

Analysis of the Beslan Massacre

Written by Evelina Vilkaite

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EVELINA VILKAITE, FEB 13 2013

Summary of the Article

'Russia School Siege Ends in Carnage', *The Washington Post*, Saturday, September 4, 2004

The article describes a case of political violence known as Beslan Massacre or School Siege, when the festive beginning of the new school year turned into a massacre. It took place in a small town called Beslan, located in Northern Ossetia. The article focuses on the description of how the siege went, as well as approximate numbers of hostages, deaths and injured people: during a 52-hour siege more than a thousand people were kept hostages, most of them children, their parents and relatives, as well as teachers; the numbers of deaths was estimated to be over 250. The author of the article goes into detail when describing the horrors hostages had to experience, choosing a dramatic tone to convey the feelings of the people who were there. However, it is rather obvious that the author of the article mostly focused not on the explanation of why the events happened, but more on irrelevant details: after quoting a local talking about the massacre, the author adds up a completely useless fact that he was a 'local sumo wrestler-turned-volunteer'. Nevertheless, the article includes a short explanation of the terrorists' demands: 'Though Russian officials never confirmed it publicly, the hostage takers demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya and the release of prisoners taken after a guerrilla raid this summer in the neighbouring region of Ingushetia'. Moreover, it touches the important topic of Putin's and the Kremlin's reactions: 'The Kremlin kept tight controls on information during the crisis, failing to give accurate counts of the hostages, confirm the demands made by the hostage takers or describe the identity of the guerrillas'. Unfortunately, in general the article fails to explain the case of the Beslan massacre and it only gives the reader the horrifying details but does not offer any credible explanations or insights.

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Terrorism, as a term, is so difficult to define that it is always surrounded by debates, controversies, emotions and inaccuracies. A terrorism expert Louise Richardson argues that the only certainty regarding terrorism is the pejorative nature in which the word is used (Horgan, 2005: 1). According to Gus Martin (2010), there are more than a hundred definitions of terrorism (Martin, 2010: 41) and therefore it is impossible to find the prevalent one. However, Martin states that the common features of most of the definitions include the use of illegal force, subnational actors, unconventional methods, political motives, attacks against 'soft' civilian and passive military targets and that terrorism acts are aimed at purposefully affecting an audience (Martin, 2010: 43). Gus Martin also argues that depending on the beliefs underlying terrorist behaviour, terrorism can be divided into state, dissident, religious, criminal and international terrorism (Martin, 2010: 46). However, terrorism is too complex to be divided and classified that easily, for instance, religious and dissident terrorism can get intertwined. The Beslan massacre demonstrates that sometimes 'radical nationalist groups use religious identification and adopt the Islamic principle of martyrdom to meet their political ends' (Bobrovnikov, 2005). By choosing their victims to be Russian Orthodox, the terrorists might have been able to position themselves as Muslims and therefore hide their political motives, even though it is not clear whether it was the case in Beslan. The Beslan Massacre, without a doubt, can be defined as one of the horrifying terrorist attacks of the 21st century. Bobrovnikov (2005) argues that the scope and impact of the attack implemented by al-Riyad al-Salihin group can be compared to the 9/11 tragedy in the United States. Even though the prevalent opinion and explanation suggested by the official media reports was that the attack was a result of

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extremist Islamic beliefs, it seems that Beslan's case is a bit more complex than a purely religion-based attack. The causes of violence are also rooted in the Russian-Chechen wars and the dramatic recollections of them seem to be the main cause of the violence: one of the terrorists in Beslan told a hostage that 'Russian troops in Chechnya caught children just like you and cut their heads off' (Bobrovnikov, 2005). Even after many investigations of the event, the truth has not been revealed and the Beslan tragedy remains mysterious. In my essay I am going to analyse the relationship between Russia and Chechnya, the motives behind the Beslan massacre, the actions of the Kremlin while the siege was still ongoing and the after-effects of the massacre.

When talking about the relationship between Russia and Chechnya and the violence it resulted in, it is crucial to consider three main historical geopolitical contexts (Tuathail, 2009: 5). Firstly, when Russia expanded as a state and took over the lands of the North Ossetia in the 19th century, Ossetians still kept their national identity, whereas neighbouring Caucasian states pledged loyalty to the Tsarist state. Later on, Stalin transferred most of Ingushetia's territory to North Ossetian control. In 1956, de-Stalinization allowed Ingush and Chechens to return to their ancestral lands. Therefore there has always been a tension between these territories. The second process that needs to be taken into account is the ethnic secessionism which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in various nationalist groups claiming over territories and seeking for independence, for instance, the tension between Ossetia and Ingushetia in 1992 ended in a full-scale fighting. Moreover, Chechen nationalists sought independence from Russia and this resulted in a war. The First Chechen War took place between 1994 and 1996 with Shamil Basayev, previous soldier in the Russian army, rising as a leader and the most important terrorist. Finally, the Second Chechen War (started in 1999), led by Vladimir Putin who was trying to claim over Chechnya, resulted in massive civil casualties as well as more than 300,000 Chechens being driven out of the republic. This was followed by a reign of terror to establish the order in the republic (Tuathail, 2009: 6). Therefore, to sum up, 'the residents of Chechnya and Ingushetia were exposed to years of personal experience with terror, torture and death' (Tuathail, 2009: 7) and had grievances against Russia. This was the main reason for the emergence of Chechen suicide terrorism. According to Speckhard and Ahkmedova, most of the terrorists have experienced torture themselves or they were forced to witness deaths of their relatives. Terrorist organisations offered a place for these people who were experienced post-traumatic sense disorder a place for redemption and revenge, as well as 'the hope of achieving some modicum of social justice through terrorism' (Speckhard and Ahkmedova, quoted in Tuathail, 2009: 7). However, it is arguable whether the trauma experienced can possibly make a massacre just.

When analysing any act of violence or terrorism, it is crucial to understand the goals and motives underlying it. As for the Beslan massacre, the motives were mainly related to grievance and revenge, whereas describing the goals or expected outcomes of the attack is not that clear. The terrorists failed to articulate the demands when they took over the school even though one of the hostages was told that they wanted for the federal forces to be withdrawn from Chechnya (Tuathail, 2009: 7). Moreover, there was a distinction, as well as a tension, between Inguish-specific and Chechen-global demands: Inguish terrorists demanded for the rebels captured during an earlier attack to be released whereas Chechens wanted a complete withdrawal of Russian forces from their territory (Tuathail, 2009: 8). However, there is a possibility that Beslan was not meant to be anything more than a suicide attack, especially considering the fact that the leader of the terrorist group kept saying 'I came here to kill' (Tuathail, 2009: 7). One of the main Chechen rebels at the time, Shamil Basayev admitted he was responsible for the Beslan massacre a few weeks after the incident. He said in his interview for the Channel 4 in February of 2005 that,

'Cynical though it may look, we are planning these operations, and we will conduct them, if only to show the world again and again the true face of the Russian regime, the true face of Putin with his Satanic horns, so that the world sees his true face. And the most important reason is to stop the genocide of the Chechen people, and to stop the bloody slaughter that is raging in our land' (Interview of Shamil Basayev to Channel 4 News, 2005).

He also said that,

'In order to stop this genocide we won't stop before anything. [...] We can fight for decades yet, but we want to stop this war because it is striking our own and other peaceful citizens, those that don't take part in the war. [...] That is why we are ready to stop the war, and as Maskhadov says to start negotiations without preconditions. But there is one condition. That is the non-negotiable and full withdrawal of the occupying Russian troops from our territory. It is

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only possible in that case.' (Interview of Shamil Basayev to Channel 4 News, 2005).

Therefore the question is to what extent the goals had been achieved and whether it resulted in any significant policy changes.

Terrorism became a much more important issue and started to be perceived as a higher threat after 9/11. Therefore if any act or decision is said to be a part of the global war on terror, it justifies and vindicates even decisions that might be wrong, at least to some extent. Lynch (2005) argues that the comparison between 9/11 and Beslan created a black and white situation and made it extremely difficult to 'utter any criticism of Russian actions' (Lynch, 2005: 158). This was a strategic move of Putin: tying the Chechen conflict the global war on terror, in this way moving from being perceived by Western nations, especially among EU members, as a 'perpetrator of gross human rights violations, to a key coalition partner in global anti-terrorism efforts' (Sussex, 2004: 419). It was even easier to make the conflict to seem like a war against terrorism after the attack of the Moscow's theatre in 2002. Moscow accused the European Union of having double standards: Lynch (2005) quotes Sergei Ivanov who said that,

'on the one hand, European countries at EU summits issue a declaration on cooperation in fighting terrorism; on the other hand, they are pushing Russia to start negotiations with terrorists in Chechnya' (Lynch, 2005: 150).

However, it is rather obvious that 'the Chechen conflict remains fundamentally a more localised struggle, with a transparent territorial focal point of conflict' (Sussex, 2004: 420). Putin's reaction to the Beslan massacre reveals a lot about his vision of Russia. Lynch quotes Putin's speech of 13th September, almost two weeks after the massacre:

'When a man is born, some disease-causing germs, some viruses appear almost immediately in his organism endangering his health. But if the organism grows strong and powerful then its immunity suppresses all these disease-causing germs and viruses. As soon as the organism weakens, they all flare up in a life-threatening disease. This is the way it happened with us... We need to put right the system of power in the country, we need to create an efficient economy, we need to revitalize the entire organism of Russian statehood and the political system' (Lynch, 2005: 153).

Therefore, the conclusions that can be made from these words are that Russia's response to the Beslan massacre is strengthening the state, because terrorism, like germs and viruses, will never completely disappear and the only way to deal with them is to strengthen the 'organism', i.e. Russia. Consequently, Putin aims to 'build immunity against inevitable 'future Beslans' and as for Chechnya, this implies not a change of policy but its continuation instead (Lynch, 2005: 154). The changes of policy therefore include changing the system of executive power and making it vertical: the regional leaders would no longer be elected but instead appointed by the Kremlin (Tuathail, 2009: 11), as well as the creation of the anti-terrorist groups across the Southern Federal District (Lynch, 2005: 156).

Another important point that needs to be considered is the coverage of the media, especially the Russian media. Russia has been criticised because of the way it handled the Beslan situation while it was still ongoing: the article states that when the battle began, Russian networks did not broadcast live for more than half an hour and that within three hours the Russian networks had dropped the story to return to regularly scheduled entertainment programs (Baker, 2004). The first actual measure taken by the Russian government was the attempt to control the media coverage by not allowing independent reporters to travel to Beslan (Tuathail, 2009: 8). One of the reporters was Anna Politkovskaya, who was well-known for being critical against the Russian government and various reports from Chechnya during the war; she was assassinated in 2006. Therefore there is a question of whether the Russian government wanted to hide something from the public and if yes, what was there to hide? Even though CNN and BBC managed to provide live coverage from Beslan, Russia's television channels were discouraged from live coverage, which again creates suspicions regarding the Government's motives. Also, the editor of the Russian newspaper Izvestya, Raf Shakirov, was forced to resign due to the 'overly emotional coverage on the Beslan horror' (Tuathail, 2009: 11) which was mainly explicit and shocking photographs of the Beslan siege aftermath. Nevertheless, Sussex (2004) argues that Beslan provided Putin with 'a more potent domestic rationale for escalating the Chechen conflict' (Sussex, 2004: 420).

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Shortly after the Beslan massacre a scientific public opinion poll was conducted to find out the prevalent perception of the Beslan events. Only slightly more than 6 per cent said that it was the fight of Chechen separatists for independence. Almost 6 per cent understood it as a revenge for the actions of Russian military in the North Caucasus. Moreover, around 23 per cent of the respondents said that it was caused by the desire of the Russian enemies to prolong the interethnic conflicts in the North Caucasus, and the most prevalent opinion was perceiving the Beslan massacre as a case of international terrorism (Tuathail, 2009: 13). Therefore, the true motives underlying the Beslan siege remain unclear, with various explanations and theories. In addition to the aforementioned possible reasons that created the outbreak of violence in Beslan, Sagramosso (2007) argues that Islamic ideals seem to guide and inspire much of the terrorist violence, even though they are intertwined with deep nationalist sentiments, especially among rebel groups in Chechnya. However, she argues that the causes of the violence in the North Caucasus are much more complex, and are only partially related to the spread of radical Islam and separatist aspirations. Sagramosso also identifies the 'perpetuation of discredited and corrupt ruling elites, the persistence of severe economic hardship, youth unemployment and social alienation, and the absence of proper and effective channels of political expression' (Sagramosso, 2007: 682) as factors driving the violence, as well as the region's unsatisfactory socio-economic and political conditions. To sum up the analysis of the Beslan massacre, it was a unlucky coincidence for North Ossetia that Beslan was attacked: even Shamil Basayev himself admitted that it was never the plan to attack Beslan:

'We planned the operation in Moscow or Leningrad, and wanted if we could to carry it out even in two places simultaneously. But the lack of finances didn't allow us to plan that operation in the centre of Russia. So we chose Ossetia' (Interview of Shamil Basayev to Channel 4 News, 2005).

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