko, and he and Khismatullin,

bending down, move further along the trench. Sergei Lopunov immediately asks Fuat to give him a needle and a piece of string, while Victor Kozhevnikov demands a pencil and some paper. We know that our charger always has in his kit whatever one might need: needles, string, shoe-laces, buttons, scissors, a razor, Vaseline, soap, shoe-polish, a brush, iodine, bandages, etc. Fuat always likes to have everything in excellent order. And he is never idle. Even now, while we are busy remembering the past, he uses the spare time to repair the torn lining of his greatcoat, and examines the broken heel of Nikolai Makarov's boot. He is an expert tailor, shoemaker, cook; and when necessary, a smith and a carpenter. As to bread, sugar or *makhorka* [a type of cheap tobacco – editor's note], we never divide it like they do in some platoons, where one man, taking a portion of the stuff, asks 'Who?' while another turns away and says 'Ivanov', 'Petrov' or 'Sidorov.' Fuat is responsible for dividing the goods, and then everyone takes from his waterproof cape one of the forty portions, being absolutely sure that all of them are the same. Translated from Uzbek, the surname Khudaibergenov means 'Gift of God'. Fuat's father was Tartar and his mother Uzbek. He is my age, a big and strong fellow. He does not talk much, but once he surprised us by inviting everyone in the platoon to visit him after the war, to enjoy some pilaw [a favourite Central Asian rice dish, often including chopped meat, vegetables, oil, spices, and stock – editor's note]. We had to promise to come to his place in Tashkent. I was in a better position than the others to make the promise: sometime before the war my father and our family had moved from Siberia to the Sargardon mine in Central Asia, so my way home passes through Tashkent.

All these events I put down in a letter home. I throw the envelope into the pile of letters, and at this precise moment – about two hours before I am due to go on duty – I am seized with fear. There you see Ivan Konski, sound asleep and probably dreaming about his native Smolensk Region. But in my mind there stubbornly persists a disturbing picture: violet faces of the dead. I try to chase away this image by recalling scenes from my childhood.

I was born into a miner's family on 14 September 1923. We lived in a Tashtagol village called Sukhoi, surrounded by dense, virgin forests. For centuries it was inhabited by native Tashtagol people, free and runaway Tartars, Estonians, Hungarians, Germans, Russian Old

Believers, and also the descendants of Cossacks who had participated in the peasant uprising led by Yemellian Pugachev (1773–1775). Each of them had their own faith, their own god, or some sacred object they worshipped. For example, one family had a hole in the corner of a room, through which they communicated with the Highest Power; another had a young larch in their yard, which they considered sacred, decorating its branches with various rags and praying to it.

These people, having their own gods, rules and principles, lived in peace with each other. They were united by a common superstition: that all were ruled by a Highest Power, which severely punished bad men. The local inhabitants, whatever their faith and nationality, were also united by another mystical notion: that there exists an 'owner' of a forest, river, hill, lake, swamp, or mine, who protects his possessions and riches. If anyone dared do a bad thing, the 'owner' would inevitably crush the man, leaving no trace of him.

My parents were both 'newcomers' and 'outsiders' – 'Party folk' (meaning Communist Party members) – free of any religion. But since they were the only people who could read and write, they were respected by the locals. My father worked as a technician in the mine, and being a Communist Party member, attended the workers' faculty courses. My mother, though poorly educated, taught the people of the neighbourhood to write – even if it was just their name.

I was born after the Russian Autocracy collapsed, and its armed forces crushed in the Civil War [1918–21 – editor's note]. The newborn Soviet state was suffering from a prolonged famine, accompanied by terrible diseases such as smallpox, consumption, cholera, and typhus. Often there was no one to make a grave for the dead. Peasant women buried their children without tears, openly showing their joy at having one less mouth to feed. Many adults – and even children – took their lives in different ways. My mother would sometimes get hysterical from constant starvation and despair, screaming madly: 'I'll hang myself! I'll run away from you (meaning myself, my younger brother and my father) . . . someplace!'

Because of this terrible life, she was not ashamed to admit – in front of me and my brother – that she envied some of her friends: women who had buried all their children. Even though I was only three or four years old at the time, I understood her, and bore no hard feelings. I prayed to the Highest Power (which I already believed existed), asking that He might give good health to my parents, and that the 'owner' of the mine would take care of my father when he was

underground. I tried to overcome my painful hunger and not to cry. Once, our medico examined me and said to my mother: 'Your kid is not sick or anything, but he is suffering from anaemia and is therefore weak. The best medicine is proper food!' Since then I was scared to cut my finger. I was frightened I would die, that I would bleed to death, and that mum would be happy to get rid of an 'extra mouth'.

Local inhabitants often visited my parents because they were the only literate people in the area. The guests discussed various important themes: 'Tell us frankly, Comrade Abdulin – you being a party man – is there a God or isn't there?' Then they would wait for his answer, catching their breath. 'Unfortunately, there is no God,' came the reply, 'but since people have always needed a strong, all-knowing, just and retributive benefactor, they invented him, so that everyone in the world would be happy.' After these words the guests' eyes almost jumped out of their sockets, but my father hurried to calm them down: 'But over mankind, instead of God, there is the Highest Power of Reason. It reigns over us and will help its people not to lose their way, and not to perish.' This seemed to reassure everyone and offer hope for a good future. People nodded their enormous beards with satisfaction: 'One might still live in this way – but without Faith, one cannot!' And bowing down to the ground, they would exit the door backwards.

From being a small child I liked to draw, saw and plane, invent and construct different gadgets. And when I was in school, I was quite an expert at making wooden skis and ice-skates. I made bird houses in the form of traditional peasant cottages, and starlings had a great liking for them, squabbling among themselves for their possession. I was an active member of the aircraft modelling and glider hobby groups. At twelve years of age, I already had 'Be Ready for Labour and Defence' and 'Voroshilov Shot' badges [these badges were given to those who successfully passed sporting and shooting norms established by the state – editor's note] and went into the forest with my gun to hunt hazel-grouses. I dreamt of becoming an artist, an actor, a mine technician, a photographer, a pilot, a driver, and a Red Army commander. Once I made a wooden camera [this would appear to have been a kind of pinhole camera or *camera obscura*, a simple device widely used before the advent of the modern photographic camera in the nineteenth century – editor's note], but had nothing for a lens – not even a pair of glasses – so I used a red-hot awl to pierce a hole, and with the help of ashes, made a piece of dim glass. It was

a great surprise to me when, some distance away from the lens, one could see on it a pretty clear picture of my wolfhound, which happened to pass by at that moment. But the dog was upside down! The inhabitants of the mine, learning about my new toy, praised me with much enthusiasm: 'Little Mansur Abdulin, that kid is quite something! He made an interesting toy which turns all the girls and women upside down, so their skirts fall over their heads! And then you can look at them! It's easy, them having no pants! Ha-ha!' So the girls and women, seeing me with my toy, shouted in panic, and tried to run away or hide. Eventually they ambushed me, knocked me off my feet, and took away the toy, smashing my nose and almost tearing off my ears . . .

Another time (being perhaps the most talented, and certainly the most persistent, participant in amateur dramatics), I was given the role of a White Army officer [opponent of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War of 1918–21 – editor's note], equipped with a pair of red-hot blacksmith's tongs, with which to torture captured Communists, fighting for the Red Army. But the show was never finished, as some of the lads in the audience rushed on stage, roaring, 'Kill the Whitey!' and gave me a sound beating, as if my acting was for real. My liver suffered a lot: as did my desire to become an actor! I also drew well, and decorated some of the writing-books (always in short supply) with my pictures: my father then 'decorated' my buttocks with his raw leather belt, in such a way that for a whole week I had to lie on my stomach with no pants, exhibiting my naked arse to the cockroaches . . .

I spent my childhood in the Miasski Mines. When I grew up a little, I was busy all through the summer from dawn till dusk – just like the rest of the boys and even some girls – looking for gold: sieving the clayey lumps and sand in a simple metal basin or gold digger's scoop. By this time our life had somewhat improved: there was less hunger and we even found some extra money to buy clothes.

In 1940, in order to get a bread card, I left my school and went to work in the mine, where I was responsible for moving the tubs. Then, on 22 June 1941 war broke out. As a miner I was exempt from service but eventually managed to enlist. There were four of us: Nikolai Koniayev, Ivan Vanshin, Victor Karpov and myself. We all went to the military registration bureau and tried to convince the officer that our experience in mining was not so great as to keep us away from the front, but he kept saying: 'I can't, I'm under orders from the

Defence Committee, I don't have the right!' So – I remember this with a smile – we had to threaten him with breaking into a shop at night: then we would probably be sent to a penal battalion, and in court we'd say that Major Galkin tried to stop us from getting to the front! Well, the major solved the problem. He phoned someone straightaway, got the permission, and soon we found ourselves standing naked before the scrutinising eyes of a commission, responsible for choosing cadets for a flying school. Only two of us made it there: my closest friend Nikolai Koniayev and Victor Karpov. Vanshin and myself went back to the military registration bureau, and that same day he departed for the Chirchiks Tank School, and I to the Tashkent Infantry School (named after V. Lenin). Of course I envied them: but fate had it that only I, an infantryman, would survive the war.

After successfully completing my course at the military school, I was again exempt from active service. As an exemplary student, I was to remain at the school as a teacher. Some of my comrades envied me, while others made spiteful remarks: 'He wanted so much to join the front line forces, but we'll see what happens now!' Nevertheless, I had a plan. I plotted with another honours student, whose surname was Taktzer. He was to eat a piece of laundry soap, end up in a hospital, and thus save himself from the front. He got diarrhoea, and I came to the school commissar with a proposal: 'Leave Taktzer here and include me on the list of those being sent to the front!' All my comrades were happy to see me – not least because I was the best singer – and I was made responsible for our group of 700 fresh junior lieutenants.

When we finally joined our division, my comrades were sent to different regiments and I was left at headquarters, in the reserve. I had no desire to stay behind, however, and begged in vain to be dispatched to a front line regiment: 'In the army there are no such things as "I won't! I can't! I don't know how!"' was the answer.

One day, when I was on duty at HQ, I was summoned by the divisional commander. Without giving me time to report myself, he warmly invited me to sit down, and even pushed a pack of *Kazbek* cigarettes closer to my chair: 'Have a smoke.' I had noticed some time ago how he looked at me: like some gypsy at a fair, contemplating a horse he particularly liked. I did not dare smoke in front of the general and prepared myself for the worse, as I already knew that he was looking for a personal adjutant. As usual, he was tipsy. He stared at me with his bull's eyes and mumbled in a bossy tone, barely able to

move his swollen tongue: 'Today I decided to sign an order making you my personal adjutant. I am satisfied with your record and your references, and I expect to hear your consent.'

'I would ask you to dispatch me to Regiment 1034, where my comrades are serving,' I replied.

'I did not expect you to refuse! Don't you realize there's nothing romantic about the front line? It's just a slaughterhouse! Say "yes" and you won't regret it. I'll see to it that you get decorations and a new rank. Think about it. I'll treat you well.'

'No, Comrade General. I don't know how to polish boots, but I know how to fight.'

'But why?' He raised his bushy eyebrows, which were streaked with grey, and kept them hovering in anticipation of my answer.

'I made an oath to my friends to fight together with them.'

'No one among your friends would have refused such an offer!'

So this was how I ended up at the front line with my fellow-cadets. I told my Regimental commissar that I wanted to be a rank and file man, because I felt ashamed of commanding soldiers that in terms of age, might well have been my father; and that I wanted to experience 'the smell of powder'. There were enough lieutenants, so my request was granted.

Did I know that I was about to face death? I did. There was no specific scene in my imagination, like the one I later saw at the bottom of the ravine in the violet light of the flare. But man is so mysterious! If I'd have found myself, just this minute, a thousand kilometres away from the ravine, in the blossoming village of Brichmulla, I would again dash to the military registration bureau, and demand to be sent here. The fact was that I didn't want to die, but similarly, I didn't want to live with a guilty conscience. One thought had tormented me back at the mine: what would I be saying when the war is over? That the rear also needed able men, especially in the mines, to work for the nation's defence? This is true. But you can't explain this to everyone; convince everyone. Even girls are summoned to the front. But I wanted to live so much! How unbearably terrifying to become a corpse in a ravine, lit by the violet flame of the flare . . .

This thought is interrupted by the appearance of Suvorov, who, it seems, also cannot not sleep: 'Well, Mansur, afraid?' I feel like someone has hit me in the stomach, 'come on, don't be ashamed,' he winked, 'everyone's afraid.' I frankly confess that looking at the other

boys I see no signs. 'They're trying not to show it,' explains Suvorov in a genial tone, and winks again, as though sharing some secret: 'and don't you show it. Keep your tail up!'

I became interested. Suvorov is seven years older than I, a regular army man, who served in the First Moscow Regiment before the war. He was fighting right from the start, and had already been decorated with the Order of the Red Star. I ask him whether he too was afraid? 'You think I don't want to live?' he smiled. 'But what can we do, little Mansur? "We didn't ask them, but they came."' (a line from a popular song.) 'They want space. Yours and mine! They're "Übermenschen" – supermen – you see? We're only fit to polish their boots. How do you like that? With such people there's only one way: a fight. A big fight. One can't just stand and look, afraid or not . . .'

It is dawn. German machine-gunners have stopped shooting. There are no more flares. The night has passed. 'Well, let's go, I'll show you the way,' says Suvorov.

The sentry-hole is carefully camouflaged. Suvorov looks into the periscope and then, clearing a space for me, remained standing nearby, sunk in thought: 'They are about 300m [just over 328 yards – editor's note] away,' he says, 'and they're facing the sun.' He wishes me luck and leaves.

They're facing the sun. This means I can freely examine their positions. I have fixed a permanent sight on my self-loading rifle, put a cartridge into the barrel, placed the butt against my shoulder, and felt the gun – everything's OK – so I watch the enemy front trenches closely, while different thoughts cross my mind.

I remember our Siberian forests. I'm still a kid. A fresh notch on a larch serves as a target. A y-shaped birch branch driven into the ground is a prop for a heavy hunting rifle. I'm eight years old, and my father is teaching me to shoot: 'Come up and aim like this!' He showed me how to aim, and I clumsily grab the rifle. The sight and the mark are instantly in line. I'm in a hurry, because in the forest one should shoot fast: the hazel-grouse won't wait, it'll fly away! I'm pulling the trigger but nothing happens. Maybe my finger is too weak? I wish my father would postpone my training until I grow up! Red with tension, I pull the trigger with all my strength. My father urges me on: 'Stop aiming, shoot!' I keep pulling and pulling, feeling myself about to explode with the strain. Suddenly I loose off – not a bullet – but an enormous fart, which makes a loud, loathsome sound, like the tearing of the tarpaulin that they use for making miners'

uniforms. This sets my father laughing. He was laughing so hard that he squatted down and raised his head so high that I could see every single one of his strong, white teeth. Later he told me that I was pulling the cramp, not the trigger. Eventually I began to shoot so well, that father barely had time to reload the gun. I was happy, but he even more so.

Was I disturbed by the thought that it was not hazel-grouses I was hunting, but human beings? I had something else on my mind. I remembered how two weeks ago, after our division hurriedly mounted a troop train (Regiment 1034 entrained at a small station called Koltubanka) and began moving towards the front, we were attacked by enemy bombers. Our engine driver would suddenly slow down and then speed ahead. The bombs did not damage the train, but the German planes, flying low, succeeded in hitting some of the cars with their machine-guns. The smoke of TNT and coal, the smell of burned earth, the blood of the dead and wounded, the groans: all this I saw, breathed, and heard, while the front was still hundreds of kilometres away. Many of my comrades perished without being able to kill a single Fritz. Can this happen to me? Will I be killed? Will I die in vain? That's impossible! To die without catching a glimpse of the enemy, after all that effort to get to the front?

The only thing I see is the flat steppe as far as the horizon. Everything is still. Not a sound. Then, suddenly, some movement ahead. My heart beats fast. My rifle is in excellent condition – I can hit a tin can from 100m [almost 110 yards – editor's note]. Suddenly I'm hot. The target is getting larger as it approaches. Germans. They're walking in the trench. How many? They're carrying some straw on their shoulders, fastened with belts. They make a turn, and I can see that there are three of them. Now they are walking down their trench along the front side. I must shoot right now. I decide to aim at the middle one. But what's going on? I can't seem to get the slit, the sight, and the target in line: if I line-up the target and the sight, I lose the slit! If I find the slit, I lose the sight! I'm sweating. It fills my eyes. The gun is shaking in my hands. Already realizing that I'll miss, I pull the trigger. The silence is broken by the report.

The Germans instantly disappear, and I – slowly, as if mortally wounded – sink to the bottom of the sentry-hole. How I hate myself at this moment! What a looser! Such an opportunity missed! I realize that I am so afraid, so nervous, because my death might come without any harm to the enemy. If I could kill just one of them! Just to get even

for the future. This thought had made me tremble and shoot in haste, as soon as I saw them within range. I am good for nothing!

All this passes through my brain in a split second. Then, I rise up again and put the butt of my rifle to my shoulder. So, where are my Fritzes? They're gone, of course. No! They're still running in the trench, bending even lower and taking longer intervals. A thought flashed: 'Now it's totally impossible to hit them.' Slit, sight, target. Strange, but now there's no trembling. Everything's in order. I make my mark a couple of centimetres in front of the middle Nazi and smoothly pull the trigger.

The first Fritz – bent double, so that only the bundle of straw is visible from time to time – goes on running, but the second one stops, stands up to his full height, his head unnaturally twitching backwards, and making a spiral movement, tumbles down like a rag-doll. Captivated by the slow turning of my victim, I fail to notice what the third German does. 'None of the lads will believe I killed a Nazi!' is my first thought. Only a minute before I was cursing myself, but now I am bursting with pride: 'If only our boys could see this!'

Suddenly I hear a voice: 'Well done, Abdulin! Well done! Aren't you the *komsorg* [leader of the Komsomol members of the unit; this organisation was officially called the VLKSM, the All-Union Lenin's Communist Union of Youth – editor's note] of your company?' I see Captain Chetkasov, our battalion commissar. He puts down his binoculars and smiles at me: 'You are the first in your battalion to inflict a casualty on the enemy!' It turns out that he heard a shot, crawled up to the sentry-hole, and saw me kill the Fritz. An hour later Chetkasov tells me that I am also the first in the whole regiment to shoot down an enemy soldier, and that I shall receive the medal, 'For Bravery'.

I have to say, that in the time to come, I did more important things – and in more difficult circumstances – than this first successful shot. And for those I got no decorations! But the ideology of war is a relative matter. One should remember that our regiment consisted mainly of inexperienced cadets; that it had just arrived at the front; and that it was essential to adapt us to active service conditions as soon as possible. In each company, political instructors spoke of the current goal that men should achieve: every soldier was to kill at least one enemy in memory of the anniversary of the Socialist Revolution.

The commissar presented me with a notebook. On the first page,