

FORUM

Between Budennovsk and Beslan

Zaindi Choltaev and Michaela Pohl

Abstract: This article discusses the hostage tragedy in Beslan (North Ossetia) and its connection to Russia's war in Chechnya and to Vladimir Putin's domestic policies. The authors argue that Russia is embracing the war on terror, but Russia's leaders are not really interested in putting an end to the terror. They have not made an effort to find out or tell the truth about its causes, to fight the all-pervasive corruption that is an important factor in all of the latest major attacks, nor to find convincing social and political solutions in Chechnya. The current initiatives leave society with lies and terrorism and strengthen those who profit from a continuation of the war on terror and the war in Chechnya.

Keywords: Beslan (North Ossetia), Chechen-Russian conflict, Chechnya, Vladimir Putin, Russia

Statements to the effect that Beslan "became a day of reckoning, which henceforth will divide the country's modern history into 'before Beslan' and 'after Beslan'" (Kots 2004), or that it was a 'cataclysmic event', comparable only to September 11 or the collapse of the Soviet Union (Straus 2004), obscure one of the most devastating episodes in Europe's recent history: the war in Chechnya.¹ This conflict has lasted longer than any other war in Europe in the twentieth century (1994–6, 1999–present). It has turned the Chechen capital, Grozny, into a bizarre landscape of ruins the sight of which shocked even Putin, who ordered the bombing of the city, and it has turned the Chechen republic into a zone of chaotic and ultra-violent 'special operations' in which death, humiliation and torture are commonplace experiences. As the French philosopher André Glucksmann has argued, the range of estimates of civilian deaths (from 100,000 to

300,000) is as if in France one were faced with a range of 6 to 20 million corpses (Glucksmann 2003). The emphasis on Beslan as an extraordinarily shocking event also shrouds its connection to a long string of acts of terror in Russia, which have taken more than a thousand lives since Shamil Basaev's seizure of a hospital in Budennovsk in 1995. President Putin told the nation that it is "dealing with the direct intervention of international terror against Russia, with total and full-scale war", but the roots of terror in Russia are not international. And indeed, Putin's political initiatives since Beslan continue the domestic policies that he has pursued since 1999.

What happened in Beslan?

On the morning of September 1, just after the school opening ceremony in School No. 1, a

still unknown number of terrorists (thirty-three to thirty-seven, among them two to five women) stormed the buildings and forced more than 1,200 students, their parents and teachers to gather in the school's gymnasium, which they mined. After 11:00 AM, they purportedly issued a statement in which they threatened to blow up the building in the event of a storming and demanded the presence of the Ingush president Murat Ziazikov, the president of North Ossetia Alexander Dzasokhov and pediatrician Dr. Alexander Roshal for the purpose of negotiations. Around 2:00 PM, the terrorists sent out a videotape that showed the gymnasium's interior, while officials announced that about two hundred people had been taken hostage. The sole negotiator to arrive in Beslan that day was Dr. Roshal, who late that night began to talk to the terrorists by phone, and never entered the school. Others communicated with the terrorists as well, including the president of the Rusneft oil company. The hostage takers first asked for water and food, then refused to accept it, and moreover threatened to shoot fifty hostages for every terrorist killed. During the take-over and when the building's electricity was turned off, they shot over a dozen men and some of the older schoolboys.

At 6:30 AM on the morning of September 2, officials announced that 354 people were inside the school. A number of former hostages have stated that from that point on nobody was allowed to drink, not even the water that was available in the school's toilet. On the afternoon of the second day, former Ingush president Ruslan Aushev arrived in Beslan, and, after talking to the hostage takers by phone, decided to enter the school. He was allowed to take out a small group of eleven women and fifteen infants, as well as a letter addressed to President Putin that demanded the withdrawal of troops from Chechnya. According to Aushev, the terrorists were willing to negotiate with the former Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov and invited telephone calls from "any federal minister". During the night from Thursday to Friday negotiations continued in the form of phone

calls. On Friday morning Aushev planned to make a repeat visit together with Aslakhhanov to acquaint the terrorists with a statement by Maskhadov, downloaded from the Internet, condemning the hostage taking. Starting Wednesday night, army, Federal Security Service and Interior Ministry troops and special equipment, including troops from the special anti-terror units Alpha and Vypel, were concentrated in and around Beslan. At 1:05 PM on the third day, while waiting for the arrival of Aslakhhanov, several powerful explosions took place and chaotic shooting erupted near the school and all around town, including fire from flamethrowers, tanks, helicopters above the school and from what Aushev later called "a foolish third force" (Muratov 2004), armed groups of local men concentrated around the school. While the terrorists fired from the school and some attempted to leave it, special force troops and soldiers entered the building and opened fire on terrorists who had managed to take up positions in adjacent houses. Around 3:30 PM, the speaker of the North Ossetian parliament called on local residents to scour Beslan for terrorists. Around 5:00 PM, a group of men found and beat to death a man presumed to be one of the hostage takers. The shooting and search for terrorists went on until late in the evening of September 3. The official count of victims, which has been contested, remains at 329, about half of them children.

This very rudimentary narrative of the events, based largely on eyewitness accounts, including that of Aushev, leaves out the anguish and fear of the hostages, the pitiless determination of the terrorists, the stench, the feces and blood on the floor of the gymnasium, the bodies of the murdered hostages in and around the school, the chaos that ensued after the storming of the school began, the empty looks on the faces of the children carried from the school, their naked, emaciated bodies, the panic on the faces of the townspeople. For all the bareness of this description, however, very few people in Russia can say more about the events in Beslan with any certainty. This leaves us with an

enormous amount of questions. Who was responsible for operative decisions in Beslan, and what were their plans? Did they plan to storm the school, and when? Why the appearance of complete paralysis before September 3? Why did the authorities lie about the number of hostages, and why did they lie about the absence of demands from the terrorists? Why did the presidents of Ingushetia and North Ossetia refuse to negotiate, and why was Putin silent throughout the events? Why were the local men not kept from interfering? How many terrorists have actually perished, and how many are in custody?

The investigation that has taken place so far raises even more questions. The parliamentary commission headed by Alexander Torshin, made up of members from the State Duma and the Federation Council, has been unable to interview senior Federal Security Service and Interior Ministry officers who were present in Beslan. Its members have talked to Beslan townspeople, former hostages, medical personnel and ordinary soldiers. Some of them, perhaps out of frustration, have conducted themselves rather unprofessionally – for example, Iurii Savelev, who announced in a recent interview that he planned to ask Ruslan Aushev why the terrorists let him go unharmed (upon which Aushev promptly refused to appear before the commission), and added, even more mysteriously, that “the truth about who is really behind this may be so terrifying that its publication might cause new and bloody conflicts” (Savelev 2004).

Lies and terromania

People in Russia are unlikely to find out the truth or even partial truths about what caused the Beslan tragedy. Russia’s war on terror has taken increasingly bizarre turns since Beslan. One example is the chain of events that followed the discovery of explosives in the center of Moscow in a car allegedly driven by Alexander Pumane, a former submarine officer. The suspect was either beaten to death or disappeared altogether,² and so

did the investigating officer in charge of the case – while other policemen involved in Pumane’s detention were rewarded with prizes and medals for their ‘professional conduct’ and for saving people from yet another terrorist attack. Another case was the unsuccessful recent attempt to blame the murder of Paul Khlebnikov, the editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes Magazine*, on two Chechen men.

The country has been seized by terromania. Gangs of young men roam the subway, beating ‘Caucasian nationals’, others burn down Armenian and Azeri kiosks and restaurants, shouting: “This is for the terror!” A wave of attacks on foreigners and dark-skinned people in St. Petersburg this year has resulted in at least three deaths (a Tajik girl, a Syrian student and a Vietnamese student). Russians seemed unmoved: almost exclusively foreign students attended a recent demonstration to protest ethnic and xenophobic violence and the inaction of the authorities. The airports have been seized by an epidemic of passenger self-justice. People in public transport eye each other suspiciously. Chechen students told us that small groups of passengers regularly leave the car whenever they get on a bus or subway. One caller to a radio show proudly told how she and her fellow passengers forced an ‘Eastern’ woman to undress in a subway car. In a particularly poignant example, a young Armenian journalist wrote about the fear with which he followed every movement of a young dark-haired woman traveling in the same tram, after an elderly woman had attacked him a few days before, screaming: “Terrorist! I am making a citizen’s arrest!” (Khachatrian 2004). A 45-year-old Chechen woman told us that this is nothing new, and that the situation was even worse after the hostage taking at the musical show *Nord-Ost* in the center of Moscow in October 2002: “I feel so guilty, after every terrorist attack! I walk around, avoiding everyone’s eyes, and I have the feeling that the whole world is looking at me, thinking I am some kind of devil. I am so tired of the looks I get.” Like many Muslim women in the capital, she no

longer dares to wear her headscarf in public, or even to take a handbag as people suspiciously glance at it, afraid it may contain explosives or weapons. Other women avoid leaving the house altogether.

The authorities and government-controlled media have done nothing to calm some of these fears. On the contrary, everyone is made to feel 'at war'. Since September, television programming has been inundated with old and new war films and with documentaries about secret services. Every speech, headline, talk show, nearly every sentence is spiced up with a reference to terror or explosions. Terror and trauma are being used to manipulate the Russian public to revert to simplified stereotypes of 'enemies of the people', external as well as internal ones. Beslan was followed by a wave of anti-American insinuations in the Russian press, which attempted to show that criticism of Putin was driven by conservative US think tanks who are out to destroy Russia, and that the Chechen cause in the West has been taken up mainly by former Cold Warriors, for the same cynical reason. A sharp increase in anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism is evident not only in the press and in thousands of online posts, but in our conversations, which indicate that many ordinary people as well as members of the intelligentsia find comfort in 'solid proof' of worldwide plots. While some Chechens blame every single act of terror on Federal Security Service conspiracies, their Russian counterparts believe that America and/or 'the Jews' are 'behind the Chechen rebellion', or that terrorists act with the implicit encouragement of human rights organizations. Russian NGOs who continue to appeal to open talks with moderate Chechen separatists have in recent weeks been widely depicted as anti-Russian traitors, who work for foreign governments and whose real aims are to weaken the country and to slander the president. Ekaterina Lakhova, a State Duma deputy, put it this way: "Feeling the support of those who make these appeals, the terrorists strike increasingly powerful and cruel blows." This view has found its way into academic discourse as well. Avoiding to mention the real issues behind the position of

groups like Memorial, i.e. the continuation of human rights abuses in filtration camps and during *zachistki* (cleansing operations) and the intensification of the seemingly endless nightmare of torture, rape and disappearances in Chechnya, Nabi Abdullaev has recently argued that Russia's human rights movement essentially supports the rebels because they have shown 'force' and claims that the recognition that Putin has risen to power on a wave of anti-Chechen sentiment is a 'plot' (Abdullaev 2004).

If there is a plot, it is state-sponsored Chechenophobia and anti-Caucasian sentiment. For years, Chechens and other Caucasians living in Russia have been subject to special police operations called 'Hurricane' and 'Whirlwind Anti-terror', in which police collect an enormous amount of information on each 'native of NCR' (the North Caucasus Region) within their jurisdiction. These 'total checks' rely on testimonies from neighbors, janitors and technical personnel about their Caucasian neighbors' lives, on life style, source of income and visitors. They offer little protection against terrorist threats, but are acceptable to the Russian public as a sign that something is happening to prevent new attacks (Choltaev and Pohl 2004). History repeats itself. Many Russians believe (again) that the deportation of the Chechen and Ingush people by Stalin was justified in the interests of national security, because of the revival of allegations that the Chechens fought on the side of the Germans during the Second World War. In the 1940s, police agents purposely spread rumors that the deported Chechens were 'enemies of the people', 'traitors', 'cut throats', 'bandits' and even 'cannibals' (Pohl 2002). Sixty years on, most ordinary citizens are convinced that the Chechens represent a special 'ethnic criminal community'.

Post-Beslan reforms and Russia's war on terror

Putin seized the moment of panic immediately after Beslan to announce several major reform initiatives that will strengthen the

so-called vertical of power and weaken political rivals. He proposed a new system that will allow him to personally appoint regional governors and judges, and introduced plans to discontinue independent (non-party) candidatures to the Duma. In addition, pro-Putin and nationalist deputies proposed a bill that would make it more difficult for small parties to register as political organizations and thus to participate in elections, and the Duma has already passed a new law that allows government ministers to hold leading roles in a political party. These changes will benefit large pro-government parties and threaten primarily the small liberal parties. They continue the effort to reduce the number of parties overall and to control the political system, which was initiated last year with an amendment that raised the threshold for parliamentary elections from 5 percent of the vote to 7 percent. On the whole, however, the proposed changes will weaken the political system, because they will make officials even less accountable to local constituencies, and frustrated regional elites will seek alternative outlets. As professor Robert Bruce Ware has argued, this will be especially problematic in the Caucasus, where wealthy men of authority and political leaders will pretend to accept the Kremlin's appointee, but work to sabotage the system, possibly by contributing to radical causes (Lavelle 2004). This spring, the Kremlin already reaped the results of manipulating referendum and election results and imposing an illegitimate leader, in the form of the assassination of Chechnya's president, Akhmed Kadyrov.

Apart from this, and apart from obvious security measures like placing guards in schools and reducing the commercial chaos near metro stations, nearly all of the measures that the government has taken to fight terror are aimed at identifying and finding terrorists. All of these actions are weakened by mistakes and inept implementation and by an all-pervasive corruption on a scale unimaginable to most Europeans and Americans. In one recent case, operative 'wanted' posters of fourteen alleged female terrorists that were put up in police stations all over the

country actually showed the photographs of fourteen female doctors working for the NGO International Medical Corps in Ingushetia. When the women complained, the posters were supposedly removed, but they received no explanation and no apologies for the mistake that might have cost them their lives. Beslan has given new impetus to the return of time-honored methods like denunciations in controlling the movement of illegal migrants. In mid-September, Moscow's mayor Yuri Luzhkov, Moscow regional governor Boris Gromov and members of parliament called for strict measures to close Moscow and other major cities to migrants and to members of 'certain nationalities', many of which were unconstitutional and impractical (and impossible to implement). However, the Duma is now working on a new law entitled 'On the registration of citizens of the Russian Federation' that will replace the current regulation 'On the freedom of movement'. The proposal calls for the participation of ordinary citizens, who will be encouraged to inform on new neighbors and 'unknowns' in return for monetary awards. Vladimir Pligin, chairman of the Duma legal commission, explained that there is nothing wrong with the word 'informer' and added that paying for information about illegal migrants "is not the worst thing in our current conditions. At least then we would not have to pay awards of ten million dollars, but could pay out more reasonable sums" (Kolesnichenko 2004). He was referring to the award of 300 million rubles or about ten million dollars offered by the Federal Security Service on September 8, for information leading to the capture of Shamil Basaev and Aslan Maskhadov.

Up to now the Kremlin has shown little interest in destroying the bandits among the Chechens, but has worked to keep destroying Chechens as a 'bandit nation'. The war in Chechnya has led to a complete confusion of terms. Called a 'counter-terrorist operation' by the Russians, it has turned all Chechens into suspects and turned hundreds of thousands of survivors into refugees in their own country. The Chechens see it as state terrorism, which has caused little but disinterested

silence in Europe and America. As Anna Politkovskaya has argued for years, the war in Chechnya is carried out in an incoherent and inefficient manner. The great majority of victims of brutal raids that end in mass torture and interrogations are not really asked coherent or probing questions. Chechen boys are arrested because they are 'tall'. Cleansing operations in villages start only after fighters have come and gone. The security services secretly support not moderates (they and their families are the most endangered people in this war) but pro-Arab extremists (Politkovskaya 2003). According to evidence published in *Novaya Gazeta*, terrorists and extortionists live and travel in Chechnya without interference, and Federal Security Service agents have helped Basaev pass federal checkpoints (Izmailov 2004). In an interview in December 2001, Bislán Gantamirov, the former mayor of Grozny, argued that finding either Basaev or Maskhadov presented no special difficulties: "Everyone in Chechnya can point out the village where Basaev is staying, or tell you where Maskhadov was yesterday" (Gantamirov 2001). Like more than 40 percent of Russians (Samigullina 2004), he believes that the security services could easily destroy either Basaev or Maskhadov, but choose not to do so – perhaps because this might endanger the interests of highly placed officials. Those who probe this issue too deeply are killed or disappear.

Most of the men in power in Russia are former KGB officers, starting with Putin himself. The list includes Defense Minister Ivanov, Federal Security Service Chief Patrushev, the president of Ingushetia, Ziazikov and many governors and ministers and their aides and lower-placed officials. They are used to working by hiding the truth, and by manipulating people through fear, by creating artificial conflicts and by creating an atmosphere of suspicion. Their measures used to work, and they might work now if the system were not so thoroughly weakened by corruption. As journalist Nick Paton Walsh has recently argued, Putin is "trying to build a police state without a functioning police force" (Walsh 2004). Many of the police officers assigned to strengthen

airport security, for example, use their new jobs primarily to fill their own pockets. In mid-October, using a hidden camera, journalists working for the television show *Vremechko* showed how security officers at Moscow's Domodedovo airport target and detain passengers late for flights – and then collect bribes to let them make their connection. The police officers filmed each made over USD 1,000 in the course of one shift. In such conditions, policies designed to fight terror merely whet the appetites of those assigned to carry out controls and corruption continues to spiral out of control. Russia's war on terror serves to increase the budget and influence of the police and security services, but ultimately weakens the state.

The Russian government (and society) has done almost nothing to fight the social and political causes of terrorism. All of Chechnya is one big wound, one big Beslan, but no one is making a coherent effort to restore the brutalized republic. Huge federal subsidies end up back in Moscow, officials come and go, and most of them have more reasons to preserve the status quo than to seek change. A new generation of Chechen fighters thinks little of independence, but is determined to exact revenge for humiliations and torture, for raped and murdered relatives. A highly respected member of the Chechen diaspora in Moscow, whose family has lost more than twenty members to extremist violence, told us: "Beslan is a signal to Putin, to change his approach." Others added that blood was shed in *Nord-Ost* and Beslan because of Russia's unwillingness to negotiate.

The Kremlin's stance towards Maskhadov, the Chechen president elected in 1997 by the citizens of Chechnya over Basaev (the runner-up), is equally damaging. Maskhadov found it impossible to disarm the victorious rebels and, rather than risk a civil war, tried to please all sides. Unable to rule without giving in to extremists and severe human rights abuses, he nonetheless must be given a chance to make a graceful exit, otherwise he will never cease to be an inflammatory symbol. Talks with Maskhadov do not mean that he has to be restored to power.

Conclusion

Russia is a multi-national state, and the current wave of paranoia, xenophobia and terrorism will not unify society. The search for enemies creates illusionary unity, while it actually turns people against each other, and makes society easier to rule. Everyone interviewed for this article sought to share one simple insight. "This is a commercial war", they said, and no one really wants to stop it because it is too profitable. The violence continues because every single document check, every arrest, every house search, every disappearance, every death is profitable to someone, and the war as a whole is profitable to Putin, the Kremlin and the generals. The war against the Chechens serves to legitimize the regime, and Russia's leaders have not made an effort to find out or tell the truth about the causes of terror, to fight the all-pervasive corruption that is such an obvious factor in all of the latest major attacks, or to find convincing social and political solutions in Chechnya. Russia has embraced the war on terror, but the Kremlin is not really interested in putting an end to the terror. Until it does, we must be prepared for more tragedies.

Notes

1. This article was prepared using quotes from interviews that we conducted in September and October 2004 in Moscow and several other locations in Russia, as well as materials from RIA Novosti, Izvestiia, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Grani.ru, Gazeta.ru and Ekho Moskvy. Articles that are specifically worth mentioning, though not directly cited here, are Andriukhin et al. (2004) and Zorin (2004).
2. It seems Pumane was taken into a cellar (of the kind that the police claim do not exist), interrogated in the presence of 150 people of all ranks and beaten to pulp. Then he was taken away and, on the way to the hospital, apparently disappeared. He was then announced dead (in fact, that was the very first version, before the details about the interrogation appeared: the suspect became ill and died). His

former wife came from St. Petersburg to identify the body, but by the time she arrived the body had been exchanged, so she and relatives said it was somebody completely different. It remains unknown what actually happened, since the person who signed Pumane's protocol disappeared after a week, too.

References

- Abdullaev, Nabi 2004. Chechnya ten years later. *Current History*, October 2004: pp. 332–6.
- Andriukhin, Aleksandr, Nikolai Gritchin, Vladimir Demchenko, Natalia Ratiani and Vadim Rechkalov 2004. Ves' pol' byl useian telami mertvykh detei [The whole floor was covered with the bodies of dead children]. *Izvestiia*. Article in edition of September 4, 2004: pp. 4–5.
- Choltaev, Zaindi and Michaela Pohl 2004. Russia's 'purge' of Chechens. *Boston Globe*. Web site: www.boston.com.: accessed on March 14, 2004.
- Gantamirov, Bislan 2001. Maskhadov v teple i s babkami [Maskhadov is warm and surrounded by women]. *Argumenty i fakty*. Web site: news.aif.ru, accessed on December 19, 2004.
- Glucksmann, André 2003. Qui est terroriste? [Who is a terrorist?]. In: Frederique Longuet Marx (ed.), *Tchetchenie: la guerre jusque' au dernier?* [Chechnya: war to the end?] Paris: Mille et Une Nuits: p. 4.
- Izmailov, Viacheslav 2004. Poviaazannye: luchshye agenty spetssluzhb – terroristy, ubiitsy, vymogateli [Tied together: the best agents of the special services – terrorists, murderers, extortioners]. *Novaya Gazeta*. Web site: novayagazeta.ru: accessed on October 11, 2004.
- Khachatryan, Serob 2004. Podvig [Victory]. *Bolshoi Gorod*. Article in edition of October 1, 2004: p. 4.
- Kolesnichenko, Aleksandr 2004. Stuchat – otkroite dver' [When they knock – open the door]. *Novye Izvestiia*. Web site: www.newiz.ru: accessed October 7, 2004.
- Kots, Aleksandr 2004. Tol'ko kamennye serdtsa ne plachut v eti dni: Rossia pominaet pogibshikh v shkole No. 1 [Only hearts of stone do not cry on this day: Russia remembers the victims of School No. 1]. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Web site: www.kp.ru: accessed October 12, 2004.

- Lavelle, Peter 2004. Q & A: Robert Bruce Ware – North Caucasian precipice. *Untimely Thoughts*. Web site: www.untimely-thoughts.com: accessed on September 20, 2004.
- Muratov, Dmitrii 2004. My poteriali poltora dnia. Ruslan Aushev – o tom, chto proizoshlo s nami na ego glazakh [We lost one and one-half days: Ruslan Aushev about what happened to us before his eyes]. *Novaia Gazeta*. Web site: novaya-gazeta.ru: accessed on September 6, 2004.
- Pohl, Michaela 2002. “It cannot be that our graves will be here”: the survival of Chechen and Ingush deportees in Kazakhstan, 1944–1957. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 4(3): pp. 401–30.
- Politkovskaya, Anna 2003. *Tschetschenien: die Wahrheit über den Krieg* [Chechnya: the truth about the war]. Cologne: Dumont (Translated from Russian by Hannelore Umbreit and Ulrike Zemme).
- Samigullina, Alia 2004. “Spetssluzhbami dan prikaz ne brat’ Basaeva” [The special services are ordered not to take Basaev]. *Gazeta*. Web site: www.gazeta.ru: accessed on October 19, 2004.
- Savelev, Iurii 2004. Interview. *Radio Station Ekho Moskvy*. Web site: www.echo.msk.ru: accessed on October 12, 2004.
- Straus, Ira 2004. 1991, 9–11, Beslan: the third stage in Russia-US cooperation? *Untimely Thoughts*. Web site: www.untimely-thoughts.com: accessed on October 13, 2004.
- Walsh, Nick Paton 2004. A police state minus the police. *The Guardian*. Web site: guardian.co.uk: accessed on September 23, 2004.
- Zorin, Iaroslav 2004. Boeviki podgotovili vzryv: Ruslan Aushev rasskazal, kak beslanskaia tragediia otrazitsia na situatsii na Severnom Kavkaze [The rebels prepared an explosion: Ruslan Aushev told how the Beslan tragedy will affect the situation in the Northern Caucasus]. *Gazeta*. Web site: www.gzt.ru: accessed on September 30, 2004.