

Online Review *of Books and Current Affairs*

[Subscribe](#)[About](#) [Submissions](#) [Reviews](#) [Archives](#) [Contact](#)

August 2006

Book Review

The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises reviewed by Jeremy Putley *continued*

In the planning of 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: that is to say, the decision was presumably that of 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 FSB (formerly the KGB), 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 perhaps 204, according to a list of victims' names published on the internet.

The Dubrovka atrocity was a joint venture "involving elements of the Russian special services and also radical Chechen leaders such as Shamil Basaev and Movladi Udugov." Shared motives were the desire to discredit the moderate Chechen president and commander, Aslan Maskhadov, and to derail 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 gas, all forty of the hostages were reported as having been killed by the rescuers. There was at least one terrorist, 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 apparent criminal involvement of the FSB in an atrocity which it was constitutionally required to combat. Given this evidence, a strong argument could be made that the FSB, under its present director Nikolai Patrushev, appears to be a corrupt and hopelessly compromised body, fit only to be disbanded. Unfortunately, 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 positions of power in the post-war period. Thus one must ask, how many years will it be before they are finally gone?

Dunlop's book is the best available research on two Russian tragedies that have already indelibly scarred this century. In accordance with what has to be recognised as a Russian norm during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, strenuous efforts have been made by the Russian government to keep secret or disguise the details of what really occurred at Beslan and at Dubrovka. For this reason the book is a particularly important record, standing as it does in place of the objective and truthful accounts of the events that should have been produced by properly appointed Russian federal commissions of enquiry. It is essential reading for anyone seeking the truth about these tragedies.

Jeremy Putley is a freelance writer who lives in Yorkshire, England. His previous articles have appeared in the Political Quarterly, The Spectator, The Daily Telegraph, The Sunday Telegraph, openDemocracy, and Prospect.