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The Beslan Massacre

On 1 September 2004 the festive beginning of a new school year in Russia turned into a national tragedy. A group of about 30 armed men and two women wearing explosive belts seized a secondary school in the small town of Beslan near Vladikavkaz in Northern Ossetia. Teachers, pupils, and their relatives were taken hostages. Their number reached about 1300 and consisted mostly of children. The hostage-takers demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from neighbouring Chechnya. Russian commandos and local militia surrounded the school. In a bloody assault that ensued on 3 September most hostages were freed, but in the fighting the school was destroyed, leaving most terrorists together with 11 Russian soldiers and 344 civilians killed and many others injured. Some of the terrorists escaped.

The impact of the Beslan massacre in Russia is comparable to that of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Russians felt and expressed solidarity with the Beslan victims. The State Bank opened an account for numerous donations to be transferred to them and a special Internet site on Beslan was created (www.beslan.ru). About 135,000 people took part in an anti-terrorist demonstration held near the Kremlin in Moscow on 7 September. The official Russian media blamed "international Islamic terrorists" for carrying out the Beslan assault and named al-Qaida as responsible for it. At the same time fears from "Caucasians" and Islam in general grew. A Levada-Center poll indicated that 33% of Russians were in favour of preventing Chechens from entering Russian towns. In Moscow, over 10,000 Muslim migrants were detained by the police, among them the Daghestani cosmonaut Magomed Tolboev who was taken for a Chechen.

Causes of violence

It is unlikely that the Beslan tragedy and occurrence of terrorist violence in Russia in general is the result of the "export of Islamic terrorism" from the Middle East as the official media put it. The causes of violence are rooted in two recent Russian-Chechen wars, in particular in the atrocities committed by the Russian army. Many terrorists have been recruited from amongst Chechens who as teenagers had suffered during these wars. It is not without coincidence that some of the terrorists who attacked the school in Beslan had lost relatives and livelihood in the mid-1990s, like the only captured hostage-taker, Nur-Pasha Kulaev (b. in 1980). The supposed heads of the terrorists, Ruslan Khochubarov (b. 1972) and Khodov (b. in 1976), also belong to the war generation.

There are numerous reports of dramatic recollections of the Russian-Chechen wars playing an important role in escalating violence in Russia. As one of the terrorists in Beslan told a hostage girl: "Russian troops in Chechnya caught children just like you and cut their heads off." His own daughter had been killed. In this way atrocities such as the use of children as human shields are being reproduced. The Chechen background of the Beslan massacre is also confirmed by a number of similar attacks that had preceded it. The most important incidents include hostage-taking in Budenovsk (1995), Kizliar (1996) and Moscow (2002), explosions in Moscow and Volgograd (1999), Kaspiisk (2002) and Grozny (2004), a recent case of two planes blown up by suicide women-bombers. The terrorist units often include young women referred to as Black Widows who had lost relatives during the wars. Some of these attacks were carried out by one of the main Chechen rebels, Shamil Basaev. On 17 September he claimed responsibility for the Beslan hostage-taking.

Violence has severely affected Russian society with the increase of terrorist attacks since 1995. The school massacre in the Ossetian town of Beslan caused shock and awe in all of Russia and beyond. It culminated a series of terrorist attacks whose foundations were laid in the history of the two Chechen wars in which Russian troops brought havoc to Chechen society. Though terrorism is usually regarded as a violation of basic Islamic principles, today Islam is effectively used in Russia by radical nationalist factions to justify their political strategies.

The Beslan incident sheds light on the complicated relationship between religion and terrorism. Though terrorism is not supported by Islamic law, nevertheless there are also different visions of Islam, including that of Basaev and his sympathisers which consider terrorist attacks as legitimate tools in the defence of the Muslim community (of Chechnya). The Beslan case demonstrates that, in Russia, radical nationalist groups use religious identification and adopt the Islamic principle of martyrdom to meet their political ends.

The Beslan attack was carried out by al-Riyad al-Salih group which appeals mostly to Caucasian Muslim populations such as Chechens, Ingushes, and Daghestanis. By choosing their victims to be from among the Russian Orthodox Ossetians they effectively positioned themselves as "Muslims" in contrast to the captured "infidel" civilians and Russian troops. A survivor remembered that "...one of the gunmen was reading the Quran constantly." Fragments of the interrogation of detained attacker Kulaev diffused by the Russian First Channel also demonstrate the radical Islamist stance of the group.

The Beslan massacre reveals both the strengths as well as the weaknesses of Islamist radicals. On the one hand, great powers like Russia and the United States are unable to bring to a halt the growth of terrorism and its spreading through their "porous" frontiers. Military counteractions like the one in Beslan are not likely to eradicate terrorism and nobody knows what will be the next target. On the other hand, terrorism will bring the Caucasian Muslims neither national liberation nor a sharia state. It might only result in human casualties and economic degradation along the Caucasian frontiers of Russia.

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A survivor of the Beslan schoolsiege holds her school album, 21 September 2004.



PHOTO BY ALEXANDER DEMIANCHUK, © REUTERS, 2004

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