

Russia's colluders

by **Jeremy Putley**

The Beslan school crisis and the Moscow theatre siege took place with the knowledge and possibly even the assistance of Russian authorities

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The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises: A Critique of Russian Counter-Terrorism by John B Dunlop

(ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart, €24.90)

John Dunlop's book covers the September 2004 Beslan school hostage crisis in southern Russia and the October 2002 Dubrovka theatre siege in Moscow, giving objective yet controversial accounts of both tragedies. While the chief responsibility obviously remains that of the terrorists, the book amounts to a severe indictment of the conduct and morality of the Russian authorities.

According to official Russian data, the Beslan crisis resulted in the deaths of 330 people between 1st and 3rd September 2004, including 317 hostages, of whom 186 were children. Dunlop's research has established the following facts. First, there was credible advance warning of a planned assault on the town of Beslan, but in spite of this, there were no police guarding School No 1 on the first day of the school year save for one unarmed policewoman—the police who should have been there were apparently bribed to stay away. Second, the terrorists had access to the school premises prior to the attack, since they had hidden weapons and explosives there, and constructed a sniper's lair on the gymnasium roof. Third, the number of the terrorists is unknown, but was certainly more than those killed—a considerable number escaped after the storming of the school; it is only too probable that the leader of the assault, Ruslan Khuchbarov, alias "the colonel," was one of those who got away and is still at large. There is also evidence that implicates officials in assisting the seizure of the school. Many of the terrorists had been in prison until just before the raid, and were released purposely so that they could take part.

The siege ended only after the armed forces, following orders and in accordance with a deliberate plan, stormed the building; the use of flamethrowers and tanks in the assault, carried out while the hostages were still present in the gymnasium, resulted in the collapse of the roof on to the hostages below, killing 160 of them and producing more than half of the hostage fatalities.

In planning the federal response, the government had priorities that had little to do with saving the hostages. It seems that the decision to storm the building was taken at the top: presumably by President Putin himself. Aslan Maskhadov, who as the elected Chechen president was leading a guerrilla war against the federal forces in Chechnya, and who had repeatedly condemned all terrorist action, had volunteered to mediate in order to bring the siege to an end so that the hostages could be saved. The storming of the building which resulted in the loss of so many lives was precipitately initiated with the intention of ensuring that Maskhadov could not carry out his intervention. It follows that, when Putin emphasised on television, "Our chief goal consists, of course, in saving the lives and preserving the health of those who are hostages," he was not being accurate. His chief goal was to bring the siege to a swift conclusion, and not to try to save lives by entering into negotiations. Although Putin declared that Russia had been attacked by al Qaeda, he has not repeated the statement since, perhaps realising that it has little credibility.

One of the terrorists' demands was the release from prison of some 30 previously captured terrorists. The release of a considerable number of hostages could perhaps have been negotiated by acceding to this request. But the federal security service (FSB), which had been appointed by President Putin to control the federal response, had been ordered to mount an attack on the school in order to bring the siege to an end, and this was what they did.

At the trial of a surviving terrorist, the head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, was summoned to give evidence, but did not attend. Apparently no political figure will resign or be held to account for what happened at Beslan. It seems certain that, first, much could have been achieved by negotiations; and, second, that the storming of the school was virtually certain from the outset to result in children's deaths. This did not weigh sufficiently in the balance. The lives of innocents do not seem to count for much in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

The second section of the book covers the events at the Dubrovka house of culture in Moscow, where the musical Nord-Ost was being performed on the night of 23 October 2002. Forty or more Chechen terrorists invaded the theatre and took hostage some 970 people. The official number of the hostages who died as a result of the subsequent rescue effort, three nights later, was 129. The actual number was as high as 204, according to a list of victims' names published on the internet.

The Dubrovka atrocity was a joint venture, involving, according to Dunlop, "elements of the Russian special services and also radical Chechen leaders such as [the recently deceased] Shamil Basayev and Movladi Udugov." The two sides shared the motives of discrediting the moderate Chechen president and commander, Aslan Maskhadov, and derailing the movement towards a negotiated settlement of the war in Chechnya.

At the end of the siege, when the surrounding forces brought matters to a conclusion with the use of a powerful—although as yet unidentified—gas, all 40 of the terrorists were reported as having been killed by the rescuers. There was at least one, however, whose body was not found among the others. This was Ruslan Elmurzaev, alias Abubakar, who, like the colonel at Beslan, had been in de facto control of events and who escaped at their conclusion. Abubakar was, the evidence suggests, an FSB "plant" and double agent who was rewarded for the success of the

operation with his life and, presumably, other consideration. For the operation was indeed successful in the achievement of its secret objectives: negotiations for an end to the conflict did not proceed, Maskhadov was discredited in the eyes of the US government and the war of attrition in Chechnya continued, to the satisfaction of the siloviki for whom the war was a source of promotions in rank and of lucrative "financial flows."

The facts are shocking mainly for the criminal involvement of the FSB in an atrocity which it was constitutionally required to combat. The FSB, under its present director Nikolai Patrushev, is confirmed, on this evidence, as a corrupt and hopelessly compromised body, fit only to be disbanded.

In today's Russia it seems as if the heirs of evil still occupy positions of power—just as if Nazis had been permitted to remain in office in the postwar period. One must ask: how many years will it be before they are finally gone?