

The Kremlin cover

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BESLAN HOSTAGE CRISES
A critique of Russian counter-terrorism
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John B. Dunlop's analysis of two of Russia's most devastating terrorist episodes – the October 2002 hostage-taking at Moscow's Dubrovka Theatre and the September 2004 attack on School No 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia – paints a disturbing picture of the Kremlin's strategy towards terrorism. It is not just that Russian authorities are ineffective in dealing with the problem and unaccountable to the public. Dunlop, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, who has examined hundreds of Russian documents, trial transcripts and press reports, raises the disquieting possibility that some elements in the Russian government, in particular the security services, have actually been complicit in the terrorism.

The issue of official complicity first arose in September 1999, three years before the Dubrovka hostage crisis, when a series of apartment-house bombings killed over 300 Russian civilians. Russian authorities blamed Chechen rebels for the explosions and used public outrage as an excuse to launch the second Chechen war. But the strange circumstances surrounding a foiled bomb blast in a building in the city of Ryazan caused considerable speculation that the Russian Security Service, the FSB, was linked to the three earlier bombings. (The FSB admitted planting the Ryazan bomb, but claimed that the bomb was fake and that they were merely conducting a "training exercise".) After the Russian government successfully thwarted attempts for a parliamentary investigation into the 1999 bombings, whose perpetrators were never caught, the human rights

activist and Duma deputy Sergei Kovalev established an unofficial committee to inquire into the matter. But the murder of the committee co-chairman and Duma deputy Sergei Yushenkov, in April 2003, the suspicious death of another member, and the arrest of the lawyer who was a consultant to the committee brought the investigation to a halt.

As Dunlop points out, the circumstances surrounding the hostage-taking at Dubrovka Theatre have important similarities with the 1999 terrorist episodes. In particular, there was strong evidence of involvement by certain elements of the Russian security services in plans for the terrorist attack. First, Russian authorities have never been able to explain how a considerable number of known Chechen terrorists, some of whom had actually been in police custody at some point earlier, could gather in Moscow and conduct "furtive activities" for several months

without being noticed. According to a former lieutenant-colonel in the FSB, cited by Dunlop, Russian authorities were well aware of the activities of these Chechen terrorists but "chose to take no action".

As was the case in 1999, the FSB had clear motives for encouraging the attack on Dubrovka. In the months leading up to the hostage-taking, the Russian government had been under strong pressure to reach a negotiated settlement with the moderate wing of Chechen separatists, led by the former President of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov. Not only was the Russian public showing signs of weariness with the Chechen war. High-level discussions organized by the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, between Chechen moderates and Russian politicians, were showing signs of progress. According to Dunlop, the *silovki* (officials from the police and military) in Putin's government were adamantly opposed to conducting peace negotiations with the Chechen separatists and to "bringing an end to a war that was serving as a source of promotions in rank and of lucrative 'financial flows'". Their views were shared by extremist Chechen rebels, whose leader was the infamous Chechen field commander Shamil Basaev. Basaev repeatedly expressed opposition to any kind of agreement between Russian authorities and Maskhadov.

Dunlop builds a convincing case that members of the FSB entered into a kind of "joint venture" with Chechen extremists to derail the negotiations by means of violent acts, which would portray the conflict in Chechnya as a fight against al-Qaeda-linked terrorists and discredit Maskhadov. The culmination of their venture came at 9pm on October 23, 2002, when forty terrorists burst into the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow and took 979 people captive.

The hostage-takers, apparently to attract support from the Muslim world, sought to convey the impression that some of them were Arabs, though, with perhaps one exception, they were all Chechens. They were brandishing signs in Arabic and the women among them were veiled and dressed in black. The Russian media (controlled almost exclusively by the Kremlin) picked up on the Arab and Islamic themes, reporting on October 24 that President Putin "sees the seizure of the hostages in Moscow as one of the links in a chain of the manifestations of international terrorism, in one row with the [recent] terrorist acts in Indonesia and the Philippines". As Dunlop puts it: "Putin and his team, manifestly, now had an 11 September 2001 of their own The seizing of the theatre building, it was heavy-handedly suggested, constituted a link in a chain leading back to the infamous Al-Qaeda".

There was little evidence tying Maskhadov to the hostage-taking. Indeed, through his official spokesman, Akhmed Zakaev, Maskhadov immediately condemned the attack and urged that a non-violent solution be reached. But the

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Russian leadership launched an aggressive and successful campaign to persuade the public that Maskhadov had ordered the raid on the theatre and that he could no longer be considered a legitimate representative of the Chechen resistance. With Maskhadov discredited, the Kremlin had a justification for cutting off any negotiations with him over Chechnya's future.

In discussions with Duma deputies and journalists, the terrorists demanded that Russian troops be withdrawn from Chechnya as a condition for releasing the hostages. From the standpoint of the Kremlin, of course, this condition was unfeasible, but at least it marked a starting point for negotiations, which the terrorists seemed anxious to enter into. They reacted positively when the Kremlin announced that a representative of President Putin's would meet with them on October 26, telling the hostages that they had "good news" and that no harm would come to them if they behaved peacefully.

As it turns out, the Kremlin had no intention of sending a representative to Dubrovka Theatre. By October 25, plans to storm the theatre by force were already well underway. Although Russian authorities would later claim that the terrorists precipitated the storming of the building by executing two hostages, eyewitnesses reported that the terrorists had not shot anyone. Nor, contrary to the official story, did the terrorists have explosives capable of detonating, a fact of which the FSB was well aware.

In the early hours of October 26, to pave the way for the takeover, FSB special forces began pumping a highly powerful poisonous gas into the ventilation system of the theatre. Close to 200 hostages died from the effects of the gas, along with many of the terrorists (the rest were shot dead by the FSB). A good number of the hostage deaths could have been prevented if there had been adequate medical emergency preparations in place. In fact, the medical teams who treated the hostages were not even told beforehand what the gas was. President Putin's response to this terrible fiasco was to hold a special Kremlin reception the next day for the FSB commandos involved and praise



A monument erected to commemorate the victims of the Moscow theatre siege of October 23, 2003

them for their bravery and professionalism.

The Beslan hostage crisis of September 2004, in which 330 people died, 186 of them children, was an eerie replay of Dubrovka, demonstrating yet again the Russian authorities' callous disregard for individual life and lack of accountability to the public. As before, the authorities ignored important signs of an impending terrorist act. Most of the terrorists, between thirty and fifty in number, had been living together in the woods in the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia during the weeks before the attack.

Despite the fact that Ingushetia had been on

high terrorist alert since a bloody June 2004 raid in that republic by Chechen rebels, Ingush police mysteriously failed to notice this large terrorist group. One of the terrorists, Vladimir Khodov, was on the police wanted list for rape, murder and terrorism, yet he spent the summer of 2004 openly living in his native North Ossetian village without being arrested. The leader of the group, an Ingush native nicknamed "the Colonel", was also well known to Russian authorities as a deadly criminal, but he had successfully avoided arrest for at least two years. Several other members of the terrorist band, it turns out, had been in jail for acts of criminal violence, but ended up being released from custody. As one Russian journalist expressed it: "The beasts came [to Beslan] from their cages. It was the judges, police and the FSB who opened the cages for them".

According to Dunlop, the terrorists had managed to conceal a number of weapons inside School No 1 before the attack, which lends credence to the theory of an inside job. In addition, the two police officers who would normally have guarded the school on its opening day were sent away on what turned out to be a false pretext. Dunlop, citing one of the terrorists who boasted to the hostages that "your police sold you out for \$20,000", suggests that the police were bribed.

A crucial question is whether or not the terrible carnage that took place on September 3 could somehow have been avoided. There is no doubt that the terrorists at Beslan were ruthless murderers (the "Colonel" had twenty male hostages shot on the first day), nor that they had plenty of ammunition and explosives. Nonetheless, they did have a list of demands, which included the release from prison of twenty-seven rebels captured in the June raid on Ingushetia, and were willing to negotiate. In fact, the former President of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev, managed to get into the school on his own initiative and persuade the terrorists to release twenty-six mothers and children on September 2.

Unfortunately, negotiations for the remaining

hostages were thwarted at every stage by the FSB. On September 1, after a meeting with the FSB Chief Nikolai Patrushev and other police officials, President Putin placed a telephone call to Beslan and ordered that the local FSB take command of the crisis, which was being managed by Aleksandr Dzasokhov, President of North Ossetia, and other leaders at the republic level. Patrushev then flew down to the North Caucasus with the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs, Rashid Nurgaliev. But for some reason (which has never been explained), the two did not go to Beslan, but returned to Moscow.

Instead of Patrushev, the FSB official who showed up in Beslan to take charge was the very person, General Vladimir Pronichev, who had commanded the terribly botched Dubrovka rescue effort. Pronichev immediately began making plans for a storming of the school building, over the protests of North Ossetian politicians, who still had hopes for a negotiated settlement. The FSB dragged its feet in arranging for the twenty-seven rebels to be released from jail, which might have resulted in their being exchanged for some of the hostages. And when the Colonel transmitted his cell-phone number to the authorities for the apparent purpose of negotiations, they "blocked" his phone. There were even more sinister attempts to prevent negotiations with the terrorists. The respected Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who planned to involve Aslan Maskhadov in discussions with the hostage-takers, boarded a plane in Moscow on September 2 with the intention of travelling to Beslan. She never made it. The cup of tea she drank in flight was laced with poison, and she ended up in hospital.

In addition to making plans for attacking the school building, General Pronichev and his colleagues were preoccupied with public relations, which in this case meant misrepresenting the facts to suit their purposes. As Dunlop notes, in terms almost identical to those he uses of the Dubrovka episode, they "attempted heavy-handedly to manufacture a symbolic link between the terrorists who were at the school and the notorious Al-Qaeda". As part of this effort, they

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began circulating the rumour that Arab television stations had offered to help in making contacts with the terrorists. During the storming of the school on September 3, one FSB general went so far as to announce on Russian state television that nine of the terrorists were Arabs and that one was a Muslim “Negro”.

The FSB also lied about the number of people taken hostage at the school, claiming that during the siege it was only 354, when in fact the real figure, known to all those involved in the crisis, was more than 1,200. When the terrorists heard the lower figure cited repeatedly on television they were furious and began to treat the hostages even more cruelly. As one hostage later reported: “They said, ‘We can do anything we want with you since there are not 1,200 of you, but only 354, and the authorities don’t need you’”. The accounts of the actual storming of School No 1 are still a matter of dispute, particularly in regard to what caused the initial explosions at around 1pm on September 3. According to one version, FSB snipers shot, through a window, the rebel whose foot was at the control of a bomb. Two explosions then occurred, causing mayhem in the school. Another possibility is that the FSB themselves fired the explosives at the walls of the school. Whatever the case, thirty minutes later, FSB troops, positioned in an adjacent building, began directing powerful flame-throwers at the roof of the school’s gymnasium, which caught fire and collapsed, killing large numbers of hostages. Meanwhile tanks and armoured vehicles had moved into the school yard and began shooting into the

building, causing more fatalities.

As was the case at the Dubrovka Theatre, the emergency response at Beslan was shockingly inadequate. Firemen did not appear at the school to extinguish the blaze in the gymnasium (where wounded hostages remained) until almost two hours after the fire started, and then did not have enough water to do the job. There was also a shortage of ambulances.

The reaction of President Putin to the tragedy was, typically, to connect the Beslan siege with international terrorism and to persist with the claim that moderate Chechen separatists, Zakaev and Maskhadov, were involved in the attack. (This claim justified the retaliatory murder of Maskhadov by Russian special forces in March 2005.) In fact, as the Russian president must have known, local authorities in Beslan had been in contact by telephone with Zakaev, who was making arrangements for Maskhadov to come to Beslan to negotiate with the terrorists. According to several sources, Maskhadov’s arrival at Beslan on September 3 was imminent. As a recent report of the North Ossetian Parliamentary Commission on Beslan observed, “those who had the greatest interest in [Maskhadov’s participation] were of course the hostages and their families and Maskhadov himself. The possible success of his mission would have allowed Maskhadov to earn a reputation as a peacemaker and increased his credibility as the legitimate leader of Chechnya in a dialogue with the central government”. This outcome was the last thing that the FSB and the Kremlin wanted. In making the decision

to proceed with the storming of School No 1, FSB officials in Beslan knew they were placing hundreds of innocent lives at grave risk, but political considerations took precedence.

Whatever President Putin’s role in these tragic events – a subject that Dunlop does not go into – he clearly bears major responsibility. First of all, as an ex-KGB officer and former chief of the FSB, Putin has an insider’s understanding of how his security services operate. He is also very close to the current FSB Chief, Nikolai Patrushev, who worked with him for many years in the KGB and is his protégé. If elements within these services were “encouraging” Chechen extremists in any way, Mr Putin would have known about it.

The fact that there were few repercussions for those in charge of handling the crises raises further questions about President Putin’s motives. Three policemen were put on trial in Beslan for criminal negligence in not providing more security to the school; and the local FSB chief, Valerii Andreev, was sacked as a result of the Beslan tragedy. But Andreev was later awarded the plum post of deputy rector of the FSB Academy, and the man in charge at both Dubrovka and Beslan, Pronichev, was promoted to the rank of army general (the highest possible) in May 2005.

Even more damning is how the Kremlin has gone out of its way to cover up the truth about what happened in these hostage crises. The official report of the Procurator-General that appeared late last year persisted with the myth that Beslan was the work of international terror-

ists and that the authorities’ response to the crisis was adequate. The report also maintained that there were only thirty-two hostage-takers, one of whom survived to face trial, when eyewitnesses insist that there were many more and that some escaped.

In November 2005, the non-governmental organization “Voice of Beslan”, composed of hostages who survived the terrible ordeal at School No 1 and the families of those who perished there, sent out an anguished appeal to Western governments and journalists.

If we had realized what a terrible path lay in prospect for us after the little town of Beslan buried more than 300 people, we would have asked you not to transfer money to us, nor to send us medicine and other humanitarian assistance. We would have asked you for nothing except aid in the investigation of the terrorist act We know nothing of who really ordered the Beslan crime Why it was not prevented. Who is to blame for this.

Judging from what happened recently to Marina Litvinovich, the Russian woman who runs the website, Pravdabeslana.ru, providing valuable information on the school hostage tragedy, it will probably be a long time before Beslan families get satisfactory answers from Russian authorities. Litvinovich was savagely beaten by thugs on a Moscow street and warned to “be careful”. But John Dunlop’s book will help to draw Western attention to the plight of those who have suffered by these terrorist acts, and the importance, for all Russians, of uncovering the truth about what happened.