

# Beslan: Russia's 9/11?

John B. Dunlop

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**The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya  
and  
The Jamestown Foundation**

## Foreword

Few experts are as well qualified to write about Russia and Chechnya as John Dunlop. A long-time observer of Russia and author of numerous books on this important country, Dr. Dunlop has spent the past five years studying the Kremlin's confrontation with Chechnya. As the former editor of *Chechnya Weekly*, he has been a close observer of this bloody war between Russia and Chechnya which to date has cost more Russian lives than the ten-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In 2004 Dunlop authored a highly detailed report on the October 2002 Dubrovka theater seizure by Chechen militants distributed by Radio Free Europe. Now he has undertaken another major study in cooperation with the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya and the Jamestown Foundation. This report is part of our continuing struggle to provide in-depth analysis of the war in Chechnya and its spillover into other parts of the North Caucasus.

The timing of this report is especially important in light of the recent one year anniversary of Beslan. While much about Beslan has been written in the Russian press, remarkably little in fact has been published in the U.S. media about an event that the *Washington Post* likened to September 11. Investigative reporting by the German magazine *Der Spiegel* and the coverage on Chechnya provided by *Guardian* correspondent Nick Paton Walsh has ensured that coverage of Beslan and the war in Chechnya has not diminished. Yet the most courageous group in the effort to shed light on this tragedy is the Mothers of Beslan Committee, which has bravely challenged official accounts of the crisis. They also sought to hold local and federal officials accountable—both for their failure to prevent the attack, and for an apparent disregard for the lives of the hostages. As Dunlop's report demonstrates, their grief is matched only by their determination to find the truth.

What is the purpose of this report? Coming on the heels of the one year anniversary of Beslan, our chief goal is to provide the U.S. policymaking community, as well as western researchers and journalists, with a detailed account on what happened in Beslan. More importantly, we wish to document the subsequent cover-up by Russian officials. To date there has been no major study of Beslan in the United States. The only objective account published in Russia is that conducted by the Mothers of Beslan. Its conclusions differ markedly from the Russian procurator's initial findings. With the official investigation yet to be finalized, Dr. Dunlop's report makes an invaluable contribution to Russia observers seeking the truth about who bears responsibility for the Beslan tragedy.

Drawing on official Russia documents – including statements and interviews by members of the Torshin commission, as well as a broad survey of indigenous sources—Dr. Dunlop provides an exhaustive analysis of these issues. Many of his conclusions are startling: first, the majority of the terrorists were Ingush not ethnic Chechens. Second, many of the casualties resulted from a Russian attack on a sniper's nest constructed near the roof, resulting in its collapse. This detail is important, as it dispels the Kremlin-backed notion that the blast erupted as result of the death of a Chechen militant whose foot set off the explosives. Third, none of the terrorist ringleaders involved in the takeover of the school have been identified among the dead at Beslan. Fourth, the hostage negotiations undertaken

at Beslan were significantly bungled by the Russian intelligence services, or FSB, which also may partly account for the mayhem that erupted after the FSB took control of the situation from local officials. These facts and other issues detailed in the report make this a landmark study in our analysis on what occurred in this tragedy in the Caucasus.

Ultimately, the story of Beslan is yet another horrid account of the dramatic instability unleashed by Russia's six year old war in Chechnya. This conflict has evolved from being a conflict in one war-torn region of the North Caucasus, to a multi-dimensional guerilla war that has spread to other parts of the North Caucasus. The seeds of this instability emanate from one source – Chechnya. Until a peaceful resolution of the conflict is reached, the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya will continue in its efforts to advocate for a peaceful a negotiated settlement as the best course for ending this tragedy.

The March 2005 death of Aslan Maskhadov, Chechnya's only democratically elected President, only makes that task harder. With the Kremlin's determination to eliminate Chechen moderates, the radical wing of the separatist movement led by Shamil Basaev is growing in strength and influence. As we review the aftermath of the Beslan tragedy, we see the seeds of another similar crisis. The solution lies in resolving Chechnya's 400 hundred year-old struggle with Russia. Until that day arrives, however, there will no peace in Chechnya and the conflict will continue to spillover into other parts of the Caucasus.



Glen E. Howard  
Executive Director

“Three shots were fired from a tank located in the courtyard into the school. I asked: ‘What are you doing?’ They answered: ‘There are rebels.’ I responded: ‘But there are people there too.’”

-- Stansislav Kesaev, Chairman,  
North Ossetian Parliamentary Commission on Beslan.

According to official Russian statistics, in the period between 1-3 September 2004, 330 individuals perished in a terrorist incident at School Number 1 in the town of Beslan in the southern Russian Republic of North Ossetia. Of those who died, 317 were hostages—186 of them children. Ten were soldiers from the Russian FSB's *spetsnaz* (special forces). Two were personnel from the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations. One was a resident of Beslan killed while helping to evacuate the hostages during the storming of the building. Seven hundred and twenty-eight persons were said to have been wounded.<sup>1</sup> A majority of the hostages who died—more than 160—perished under the school's collapsed roof.<sup>2</sup> The Mothers of Beslan committee, comprised of mothers of pupils who perished in the building, provided even higher figures. “218 of those killed were found with burns,” they claim.<sup>3</sup>

For two reporters from the *Washington Post*, this horrific terrorist event, occurring on the first day of a new school year, represented “the worst terrorist attack in the world since September 11.”<sup>4</sup> It also attracted significant international attention. On the first anniversary of the terrorist attack, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov handed to the chairwoman of the North Ossetian parliament, Larisa Khabitsovaya, 770,000 signatures from a “Beslan Appeal,” collected in 112 countries.<sup>5</sup> Most of the signatures came from residents of the USSR's former union republics. Among the signatories were numerous parliamentarians and heads of state.

This report follows a similar study of the hostage-taking episode at Moscow's Dubrovka theatre in October 2002<sup>6</sup>. Last spring my colleagues at the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya encouraged me to take a closer look at what had occurred in Beslan some two years later. Given the vastness and complexity of this event, I chose to focus on several key issues where the Russian General Procuracy and the residents of North Ossetia have often been in sharp disagreement.

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<sup>1</sup> Ol'ga Allenova, “Byli desistviya, kotorye byli pokhozhi na shturm,” *Kommersant-Vlast*, August 29, 2005. The author would like to thank Robert Otto for a number of bibliographical suggestions and for helpful comments on a draft of this report. He would also like to thank Lawrence Uzzell for his useful comments on a draft of this essay. Finally he would like to express his gratitude to his research assistants, Joyce Cerwin and Yuliya Shmeleva, for their fine work.

<sup>2</sup> Statement of Stanislav Kesaev, chair of the commission of the North Ossetian parliament to investigate the Beslan events, in “Vlast' dolzhna otvechat' za svoyu bespomoshchnost',” *Gazeta.ru*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> C.J. Chivers, “A year later, siege at school angers Russia,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2005), p. 34. The six authors of a lengthy investigative report, entitled “Putin's Ground Zero,” in *Der Spiegel*, No. 53, December 27, 2004, pp. 65-101, refer to it as “the bloodiest attack since 11 September 2001.”

<sup>5</sup> “770,000 chelovek podpisali ‘Beslanskoe vozzvanie,’” *Gazeta.ru*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> John B. Dunlop, “The October 2002 Moscow hostage-taking incident,” Parts I-III, *RFE-RL Organized Crime and Terrorism Watch*, December 18, 2003, January 8, 2004, and January 15, 2004.

Several sources are particularly worthy of note. The first is a draft report on the Beslan incident written by a Russian parliamentary commission headed by Aleksandr Torshin, a deputy speaker of the Federation Council. The Commission, which also includes Duma deputies, wrote a draft report whose text was obtained by journalist Elena Milashina of the pro-democracy newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. In the early stages of their investigation, Torshin and other Commission members gave a number of rather frank interviews to the Russian press. By the summer of 2005, however, they had generally been reined in by the Kremlin and its supporters. The draft report largely refines the findings of the Russian State Procuracy, and it should thus be considered an “in-house” investigation. “The commission was supposed to have met with Vladimir Putin this summer [2005], but now the head of the commission, deputy speaker of the Council of Federation Aleksandr Torshin, states that the report may not be completed before the end of this year.”<sup>7</sup>

The second source is the investigation by a provincial parliamentary commission. Headed by Deputy Speaker Stanislav Kesaev, the North Ossetian parliament has pressed ahead with its own independent investigation of the Beslan events. Its conclusions frequently differ from those of the Russian Procuracy and of the Torshin Commission. The Kesaev commission’s draft report was, like that of the Torshin commission, summarized by journalist Elena Milashina on the pages of *Novaya Gazeta*, who then compared and contrasted their respective conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

The third source is the Mothers of Beslan, an organization of mothers of children who perished at the school. Headed by Susanna Dudieva, the organization has also conducted its own investigation into the events of September 1-3, and its spokeswomen have given a number of interviews to the Russian and foreign press. The findings of the Mothers are generally quite similar to those of the Kesaev Commission. On September 2, 2005, four of the Mothers were invited to Moscow to meet with President Putin and discuss the events in Beslan.

Other investigations bear mentioning. Although the Russian Procuracy has yet to issue a full official report, deputy procurator general Nikolai Shepel’ did summarize his office’s preliminary findings at the trial of Nur-Pasha (Nur-Pashi) Kulaev, the lone suspect whom the Russian authorities claim to have captured at Beslan. Shepel’ presented these preliminary findings at a hearing held at the Supreme Court of North Ossetia on May, 17 2005.<sup>9</sup> The transcripts of the sessions of the Kulaev trial, which contain detailed testimony by former hostages and eyewitnesses among the townspeople, constitute an invaluable source of information concerning the Beslan incident. On September 9, 2005, deputy procurator

<sup>7</sup> “Beslanskaya komissiya temnit,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 7, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> For summaries of the draft reports of both the Torshin and Kesaev commissions, see Elena Milashina, “Den’ neznaniya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005. The public unveiling of the Kesaev commission’s report has now been postponed until “the second half of October [2005].” See: “Beslanskuyu komissiyu postavili pod vopros,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 26, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See “Pervoe zasedanie Verkhovnogo suda Severnoi Osetii po delu Kulaeva,” May 17, 2005, pp. 6-17. Transcripts of the 28 sessions of the trial held to date may be found at the website *Pravdalbeslan.ru*. References to these sessions will be provided in shortened form, with a roman numeral used to indicate the session and the appropriate page number then being provided, e.g., I, 6-17.

Shepel' announced that the investigation of the terrorist act at Beslan "would be extended by the General Procuracy until 1 December 2005."<sup>10</sup>

Several press reports also deserve special mention. First there is an exceptionally valuable three-part report authored by journalist Svetlana Meteleva, a correspondent for the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, which cites important classified documents that had been leaked to her.<sup>11</sup> In a statement given to Ekho Moskvyy Radio, Meteleva's colleague Aleksandr Minkin noted that "the [official Russian] investigation is demanding that the journalist reveal her sources of information." Federal investigators also threatened Meteleva in Minkin's presence. "After all, we will find them [Meteleva's sources] no matter what, and we will punish them," they reportedly said.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, there are a large number of exceedingly useful investigative articles by the aforementioned journalist Elena Milashina published in *Novaya Gazeta*. These path-breaking articles are acknowledged in the footnotes throughout this report. There is also an important and valuable journalistic investigation that was conducted by six German reporters who fanned out to conduct interviews at key points in North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Chechnya in the aftermath of the Beslan tragedy.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the work of Pavel Felgenhauer—a leading independent Russian military affairs specialist—is particularly noteworthy. Early on, Felgenhauer raised many of the questions—including whether the Russian forces that stormed the school had used flamethrowers—that were subsequently posed by both the Kesaev Commission and the Beslan Mothers.<sup>14</sup>

## ADVANCE WARNINGS

The first issue needing elucidation is whether or not the Russian and North Ossetian authorities had advance notice of a planned assault on Beslan. On August 18, 2004, nearly a fortnight before the tragedy occurred, "the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs sent a telegram to all regional police commandants. It said that there were indications that Chechen rebels were planning an operation in North Ossetia. It was said to resemble the one that Shamil Basaev once launched at a hospital in the city of Budennovsk in the summer of 1995.... Government buildings, police stations, and train stations [were put] under much closer watch, but the main emphasis was on hospitals and main traffic arteries."<sup>15</sup> That telegram seems to have neglected the possibility that terrorists who had once attacked a hospital might elect to strike at a school.

<sup>10</sup> "Beslan: proverka bez somnenii," *Lenta.ru*, September 9, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, "Beslan bez grifov," Parts I-III, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 24-26, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> "V 'Moskovskom komsomol'tse' sooobshchili o doprose avtora stat'i pro Beslan," *Lenta.ru*, June 3, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Uwe Buse, Ullrich Fichtner, Mario Kaiser, Uwe Klussmann, Walter Mayr, and Christian Neef, "Putins Ground Zero," *Der Spiegel*, no. 53, December 27, 2004, pp. 65-101.

<sup>14</sup> See two interviews with Felgenhauer, "Operatsiya spetsluzhb po osvobozhdeniyu zalozhnikov byla oshibkoi," *Die Welt*, September 7, 2004, Russian translation in *Inosmi.ru*, September 7, 2004; and Jeremy Brantsen, "Troubling questions remain about bloody Beslan siege," *Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty*, September 6, 2004. See also: Pavel Felgengauer, "'Shmel' i 'svin'i'" *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

In early 2005 similar questions issues arose during a meeting of Beslan residents with Dmitrii Kozak, the plenipotentiary Russian presidential representative in the Southern Federal District. One of the townspeople, Valiko Margiev, told Kozak: "On 28 August there stood traffic policemen [GAI] at all the crossroads in Beslan. When they began carefully to search my vehicle, I asked: 'What has happened?' They answered me: 'A group of rebels has penetrated into Beslan.' On September 1<sup>st</sup> the police should have been at the school in order to ensure the security of the children as they crossed the road. But they weren't there."<sup>16</sup> Kozak's response was to keep silent.

Evidence also suggests Russian authorities received notice several hours before the actual attack. At 5:00 a.m. on September 1, 2004, the day on which the school was seized, a report was sent to the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs, Rashid Nurgaliev, stating: "Information is being processed concerning the fact that on 1 September 2004 at 5:00 a.m. in the city of Shali [Chechnya], a citizen named Arsamikov was taken into custody. During the course of the interrogation Arsamikov related that a seizure was planned [that day] of a school in the city of Beslan."<sup>17</sup> Noting that there are only four schools in the town of Beslan, journalist Svetlana Meteleva then apostrophizes her reader: "Now you model the situation. You have information that a terrorist act is being prepared, and you know the time and place of the future act," she notes, "You still have four hours and five minutes and special communications equipment. Can you convey this information to the special services in Beslan?" The MVD failed to act on accurate intelligence.

Despite credible warnings concerning an impending terrorist attack, School Number 1, with its large number of students and teachers, was left completely undefended on opening day—a ceremonial occasion where a large number of parents traditionally accompany their children to school. Even local security officials were caught by surprise. El'brus Nogaev, the head of the Beslan police department's investigations branch, lost his entire family in the school. When asked: "Were sufficient measures taken by the [law enforcement] organs to protect the school from being seized?" Nogaev replied indignantly, "No of course not. There was no one there except for one [unarmed] woman instructor."<sup>18</sup>

Not only were there no armed police whatsoever in the school building, there were also no armed traffic police [GAI] parked in vehicles near the school, as had been the practice in recent years. As one eyewitness has recalled: "I have been taking my children to school for five years. Every day I met the GAI at the crossroads. Near the First School, near the school boarding house, and so on. This year there was not a single GAI officer there. I even knew them by name... Where were the GAI? Why wasn't the school being guarded?"<sup>19</sup> Another former hostage has asked angrily: "Who removed the GAI posts? Who removed the police from the school? There was no guard there. There was one policewoman without a telephone and without a gun."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Yurii Safonov, "Korpunkt v Beslane: Khodoki," *Novaya Gazeta*, February 3, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, "Beslan bez grifov," part III, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 26, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> "Po nam terroristy voobshche ne strelyali," *Kommersant*, June 15, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, X, 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XII, 6.

According to Shepel', responsibility for the absence of police protection lay with Miroslav Aidarov, the director of the Pravoberezhnyi District Department of the Interior Ministry of North Ossetia, and two of his subordinates, Taimuraz Mukrtazov and Guram Dryaev. Although they had received instructions from their superiors "to take the relevant measures due to the threat of terrorist attacks on September 1<sup>st</sup>," they chose, Shepel' said, to ignore these orders and instructions. Two officers who were supposed to have served as armed security at the school "were sent off to the Caucasus Highway [supposedly] to guard the president of North Ossetia."<sup>21</sup> It was later revealed that President Dzasokhov of North Ossetia had had no travel plans for that day.

The lone unarmed policewoman who was in the school when it was seized, Fatima Dudieva, was asked: "Can you say why on that day, 1 September, they did not leave one or two [GAI] police cars next to the school?" "They said that they never have enough people," Dudieva responded, "They had to protect the highway because a high-ranking official was due to pass by. Until now, however, they haven't been able to figure out who he was supposed to be."<sup>22</sup>

Was the absence of police protection due merely to disorganization and incompetence, or to other factors? During the time that the hostages were being held in the school building, a deputy leader of the terrorists, Vladimir Khodov, mocked the authorities, boasting aloud: "Your police sold you out for \$20,000."<sup>23</sup> The payment of a hefty bribe to the police could quite conceivably have contributed to the absence of any armed protection at the time that the terrorists struck. It should also be noted that Shamil Basaev, the terrorist leader who was in titular command of the assault, claimed that he tricked the Russian authorities into leaving the school unprotected because they thought that he planned to attack government buildings in North Ossetia. While conceivable, this boastful claim by a notorious liar seems less likely than the payment of a large bribe.

## THE INGUSH JAMAAT

A number of those who have looked into the Beslan events have concluded that the roots of the assault on the school lie in the bloody events of June 21-22, 2004 that occurred in the Republic of Ingushetia. "Shamil Basaev," one journalist noted, "thought up this operation, as a result of which 80 persons were killed and 106 wounded, with 57 of the killed and 51 of the wounded being employees of law enforcement organs. The main goal of the attackers was to add to their stores of weapons and ammunition... About forty of the attackers stole 1,177 firearms and 70,922 bullets."<sup>24</sup> Several days after the Beslan events, Russian deputy procurator general Vladimir Kolesnikov announced that "seven automatic weapons and three pistols" used by the terrorists in the school had come from an MVD armory in Ingushetia raided on June 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nikolai Gritchin, "The actions of police officers in Beslan helped the terrorists," *Izvestiya*, November 11, 2004, English translation in *Johnson's Russia List*, no. 8448, November 11, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Pravdabeslana.ru, XIII, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Pravdabeslana.ru, XVIII, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Yuliya Kalinina, "Lyubimyi gorod mozhno sdat' spokojno," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 22 June 2005.

<sup>25</sup> "Oruzhie dlya terakta v Beslane ukrali u ingushkoi militsii," *Lenta.ru*, 10 September 2004.

Shamil Basaev and his top confederates released a video message following this assault on police stations and armories in Ingushetia. “I want to say thanks to the MVD of Ingushetia for keeping these weapons for me,” Basaev boasts mockingly on the film.<sup>26</sup> Appearing with Basaev on the film is a bearded man bearing a strong physical resemblance to “the Colonel,” the terrorist who, all sources agree, led the assault on the school building at Beslan. Another figure, whom Russian law enforcement personnel have identified as an Arab named Abu Dzeit, asks the Colonel on the film: “Are you ready to meet Allah?” “I am ready,” the Colonel replies.<sup>27</sup> Russian procurators, including deputy procurator general Shepel’, subsequently argued that this film was made just before the assault on Beslan. This information was demonstrably misleading—the evidence indicates that film was made in June of 2004, not in late August.<sup>28</sup>

The June raid on Ingushetia is similar to Beslan in one other important respect. One of the demands of the terrorists at Beslan, as we shall see, was that some 30 or so of their confederates who had been arrested following the events of 21-22 June be released from prison. The importance of that connection should not be understated.

During the trial of captured terrorist Nur-Pasha Kulaev, a number of former hostages and local townspeople presented evidence showing that the terrorists had in fact had access to the school before the events of 1-3 September. It was claimed, for example, that the terrorists had concealed a number of weapons in the school in advance of the assault.<sup>29</sup> It was even asserted that the terrorists had been able to construct an elaborate sniper’s nest fortified with bricks and sandbags in the attic of the school above the gymnasium.<sup>30</sup> It was also claimed that one group of terrorists had been in Beslan for at least a week before the terrorist incident and that one of them—a man with a highly visible large scar across his neck from ear to ear—had been seen in the market place the previous Sunday.

Also notable are indications that an advance group of terrorists took command of the building on the night of August 31, before it was attacked by the main group after 9:00 a.m. the following morning. This is the contention of policewoman Fatima Dudieva, who was seized on the second floor by terrorists as the building was being raided from outside<sup>31</sup>. Despite such eyewitness testimony, however, all such claims by former hostages and townspeople have been heatedly rejected by the Russian Procuracy.

For his part, Russian deputy procurator general Shepel’ has insisted that “the rebels brought their weapons with them. In addition, from the testimony of the victims we learned that the repair work on the school was conducted with the help of the local administration and that no other persons participated in the repairs.”<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that this was not always the position of official Russian spokespersons. On September 4, 2004, FSB General Valerii

<sup>26</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Otmorozhennyi Magas,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, April 15, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, “Mystery still shrouds Beslan six months on,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2005. For a discussion of three Ingush police officers who allegedly assisted Basaev in carrying out the June raid, see Musa Muradov, “Informatora Shamilya Basaeva likvidirovali dvazhdy,” *Kommersant*, August 24, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> “Naidena zapis’ podgotovki terakta v Beslane,” *Gzr.ru*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VIII, 15, XII, 25, XIII, 27, XVI, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Elena Milashina, “Vyshe nekuda,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 5, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 34.

<sup>32</sup> “Zamgenprokuratura zayavil, chto shturma v Beslane ne bylo,” *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2005.

Andreev, head of the North Ossetian secret police, announced that “weapons and explosive materials were carried in and hidden on the territory of the school” before the terrorist event occurred.<sup>33</sup>

The change in the official line merits consideration. In June 2005, the German newspaper *Die Welt* reported that a former hostage, Kazbek Dzarasov, had admitted publicly that he had been forced by three “unknown persons” dressed in camouflage uniforms to give false testimony at the trial of Nur-Pasha Kulaev. According to *Die Welt*, Dzarasov “was forbidden [by them] to say that when he was a hostage the terrorists had forced him to open up the floor of the building and extract weapons hidden there, obviously long before the tragedy.”<sup>34</sup>

One point, however, seems unambiguous: the terrorists brought with them a detailed floor plan of the school. As Russian parliamentary commission chairman Aleksandr Torshin has remarked, “They were precisely going to Beslan. And precisely to school No. 1. Khuchbarov [‘The Colonel’] had in his pocket a floor plan of the school, and that has been firmly established.”<sup>35</sup> There can no doubt that the attack was premeditated.

The group of attackers was also quite large. According to *Der Spiegel*'s investigative team, “the men and women who later invaded Beslan had assembled in the woods southwest of the village [of Psedakh in Ingushetia] since 20 August. The terrorists were spartanly equipped and well-acquainted with living in the forest.... The hostage-takers had been recruited from the ‘Riyad al-Salihin’ (Garden of the Righteous) Martyrs’ Brigade. The brigade made its first appearance during the hostage-taking at Moscow’s Nord-Ost musical theater [in October 2002]... Chechen field commander Shamil Basaev...is the martyr brigade’s self-proclaimed emir.”<sup>36</sup>

Questions have been raised, quite appropriately, as to why the Ingush police, who, after the bloody events of June 21-22, had been on a high terrorism alert, failed to spot this large gathering of terrorists. As *Der Spiegel* team notes: “In the weeks before the attack, when the perpetrators were making preparations in an Ingushetia woodland, the [Ingush] police had several opportunities to act—but nothing happened.”<sup>37</sup> The Russian General Procuracy announced in November 2004 (and then, again, in September 2005) that it was charging the two top Ingush police officials in Malgobek District of Ingushetia with “criminal negligence” for failing to report the presence of the terrorists. But was it merely criminal negligence, or something else?

<sup>33</sup> “Osnovnyuyu chast’ oruzhiya i vzryvchatki v shkolu terroristy zavezli zaranee,” *Vazhno.ru*, September 4, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> “Troie neizvestnykh v kamuflyazhe ugrozhali zalozhnika Beslana, i on dal na sude lozhnye pokazaniya,” *newsru.com*, June 23, 2005. *Die Welt* also reported that a male teacher who died in the school conveyed the same information to a female hostage. At a session of the Kulaev trial on September 27, 2005, former hostage Sarmat Khudalov asserted that he and other hostages had been forced to extract weapons and ammunition from under the floorboards of the school. See “Byvshii zalozhnik v Beslane rasskazal, kak ego zastavlyali dostavat’ spryatannye pod polom boepripasy,” *Newsru.com*, September 27, 2005. See also: “Byvshaya zalozhnitsa: terroristy zaranee zavezli i khranili oruzhie pod polom v beslanskoi shkole,” *Newsru.com*, September 29, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> “Shmelei’ ot komissii ne spryachesh’,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, February 11, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

As the terrorists drove from the woodland of Psedakh in Ingushetia to the school in Beslan they “approached the Ossetian Cossack village of Staryi Batakoyurt via a good road. There are four police posts... Normally it takes just a handful of rubles to get by the controls.”<sup>38</sup> Outside the village of Khurikau, in North Ossetia, the terrorists took captive—at least that is the victim’s version—an ethnic Ingush policeman named Sultan Gurazhev who had stopped their vehicle. Amazingly, this policeman was subsequently let go by the terrorists once they arrived at the school at Beslan. According to the testimony of accused terrorist Nur-Pasha Kulaev, “They didn’t kill the policeman at Khurikau on the order of the Colonel. The Colonel said: ‘That is the brother [i.e., cousin] of one of ours.’”<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after 9:00 a.m. the main group of the terrorists, led personally by the Colonel, expertly rounded up some 1,200 hostages and herded them into the school building. At the same time, a second group of terrorists finished securing the building. After hearing from a parent that a suspicious vehicle was in the vicinity, unarmed policewoman Fatima Dudieva realized that she needed to call headquarters: “I ran up to the second floor of the school [where there was a telephone]. As soon as I tried to pick up the phone, I was surrounded by 9-10 rebels in light-colored camouflage uniforms, and they said: ‘Lady cop, whom are you trying to call? This will not be a Nord-Ost.’”<sup>40</sup>

“How did they turn out to be on the second floor?” Dudieva was asked at the Kulaev trial. What do you mean ‘turn out?’” she responded, “They had been there the entire night.”<sup>41</sup> Dudieva also noted that the group of terrorists who seized her had warmly embraced the members of the main group of rebels when they ascended the stairs to the second floor: “Yes, they embraced when they met. And they showed by their expressions that everything was excellent. They [the terrorists] were comprised of several groups, I think that was the case.”<sup>42</sup>

Following their successful seizure of the school building, the terrorists, again led by the Colonel, began setting up an elaborate network of explosive devices in the school gymnasium, where the vast majority of the hostages were being held. Openings were knocked out in the upper parts of the windows so that there would be ventilation and, more importantly, so that the Russian *spetsnaz* could not launch a gas attack as they had done at Nord-Ost. All cell-phones were confiscated from the hostages.

Russian officials were quick to name the terrorist leaders. In a televised report to President Putin on September 9, 2004 Russian procurator general Vladimir Ustinov singled out two of the terrorists for special mention: “their leader, who was called ‘the Colonel,’” and “one of the rebels who was called Abdul...”<sup>43</sup> Former hostages also highlight the roles of these two men. “One of them was called ‘Abdulla,’” noted one female hostage several days after the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Otmorozhennyi Magas,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, April 14, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 34. At Nord-Ost some of the hostages used cell-phones to contact the authorities.

<sup>41</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 41.

<sup>43</sup> “Versiya genprokurora,” *Vremya.ru*, September 9, 2004.

storming of the school, “and it was evident that they related to him with respect, but they related with still greater respect and honor to the one whom they called ‘the Colonel.’”<sup>44</sup>

### THE RINGLEADERS

There is a virtual surfeit of information concerning the man known by the code-name “Abdul” or “Abdulla.” “Abdul” was an ethnic Ukrainian convert to Islam whose real name was Vladimir Khodov. Khodov was born in 1976 in Ukraine to an ethnic Ukrainian mother who spoke Russian at home. Nothing is known about his Ukrainian birth father. When Vladimir was three years old, he was brought by his adoptive father, an ethnic Ossetian serving in the Soviet army as an engineer who was fifteen years older than Vladimir’s mother, to the town of El’khotovo in North Ossetia. Shortly thereafter the couple had a son of their own, whom they named Boris.

The town of El’khotovo represents a kind of Muslim bastion in largely Orthodox Christian North Ossetia. It boasts a large mosque but does not have an Orthodox church. From an early age, therefore, Vladimir was exposed to Muslim influences. He grew up speaking Russian without the local Ossetian accent, but he also became fluent in Ossetian.<sup>45</sup> A key turning point in Vladimir’s life occurred in 1995, when his sixteen-year-old brother Boris was arrested and then sentenced to eight years in prison for having stabbed a neighbor to death during an argument. Boris “shared a cell with a group of Muslims and converted to Islam. Khodov visited his brother in prison, and, under his influence, converted too.”<sup>46</sup>

On one occasion, in 1998, when Vladimir had traveled to the town of Maikop to visit his brother, he himself committed a serious crime, the rape of a young woman. Following the commission of this crime, Vladimir found himself on the Russian wanted list. In 2003, Khodov’s brother was released from prison, a year ahead of time, but he immediately got himself into trouble again. Having kidnapped a young woman who had caught his fancy, Boris was then shot dead by the woman’s brother. A number of residents of El’khotovo have recalled that, even though he was on the Russian wanted list, Vladimir showed up for his brother’s funeral, which was held on July 22, 2003, insisting that Boris be given a Muslim funeral. While he was in town, “Khodov told neighbors that he was studying to become a mullah at an Islamic institute in Dagestan.” “It was clear,” one villager recalled, “that he had become a fanatic. He tried to convert us to Islam. He told us that the only true religion was Islam.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite the fact that he was on the Russian wanted list, Vladimir spent the days and weeks following his brother’s funeral in El’khotovo at the home of a local Muslim known as Hadji Ali. It was at this point that, “The police, the sixth division of the North Ossetian Ministry of Internal Affairs, arrested him but [then] released him straight away.”<sup>48</sup> The police even

<sup>44</sup> Ruslan Pliev, “Obeshchali ubit’ zalozhnikov i smyt’sya v Chechnyu,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 9, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> For Khodov’s biography, see *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004; Elizaveta Maetnaya, Marina Gridneva, “Pozyvnoi Abdulla,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 7, 2004; Mark Franchetti and Matthew Campbell, “How a repressed village misfit became the butcher of Beslan,” *Sunday Times* [UK], September 12, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> *Sunday Times*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

offered him a lift home.<sup>49</sup> Why this benevolent treatment of a wanted rapist on the part of the North Ossetian police? *Der Spiegel* speculated that Khodov managed to pay a large bribe to the police in order to obtain his release. Russia's most wanted terrorist, Shamil Basaev, on the other hand, has claimed that Khodov was not arrested on this occasion not because he had paid a bribe but because he had agreed to become a police agent. "He was offered a choice: prison with its resulting [homosexual] rape or to go to work for them."<sup>50</sup> Khodov was given the police agent's code-name "Traveler" [*Putnik*]. Eventually, according to Basaev, Khodov became an agent of both RUBOP (the anti-organized crime division of the regular police which has an anti-terrorist subsection) and the FSB.

Following his release by the police, Khodov soon emerged as a deadly terrorist. On 3 February 2004, together with some Ingush confederates, he set off a car bomb in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, aimed at killing students who were studying at a local school for MVD internal troops. One student was killed in the blast and ten were wounded, while a passerby was also killed.<sup>51</sup> Khodov's photograph was then widely circulated by the police. Despite his growing notoriety, however, Khodov continued to pay regular visits to his hometown of El'khotovo: "Although at this point, he was the subject of two arrest warrants (for terrorism, murder and rape) Khodov still moved about freely in his hometown of El'khotovo in the spring and summer of 2004. But the local police chief, Lieutenant Colonel Valerii Dzhibilov, did not order his arrest."<sup>52</sup>

In May of 2004, Khodov stepped up his terrorist activities. On the twenty-ninth of that month: "At 7:27 a.m., train No. 35 from Moscow to Vladikavkaz went off the rails as a result of two explosions near the station of—pay attention!—El'khotovo. Only by a miracle were none of the 463 passengers on board not hurt. The same kind of bomb was used as had been employed in Vladikavkaz."<sup>53</sup> Yet despite these brazen acts, Khodov remained untouched. "For an entire month and a half [in the summer of 2004] Khodov walked quietly about his native village wearing a [Muslim] prayer cap and was from morning till night in the mosque."<sup>54</sup> While he was in El'khotovo, Khodov stayed at the home of his mother. "The entire Ossetian police force," investigative journalist Aleksandr Khinshtein observed sardonically, "exhausted itself looking for Khodov. And during this time he... was living peacefully at his home [in El'khotovo]. This was established by correspondents from *Moskovskii komsomolets* who visited the village."<sup>55</sup>

Following the terrorist attack on Beslan, some of Khodov's fellow villagers wrote an angry letter to the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, they noted, the newspaper had reported that "the special services had been looking for Abdulla for about a year." They then declared: "We are indignant: the special services were seeking that monster but could not find him. If they had come to our village, we could have told them everything about him... [After his brother's funeral] the police (sixth division, Vladikavkaz UVD) took him

<sup>49</sup> *Sunday Times*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Shamil Basaev, "U nas mnogo, chto rasskazat' po Belanu..." *Kavkaz Tsentri*, August 30, 2005, posted at *Chechenpress.info*, August 31, 2005.

<sup>51</sup> "Pozyvnoi Abdulla," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 7, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> "Pozyvnoi Abdulla," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 7, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> In *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, October 21, 2004.

into custody and then let him go! Why? After that, he committed a terrorist act in Vladikavkaz, and they again could not find him! We, his fellow villagers, saw him in the mosque, he visited his mother, but the special services couldn't find him! Or they didn't want to?"<sup>56</sup>

Several days after the Beslan incident had concluded, a well-known defector from the FSB who currently lives in London, retired lieutenant colonel Aleksandr Litvinenko, hypothesized: "Most likely Khodov, who was being sought on a charge of terrorism, was not arrested at his place of residence in connection with the fact that he was a secret agent of the FSB..."<sup>57</sup> Shamil Basaev offers a similar explanation for the bizarre behavior of the police. Both the secret police and UBOP, he writes, wanted Khodov to become a close associate of Basaev himself. "In order to gain my trust, they helped him to set off several explosions in Vladikavkaz as a member of an Ingush group. Then Khodov, at the behest of the special services of Rusnya [a pejorative term used by Basaev for Russia], proposed to us a Shakhid operation involving the seizure of the parliament and government of North Ossetia."

This Russian plot failed to achieve its aim, Basaev remarks, because Khodov had decided to become a double agent. "Having lived about a month among the mujehedin in Ingushetia, Khodov himself confessed to the Amir of the group [presumably 'the Colonel'] that he was an agent of the special services (RUBOP and FSB) and that he had been infiltrated with the aim of getting close to me. I met with him, thanked him for his sincerity, and proposed to him that he henceforth work for the good of Islam by becoming a double agent."<sup>58</sup> Khodov, Basaev reports, accepted this offer.

From the statements of former hostages, we know that Khodov, a criminal and an abusive sadist, was in charge of the more than one thousand people imprisoned in the school gymnasium. "In the gymnasium everyone was directly subordinated to [Khodov]..."<sup>59</sup> (For a photograph of Khodov, see the September 6, 2004 issue of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*.<sup>60</sup>) It is not clear, however, whether or not Khodov was killed during the storming of the school building: "Before me is the result of the coroner's report," reported Aleksandr Torshin in December 2004, "Khodov, Vladimir [it says] has been identified from his fingerprints and from identification by his mother." But this comes from the site of the MVD of the Russian Federation, from the most recent days: 'Khodov, Vladimir Anatol'evich, is on the federal wanted list.' So has he been killed or is he being sought?"<sup>61</sup>

Nine months later, the head of the North Ossetian parliamentary commission investigating the Beslan incident, Stanislav Kesaev, made the same point: "Khodov, who 'supposedly' was identified [among the dead terrorists] was for several months on the wanted list web site of

<sup>56</sup> "Abdula dazhe svoemu otsu zhelal smerti," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 18, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> "A Litvinenko: Lichnosti terroristov na 100% dokazyvayut uchastie FSB v zakhvate shkoly v Beslane," *chechenpress.info*, September 8, 2004.

<sup>58</sup> Basaev, "U nas mnogo..." *Chechenpress.info*, September 8, 2004. In August 2003, the Russian MVD had created anti-terrorist center "I" within the Main Administration for the Struggle with Organized Crime (GUBOP). See "Rossiiskaya sistema predotvrashcheniya teraktov: spustya god posle Beslana," *Politcom.ru*, September 17, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, IX, 8.

<sup>60</sup> URL: <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23354/31826/print/>

<sup>61</sup> "Drugaya voina," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, December 22, 2004.

the MVD. So I ask myself the question: was he killed or not?”<sup>62</sup> Journalists raise similar questions. Writing in the September 12, 2004 issue of the *Sunday Times*, Mark Franchetti and a co-author reported: “The authorities said they captured only two [terrorists] alive. One of them was Khodov.”<sup>63</sup> On September 6, 2004, the Russian government newspaper *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* reported the words of Sergei Fridinskii, deputy procurator general of the Russian Federation for the Southern Federal District: “On suspicion of participating in the seizure of hostages three persons have been taken into custody, including one woman. One of those taken into custody is on the federal wanted list.”<sup>64</sup>

Contradictions abound. The newspaper *Izvestiya* reported that Russian *spetsnaz* who participated in the storming of the building “succeeded in taking four rebels alive, including one woman.” Lev Dzugaev, the head of the information-analytical department of the President of North Ossetia, in turn stated that “three living terrorists” had been taken into custody.<sup>65</sup> “A North Ossetian police spokesman,” the *Sunday Times* reported, “claimed Khodov had been captured alive. He went on to explain that the terrorist had committed suicide the following day in his cell. ‘You understand,’ he added, ‘that is the official version.’”<sup>66</sup> Deputy Russian general procurator, Vladimir Kolesnikov, has, for his part, vehemently insisted that Khodov was in fact killed during the storming of the school. “The first of the destroyed terrorists to be identified was the corpse of precisely Khodov,” he declared.<sup>67</sup>

Significantly less is known concerning the man referred to as “the Colonel” [Polkovnik], who was unquestionably the leader of the terrorists who seized the school. Russian law enforcement took some time to identify him. Immediately after the Beslan tragedy, it was initially reported in the Russian and Western media that the leader of the raid had been thirty-year-old Ali Taziev, an ethnic Ingush and a former senior lieutenant in the external security division of the pro-Moscow police of Ingushetia.<sup>68</sup> Taziev was said to have been one of the leaders of the June 2004 assault on police departments and police armories in Ingushetia. Then, on September 20, 2004, Russian deputy procurator general Vladimir Kolesnikov announced that the leader of the terrorists had in fact not been Taziev but rather another ethnic Ingush, Ruslan Tagirovich Khuchbarov, born on November 12, 1972.<sup>69</sup>

Like Khodov, Khuchbarov had a tumultuous and heavily criminalized past. In 1996, he had moved from his native town of Galashki, in Ingushetia, to the city of Orel in southern Russia, where he reportedly “went to restaurants, lived with women, drank vodka and amused himself with narcotics.”<sup>70</sup> In 1998, he murdered two Armenians living in Orel in a

<sup>62</sup> “Ubitogo boevika Khodova eshche neskol’ko mesyatsev razyskivalo MVD,” *Ej.ru*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> *Sunday Times*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Andrei Sharov, “Nelyud’ s chernym pogonom,” *Rg.ru*, September 6, 2004.

<sup>65</sup> “Genprokuroru ne vse dolozhil prezidentu: neskol’ko terroristov skylis’ iz shkoly,” *Newsru.com*, September 9, 2004.

<sup>66</sup> *Sunday Times*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>67</sup> “Khronika terrora—2004,” *Strana.ru*, January 11, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> “Raskryta lichnost’ ‘Polkovnika,’ rukovodivshego zakhvatu shkolu v Beslane,” *Newsru.com*, September 10, 2004; and Tom Parfitt, “Ex policeman ‘masterminded Beslan terror,’” *Sunday Telegraph*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>69</sup> “Zagadka polkovnika,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 20 September 2004; “Dos’e na beslanskikh ubiits,” *Utro.ru*, 24 September 2004; *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>70</sup> Lyudmila Butuzova, “‘Razvelos’ polkovnikom,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, October 22, 2004.

dispute over a woman.<sup>71</sup> Following this double murder, he, like Khodov, was placed on the Russian wanted list. He then decided to join the ranks of the Islamic terrorists. In September of 2003, he is said to have provided explosives for an attack on a building of the FSB in Ingushetia that claimed three lives. He is also reported to have participated in an armed attack on a column of Russian troops outside of Galashki and to have been involved, either actively or logistically, in the June 21-22 2004 raid on Nazran' and other population centers in Ingushetia.<sup>72</sup>

Unlike in the case of Khodov, the Russian police appear to have made several good faith but bungled attempts to arrest Khuchbarov. "He routinely got away from security forces: once during an attempt to meet his girlfriend in the Kabardinian city of Nalchik; then again, in 2002, when he escaped the police during a shootout at the bus stop in the Ingushetian settlement of Sleptsovskaya; and another time, when he was visiting his father in Galashki and fled into an adjacent corn field to evade approaching police."<sup>73</sup> When interviewed by reporters for *Der Spiegel*, Khuchbarov's father, Tagir, a retired tractor driver, recalled: "For ten years intelligence officers have come to see me every week... They ask about my sons. Or rather, only about Ruslan, since they shot my younger son, Bashir, in the woods two years ago." A friend of the family in Galashki, Musa Arapkhanov, told *Der Spiegel* that "the 'Colonel' was in Galashki this year [2004], to attend a memorial service for his deceased mother." "He is a very devout man," Arapkhanov added.<sup>74</sup>

*Der Spiegel's* investigative journalists chose to accept the authorities' identification of Khuchbarov as "the Colonel". That identification is likely to be correct. Yet several unanswered questions still remain. Although the Russian authorities have insisted that "the Colonel" was called only "Rustam" or "Rasul" by his fellow terrorists, his fellow rebels in Beslan called him "Ali". Hostage Larisa Mamitova, a medical doctor who was required by circumstances to hold frequent conversations with "the Colonel," confirms this fact. "Among themselves," the newspaper *Russkii Kur'er* reported in November 2004, "the bandits [at Beslan] called him Ali."<sup>75</sup> The name issue may not, in the final analysis, mean much of anything. In negotiations with representatives of the Russian authorities, "the Colonel" also called himself "Shakhid" and "Sheikhu." In the presence of former Ingushetian president Ruslan Aushev, he was called "Amir" by his fellow terrorists. Film footage obtained by CBS television that shows conditions in the school at the time of Aushev's visit on September 2<sup>nd</sup> provides an excellent still photograph of the terrorist leader. This photograph could presumably be used to settle any lingering questions there might be concerning the "the Colonel's" identity.<sup>76</sup>

Asked about the Colonel's ethnicity and language abilities by the procurators at his trial, Nur-Pasha Kulaev responded as follows: "What was the Colonel [ethnically]? [Kulaev:] The Colonel was an Ingush.... In the school when you were there in what language did they give commands? In Ingush. The Colonel [he added] also spoke fluently in Chechen. Did you

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004; *Moskovskie Novosti*, October 22, 2004.

<sup>73</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Elena Shesterina, "Fantom po imeni Magas," *Ruskur.ru*, November 5, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> For the photograph, see this URL: <http://www.utro.ru/articles/print/2005/01/24/399651.shtml>

understand him when he gave commands in Ingush? No, I didn't. But he knew Chechen well... Who in the school decided who should stand where? The Colonel and one other Ingush."<sup>77</sup> Kulaev also recalled that the Colonel and Ruslan Aushev had spoken in Ingush at the time of the latter's visit to the school.<sup>78</sup>

Numerous descriptions of "the Colonel" given by former hostages reveal an extremely competent but also sadistic terrorist. He was the only one of the terrorists at Beslan seen carrying about a portable sniper's machine-gun similar to those used by the Russian *spetnaz*. In negotiations with representatives of the Russian government, he invariably repeated the same cynical answer, "The hostages do not want food or water. They are on a hunger strike against the [Russian] government."<sup>79</sup> "He behaved himself in the hall aggressively," recalled one female hostage, "He conducted himself very badly. He told the children he had come there not to joke around. And when the children asked him, 'May I go to the toilet?' he answered: 'I'm not your uncle, I'm a terrorist. I cannot let you do whatever you want. I also have children. I came here not simply to make jokes. I came here to kill.' I remember that very well."<sup>80</sup> And kill he did. Under "the Colonel's" leadership, the terrorists executed twenty-one male hostages during the first two days of the incident.

The Colonel's justification for those killings is questionable. One female hostage, the nurse Larisa Tomaeva, recalled that the Colonel told her: "They [the Russian forces] killed my whole family, almost my entire line." He then enumerated them, adding, "They cut them all down. Why then should I spare you? I came here to kill."<sup>81</sup> If "the Colonel" is in fact Ruslan Khuchbarov, as the Russian authorities maintain, then this statement is a lie. Though he had reportedly lost a brother, Khuchbarov's entire family had not been killed off by the Russians.

Like "Abubakar," the *de facto* leader of the terrorists at Nord-Ost in October 2002, it seems likely that "the Colonel" managed to escape during the storming of the school. "Do you know why I cut my beard?" he asked one hostage, "So I can pass your blockade."<sup>82</sup> In mid-September one of the Russian investigators of the Beslan incident told the newspaper *Kommersant*: "The Colonel himself did not want to die. We know that on Friday morning [September 3<sup>rd</sup>] he divided the rebels into two groups. Into one [i.e., the designated sacrificial lambs] he included people who had in general accidentally found themselves among the rebels."<sup>83</sup> The other group, the elite, were to escape.

That the Colonel succeeded in escaping seems probable. In a December 2004 interview Aleksandr Torshin noted that none of the leaders of the terrorists had been identified among the bodies of the dead. Those identified, he said, "are 'small fry.'"<sup>84</sup> When one former hostage, Svetlana Dzebisova, was asked whether she had recognized "Ali" in the

<sup>77</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, III, 38.

<sup>78</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, III, 10.

<sup>79</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>80</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VIII, 17.

<sup>81</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Finn and Peter Baker, "Hostages were helpless in the face of chaos," *Washington Post*, September 5, 2004.

<sup>83</sup> Cited in "Beslan: Boeviki shli na delo sem'yami," *Grani.ru*, September 16, 2004.

<sup>84</sup> "Drugaya voina," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, December 22, 2004.

photographs taken by the authorities of the dead terrorists, she replied, “No, I did not see him there.”<sup>85</sup>

The web-site [Ingushetia.ru](http://Ingushetia.ru) reported in January of 2005 that Khuchbarov was back with Shamil Basaev fighting in the mountains of Chechnya.<sup>86</sup> On the occasion of the first anniversary of the Beslan tragedy, journalist Vadim Rechkalov wrote on the pages of *Moskovskii Komsomolets*: “Basaev became Basaev after Budennovsk. We were unable to catch him, and now there is a new bandit of world level—Ruslan Khuchbarov—the Colonel—the very one who came to Beslan, did what he wanted there, and safely got away.... If we haven’t caught Basaev, then we also won’t catch Khuchbarov.”<sup>87</sup> The Mohammed Atta of Russia’s 9/11 still appears to be at large.

### THE RANK AND FILE

Who were the rank-and-file terrorists at Beslan? How many of them were there? The Russian Procuracy has stubbornly clung to Nur-Pasha Kulaev’s assertion that there were 32 terrorists in the band that assaulted the school. At his trial, Kulaev repeatedly claimed to have heard this figure from the Colonel himself shortly before the terrorist attack was launched. “Who said that there were 32 [terrorists]?” Kulaev was asked at trial. “The Colonel counted them, he said it,” Kulaev replied.<sup>88</sup> In his initial interrogation by the Russian authorities on 4 September, however, it emerged that Kulaev had stated that he did not know how many rebels there were in the group.<sup>89</sup> It is therefore possible that the number 32 was first suggested by interrogators and not by Kulaev himself.

The *Der Spiegel* investigative team has written that it believes that 32 terrorists were killed at Beslan: “There [were] 32 bodies, which contradicts the official report of 31 dead terrorists. There are 32. An entire platoon of firefighters sees them lying there and swears to the number. There are numbers on the body bags, 1 through 32.”<sup>90</sup> Yet many of the hostages and their relatives believe that there could have been as many as fifty terrorists in the school, perhaps even seventy.

Writing in the weekly *Kommersant-Vlast*, journalist Valerii Panyushkin reports on a walk he took about the ruined school with the father of a child who had perished in the building. “The school is big,” he writes, “we walk about it for a long time. Sasha [last name not given] relates where the rebels stood and, from his explanations, it emerges that 32 rebels could not in any way have controlled this space. So there must have been more rebels, and many of them must have gotten away.”<sup>91</sup>

<sup>85</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VIII, p. 17.

<sup>86</sup> “Stat’ya v nemetskom ‘Shpigele,’” *Ingushetia.ru*, January 14, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Vadim Rechkalov, “Tol’ko tak my pobedim, vruga...,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 14, 2004.

<sup>88</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, III, 22.

<sup>89</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XI, 31.

<sup>90</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Valerii Panyushkin, “My khotim dokazat’, chto vlasti vinovaty v gibeli detei,” *Kommersant-Vlast*, February 28, 2005.

In a similar vein, journalist Yurii Kotenik, reported: “It seems that it remains unclear up until now [February 2005] how many terrorists there were in all at Beslan. School No. 1 consisted of several buildings, separate auditoriums, auxiliary rooms ( a boiler room, etc.) and an interior courtyard. One has to take into account that a part of the terrorists had to keep the hostages under the barrels of their guns in the gymnasium, a part had to rest, and a part had to patrol the perimeter and the approaches. Thirty-two terrorists (the number announced by the General Procuracy) simply could not control such a broad territory and such a large number of hostages.”<sup>92</sup>

That assessment confirms reports from former hostages. “According to my calculations,” stated hostage Veronika Salkazarova, “and I conducted such calculations from the very beginning, there were not less than 50 persons [among the terrorists], because they constantly spelled each other off.”<sup>93</sup> The policewoman who was a hostage in the school, Fatima Dudieva, who impresses one as an attentive observer, has remarked: “There were not less than seventy of them, and they periodically spelled each other off.”<sup>94</sup>

The issue of the number of the terrorists cropped up during President Putin’s discussion with the Beslan Mothers on September 2, 2005. The chairwoman, Susanna Dudieva, recalls: “We said that we do not agree that a single group [of 32 rebels] arrived with weapons and seized the school. The president said, ‘I have witnesses.’ We said that we have other witnesses and that there a great many of them. He said: ‘We’ll sort this out.’ On the question of weapons he has a report [*spravka*] that there were no weapons in the school [before the raid]. We said that there are other witnesses who can show the opposite.”<sup>95</sup>

The terrorists’ ethnicity challenges another questionable assumption. It has generally been believed in the West that Beslan was attacked by a band consisting of ethnic Chechens. This impression appears to be false. Stansilav Kesaev, the chair of the North Ossetian parliament’s commission to investigate the Beslan incident, has asserted that the “overwhelming majority” of the terrorists at Beslan were ethnic Ingush.<sup>96</sup> It seems likely that future researchers will conclude that Kesaev is correct. As we have seen, according to Nur-Pasha Kulaev’s testimony, “the Colonel” and his still unidentified deputy were both ethnic Ingush, and when the Colonel addressed the terrorists he did so in the Ingush language. The Russian authorities also seem to have concluded that they were dealing with a largely Ingush group: former top-level Ingush politicians including Ruslan Aushev and Mikhail Gutseriev—whom the Kremlin dislikes—were rushed into service as negotiators.

Subsequent developments confirm these findings. Asked by prosecutors, “What nationality were the 32 persons in your group?” Nur-Pasha Kulaev responded: “Ingush, one Arab and one Ossetian [presumably Khodov], and one slant-eyed person. The remainder were Ingush and Chechens. There were four or five Chechens...What was the slant-eyed one? A Korean, Chinese, Kazakh? I don’t know. Were there [ethnic] Russians among them? There

<sup>92</sup> Yurii Kotenok, “Za Beslan nakazali ‘pomoshchnikov stroichnika,”” *Utro.ru*, February 21, 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Tat’yana Lokshina, “Pepel Beslana stuchit v moe serdtse,” *Polit.ru*, September 27, 2004.

<sup>94</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 39.

<sup>95</sup> “Vladimir Kolesnikov,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 12, 2005.

<sup>96</sup> “Ubitogo boevika Khodova eshche neskol’ko mesyatsev razyskivalo MVD,” *Ej.ru*, September 1, 2005.

were no Russians... Four persons spoke only in Russian.”<sup>97</sup> In May 2005, journalist Svetlana Meteleva reported: “Full identification has been established for 17 participants in the attack: one Ukrainian [Khodov], and six Chechens, while the remainder were of Ingush nationality.”<sup>98</sup>

The fact that most of the terrorists were Ingush is something that neither the Russian authorities nor the titular head of the terrorists, Chechen Shamil Basaev, wished to admit. The Russian authorities have reasonably been leery of re-igniting the incendiary Ossetian-Ingush “ethnic Chernobyl,” which, in 1992, exploded into heavy fighting in the contested Prigorodnyi District, which Beslan borders. That conflict culminated in the ethnic cleansing of some 30,000 Ingush.<sup>99</sup>

Shamil Basaev’s claims reflect another agenda. As we will see below, Basaev sought to “Chechnize” the terrorist attack, requiring the mostly Ingush terrorists to press for the removal of Russian troops from Chechnya and attempting to scotch their attempts to obtain the release of some 30 mostly Ingush rebels imprisoned for their part in the June 2004 assault on Ingushetia.<sup>100</sup> Basaev, with the apparent intention of misleading his readers, asserted that the terrorist group at Beslan included twelve Chechen males, two Chechen women, nine Ingush, 2 Arabs, 2 Ossetians, and 1 Guran. Basaev also denied in his statement that the terrorists had wanted to obtain the release of confederates captured after the June 2004 events in Ingushetia. “They [the terrorists at Beslan] did not demand that any of the mujahedin be released from prison,” he claimed.<sup>101</sup>

Eyewitness testimony appears to confirm this analysis. One former hostage, Fatima Gutieva, has recalled: “I by myself arrived at the conclusion that they [the terrorist leaders] had switched the task before them [the rank-and-file terrorists]. On the first day they said that they wanted the Ingush rebels to be released... They did not expect that before them would be placed the additional task of obtaining a withdrawal of the troops [from Chechnya]...”<sup>102</sup>

## CRIMINAL CONNECTIONS

Also notable is the fact that many of the suspected terrorists were believed to be in custody. When the Russian authorities first began to identify the perpetrators killed during the storm at Beslan, several former high-ranking officers of the Russian secret services now serving in the Duma’s Security Committee expressed outrage. They wondered aloud how it was possible that “there could be persons [among the terrorists] who were supposed at that time to be in places of imprisonment.” The deputies sent an official inquiry [*zapros*] to the MVD, FSB and Russian General Procuracy demanding answers. Among the signatories of these *zaprosy* were: Vladimir Margelov, a former deputy director for operations of the SVR,

<sup>97</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, III, 38.

<sup>98</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” part II, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 25, 2005.

<sup>99</sup> On this, see “Eto privedet k bol’shoi krovi,” *Vremya.ru*, September 3, 2004.

<sup>100</sup> See “Zayvlenie Amira Brigady Shakhidov ‘Riyadus-Salih’ina’ Abdallakhiya Shamilya,” *Chechenpress.info*, September 17, 2004.

<sup>101</sup> “Zayvlenie Amira Brigady...,” *Chechenpress.info*, September 17, 2004.

<sup>102</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIX, 25.

Gennadii Gudkov, a former colonel in the FSB, Vladimir Stal'makhov, who had previously worked in the central apparatus of the FSB, and Aleksei Volkov, who had served as the head of the MVD for Kursk oblast'.<sup>103</sup>

A particularly scathing article on the subject of these identifications was published by journalist and Duma deputy Aleksandr Khinshtein. "Both terrible and sensational," he began his article, "is the arithmetic of Beslan: as it turns out, five of the eighteen [identified] terrorists had previously been taken into custody by the special services. They were all caught red-handed, but for some reason...they unfailingly found freedom. Five other participants in the terrorist act were on the wanted list for other crimes, but they [law enforcement] were unable to find them."<sup>104</sup>

In response to the *zaprosy* submitted by the Duma deputies, both the MVD and the General Procuracy acknowledged that "two of the terrorists had already been brought to trial. One had been freed by the Procuracy 'as a result of a change of circumstance.' The other had been found not guilty by a jury. He was freed a month and a half before Beslan."<sup>105</sup> The terrorist who had been released due to "a change of circumstance" was Khampash [Khan-Pasha, Khan-Pashi] Kulaev, the older brother of the sole terrorist reportedly captured alive at Beslan. A native of Chechnya's Nozhai-Yurt district, Khampash was arrested in August 2001 for participating in a rebel group under the command of field commander Rabani Khalilov.

Khampash lost his arm during an attack by federal aviation. As a result of the amputation, Khinshtein reported, he had been officially classified as an invalid and, on December 16, 2001, "the criminal case against him was quashed." "What touching, sweet tender-heartedness!" Khinshtein exclaimed, noting that that the one-armed Khampash had been seen by hostages firing a grenade-launcher during the storming of the school by Russian forces.

Another case cited by Khinshtein was that of 23-year-old Isa Torshkhoev. "In June of 1999," Khinshtein recalled, "[Torshkhoev] carried out a robbery in the home of a family in the Terskii district of Kabardino-Balkariya. The offices of the Mozdok police arrested Torskhoev while hot on his trail. At the time he was arrested, they found a grenade on him. However in April 2000 the district court of Mozdok gave him a two-and-a-half year suspended sentence."

"In June of the same year [2000]," Khinshtein continued, "Torshkhoev was sentenced for a second time—by the Terskii District Court—and this time to two years in prison. But he was amnestied while he was still standing there in the courtroom. The Procuracy did not agree with this decision. After it launched a protest, Torshkhoev fled and was put on the wanted list. They found him only in March of 2001. But when they brought him to Terskii Court, Judge Tolparova (a kindly woman, God grant her health!) immediately released the criminal." Torshkhoev's case, Khinshtein added, "was reexamined only in July 2002... for

<sup>103</sup> "Duma nachala svoe rassledovanie po Beslanu," *Gazeta.ru*, September 11, 2004.

<sup>104</sup> Aleksandr Khinshtein, "Prigovorney k svobode," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, October 21, 2004.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

his having illegally carried a grenade and for robbery... Torshkhoev was then sentenced to four years. Naturally, it was a suspended sentence.”

Particularly shocking, in Khinshtein's view, was the case of terrorist Mairbek Shebikhanov. “On the evening of August 7, 2003, on the road between the settlements of Nesterovskaya and Alkhasty, Sunzhenskii District, the group of Shebikhanov fired on an armored transport carrier from ambush. Six soldiers from the Eighth Commandant's company of Groznyi perished, and seven were wounded... On September 26<sup>th</sup> [2003], together with two other participants in the raid, Shebikhanov was taken into custody in Karabulak [Ingushetia]. And even though the terrorists put up armed resistance while they were being arrested, on September 29<sup>th</sup> [2003]—that is, precisely three days later—the procuracy of Karabulak District freed Shebikhanov. The enraged officers of the Ingush UBOP were forced to arrest him again... and take him off to the republic's procuracy.”

“During the investigation,” Khinshtein summed up, “Shebikhanov fully admitted his guilt. He was charged with an entire bouquet of articles from the Criminal Code (murder, terrorism, participation in the NVF [the separatist movement], the illegal possession and bearing of arms). But then something miraculous happened... In July, the Supreme Court of Ingushetia found the terrorist not guilty. The verdict was reached by a jury. Shebikhanov left directly from the court and immediately joined the rebels. There were less than two months left until the Beslan tragedy.”

Khinshtein also discussed the case of Adam Iliev, a twenty-year-old Ingush from Malgobek District, who was arrested while caught in the act of building bombs. “A month and a half [after his arrest], an investigator for the Malgobek police for some reason released Iliev on his own recognizance. On the same day, with the agreement of the deputy procurator of the district, the criminal case against him was completely quashed.” The authorities noted that Iliev had not been arrested previously and enjoyed good character references. Another “hero” of Beslan was 27-year-old Chechen Sultan Kamurzoev, who was arrested in February 2000 by the MVD's Grozny department for participating in the NVF. Two months later he was released for time served.

The investigative efforts of Khinshtein and the deputies on the Duma's Security Committee came to naught, and they were soon required to drop the issue. Yet during his trial in the summer of 2005, Nur-Pasha Kulaev confided several times during the proceedings that he and his older brother had de facto been forced by the terrorists to join their band. Both of them, he said, had been accused by the terrorists of “collaboration with the [Russian] authorities.” Nur-Pasha maintained at the trial that he “indeed possessed a certification from an employee of the security services of the [pro-Moscow] president of Chechnya.”<sup>106</sup> He also said at the trial: “They [the terrorists] came and picked me up because I had prepared documents that I wanted to work with [pro-Moscow deputy Chechen premier] Ramzan Kadyrov.”<sup>107</sup>

<sup>106</sup> “U Kulaeva bylo udostvorenie sotrudnika bezopasnosti prezidenta Chechni,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, June 1, 2005.

<sup>107</sup> “Beslanskie terrorsty ne khoteli otdavat' Kulaeva Ramzanu Kadyrovu,” *Lenta.ru*, July 15, 2005.

On the subject of the inexplicable release from prison of certain of the terrorists who later attacked Beslan, former FSB lieutenant colonel Aleksandr Litvinenko, who once served as a Russian counter-terrorism specialist, has commented: "According to the internal orders which regulate the operational secret service activity of the organs of the FSB of the Russian Federation, in the case of persons who have been arrested on suspicion of their participation in illegal armed units...a file of operational work progress is opened... During the work on this case, measures are taken for the operational tracking of the criminal cases and secret measures are taken with regard to the [former] prisoners, i.e., they are shadowed, and, in this connection, they are constantly under the control of the secret services."<sup>108</sup>

Terrorists released following their arrest by the FSB on terrorism charges, Litvinenko continued, "could not have left their prisons under any circumstances, without having come into the view of the FSB.... I don't have any doubts that after their detention and arrest... active operational measures were conducted with regard to them and, first of all, measures aimed at turning them into secret collaborators with the FSB. And only after they had been recruited... were they then released to carry out assignments for the special services." *Der Spiegel's* investigative team drew similar conclusions: "Many of the hostage-takers, especially their leaders, were wanted criminals, some of many years' standing, but they remained unmolested by the police even though they moved about freely in their home village. Other perpetrators had been detained prior to Beslan but were then released for dubious reasons."<sup>109</sup>

Writing in May 2005, journalist Svetlana Meteleva summed up the situation with regard to these terrorists in the following way: "The beasts came [to Beslan] from their cages. It was the judges, police and the FSB who opened the cages for them. As for the remaining twelve who have been identified there is no such information [i.e., that they had previously been arrested]. But that is not necessary. It is sufficient to mention that their corpses were identified from fingerprints. That means that each of them was 'on operational registration.'"<sup>110</sup>

Allegations of drug addiction among the terrorists also bear mentioning. In September 2005, the deputy Russian procurator general Nikolai Shepel' asserted: "No conditions for the freeing of the hostages were put forward [by the terrorists], and none were discussed." He then added contemptuously: "Twenty-seven of the rebels were taking drugs, 22 of them were under the effect of strong narcotics—of heroin and morphine."<sup>111</sup> How, he implied, could one even consider negotiating with drug addicts?

The North Ossetian parliamentary commission to investigate the Beslan episode has challenged this assertion. In its draft report, the commission concluded, "No traces of strong narcotics were found in the bodies of the rebels, something which coincides with the testimony of the hostages, who underline the high professionalism of the terrorists and are

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<sup>108</sup> In *Chechenpress.info*, September 8, 2004. English translation by Norbert Strade. It should be noted that Litvinenko is a close associate of fugitive oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

<sup>109</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>110</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, "Beslan bez grifov," part II, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 25, 2005.

<sup>111</sup> "Zamgenprokurora zayavil, chto shturma v Beslane ne bylo," *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2005.

not inclined to consider the rebels banal drug addicts.”<sup>112</sup> In similar fashion, doctor Larisa Mamitova has recalled an incident from her captivity at the school: “The Colonel came up to me and said: ‘Doctor, do you see any drug addicts here?’ I said, ‘No.’ ‘Then,’ he said, ‘Remember my words, they will call us drug addicts...’”<sup>113</sup>

## TERRORIST DEMANDS

Despite Russian deputy procurator Shepel’s heated denial that the Beslan terrorists had wanted to negotiate—President Putin initially made the same claim during his 2 September 2005 meeting with four Beslan Mothers<sup>114</sup>—it seems clear that the terrorists in fact did seek to negotiate with the Russian authorities, albeit with high-ranking and not low-ranking officials. Attempts by the authorities to initiate low-level negotiations were quickly rebuffed by the terrorists: “At 11:00 a.m. [on September 1st], two policemen went up to the building for negotiations, but the terrorists halted them with shots [over their heads].”<sup>115</sup>

According to *Der Spiegel*, one noteworthy attempt by the terrorists to initiate negotiations was effectively jump-started by the North Ossetian doctor, Larisa Mamitova, who found herself and her young son numbered among the hostages. Shortly after the school complex had been seized, “The terrorists addressed the crowd [of hostages] asking for a doctor. Mamitova speaks up. She is led to the main corridor. Two terrorists are sitting there on the floor, leaning against the wall and bleeding profusely. Mamitova figures that one is around 25 years old, the other 35... A bullet has passed through the lower part of the older one’s right arm... She bandages the older one first.... Mamitova has the feeling the man is one of the leaders of the hostage-takers. He is particularly aggressive and issues orders to the others...”<sup>116</sup> The two terrorists were wounded during the assault. One of the children’s fathers reportedly brought a pistol with him to the school, and he seems to have been able to wound two terrorists and kill another.

The terrorist demands were clear: “‘We have only one goal,’ Khodov [the wounded terrorist] said to Mamitova. ‘The Russian army must leave Chechnya.’ Mamitova suggests that a note with a message be sent outside. ‘Only the Colonel can decide that,’ Khodov says. ‘Then let me talk to the Colonel,’ Mamitova says.” After some time Mamitova is taken to see the Colonel. “The Colonel seems purposeful and sure, so sure that Mamitova has the feeling he has experience with hostage-taking. The doctor sees that they [the other terrorists] are afraid of the Colonel and they do what he orders.”

The *Der Spiegel* account continues: “The Colonel sits back down at the table with Mamitova. He gives her a sheet of paper and a pen, and dictates a phone number at which the Russian government should call him. Then he digs around in his pants pocket. He pulls out a floor plan of the school, examines it briefly, and puts it back in his pocket. Then he takes out a sheet of paper with writing on it and dictates his demands to Mamitova. The presidents of

<sup>112</sup> Elena Milashina, “Den’ neznaniya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>113</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VII, 34.

<sup>114</sup> Natal’ya Galimova, “My donesli do nego pravdu,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 5, 2005.

<sup>115</sup> “Nord-Ossetia,” *Gzt.ru*, September 1, 2004.

<sup>116</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

North Ossetia and Ingushetia must come to the school to negotiate, together with Putin's advisor on the Caucasus, Aslambek Aslakhonov, and Leonid Roshal', a Moscow pediatrician and Putin confidant. Twenty hostages will be shot for each wounded hostage-taker, and fifty for each dead one. If the school is stormed, he will blow it up. The Colonel also demands that water be provided from Nazran', Ingushetia, water, pure water." Waving a white flag, Mamitova then left the school building to deliver the message. The terrorists told her that they would shoot her son if she attempted to flee. She naturally returned to the building.

In its "Chronicle of the seizure of hostages" posted on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, the website *Newsru.com* reported that the note carried by Mamitova was delivered at 11:35 a.m. on September 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>117</sup> At 12:10 p.m., the same website reported: "The terrorists who seized the school in Beslan have sent the law enforcement organs a note with a released hostage carrying the text, 'Wait.'" And at 12:25 p.m. *newsru.com* wrote: "The terrorists entered into negotiations and hand over a video-cassette containing a tape of what had happened inside the school. They also hand over a note in which they demand that the rebels who attacked Ingushetia on the night of June 22<sup>nd</sup> be freed."

This final point was confirmed by the web-site *GZT.ru*: "The bandits demanded that 27 rebels captured after the June raid on Ingushetia be released from prison in Vladikavkaz [North Ossetia], which confirms the version that Beslan was attacked by a mixed Chechen-Ingush detachment."<sup>118</sup> Yet according to another former hostage, Olga Vlaskina, "the Colonel" also told them: "Your demands [to be transmitted to the Russian authorities] are...to remove the troops from Chechnya, to halt the war in Chechnya and to release certain of the rebels who are in prison in Vladikavkaz."<sup>119</sup>

At 2:09 p.m. on September 1<sup>st</sup>, it was reported: "The terrorists declined to negotiate with Mufti Ruslan Valgosov [of North Ossetia] and the procurator of Beslan, Alan Batagov. They did not admit the mufti and the procurator into the school... In the words of the mufti, the terrorists again declared they would talk only with Dzasokhov, Zyazikov, and Roshal'."<sup>120</sup> The message did not appear to go through. During the early phases of the incident the primary telephone negotiator with the terrorists during was an FSB officer from North Ossetia. As Stanislav Kesaev has noted, "They kept promising him [the local negotiator] that professional negotiators from Moscow would soon appear. But they did not appear."<sup>121</sup>

The terrorist soon made good on their promises. During the first day of the hostage crisis, they brazenly executed approximately twenty male hostages inside the school.<sup>122</sup> Their bodies were later dumped outside the building where they lay decomposing. The reasons behind this wanton criminal act have been explained by commentators as being: a desire to get rid of physically strong male hostages who could have caused the terrorists difficulties; a desire

<sup>117</sup> "Khronika zakhvata zalozhnikov v shkole goroda Beslana v Severnoi Osetii," *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2004.

<sup>118</sup> "Nord-Ossetia," *Gazeta.ru*, September 1, 2004.

<sup>119</sup> "Skvachennogo boevika zalozhniky ne uznayut," *Gazeta.ru*, September 10, 2004.

<sup>120</sup> "Khronika zakhvata," *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2004.

<sup>121</sup> Olga Allenova, "Byli deistviya, kotorye byli pokhozhi na shturm'," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, August 29, 2005.

<sup>122</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

to intimidate the other hostages; and, finally, a wish to convince the Russian authorities that their threat to kill the remaining hostages was a credible one.

### FEDERAL RESPONSE

There has been some question as to when the name of Aslambek Aslakhonov, President Putin's advisor on the North Caucasus, was added to the list of officials whom the terrorists wanted to come to the school.<sup>123</sup> Doctor Mamitova appears to have forgotten at what point Aslakhonov's name was added to the list. As for the other three names on the list—Zyazikov, Roshal' and Dzasokhov--it seems likely that the terrorists wanted to execute Murat Zyazikov, a former FSB general serving as the president of Ingushetia, and pediatrician Leonid Roshal', who had been present at Nord-Ost where he had reportedly collaborated with the Russian secret services. As journalist Sanobar Shermatova has noted: "The rebels repeatedly had tried to kill Zyazikov, and the Ichkeriya web-sites openly call Roshal' an FSB collaborator."<sup>124</sup>

In the case of President Dzasokhov of North Ossetia and of the Chechen Aslambek Aslakhonov, however, it seems likely that the terrorists wanted them present as negotiators. With the Kremlin's knowledge, Dzasokhov had at one point provided refuge to the family of Chechen separatist president Aslan Maskhadov, while Aslakhonov is generally not viewed as close to Putin. During a session in the trial of Nur-Pasha Kulaev Beslan hostage Rustam Kokov recalled: "[Vladimir] Khodov told me that the hostages weren't needed, and he did not intend to kill them. 'We need Dzasokhov [he said]. Your people think that we want to kill him, but we need him alive.'"<sup>125</sup>

As previously noted, the terrorists released a video on September 1<sup>st</sup> showing the number of hostages seized. The official Russian response was that this cassette was empty. "They [the terrorists] sent out a cassette in which the demands of the rebels were laid out. But it turned out to be empty."<sup>126</sup> On September 7<sup>th</sup>, however, the Russian television channel NTV showed a videotape "which was filmed inside the seized school by the terrorists themselves... Judging from everything, the videotape was made on September 1<sup>st</sup> several hours after the taking of the school... Up until today no-one but the employees of the special services had seen it."<sup>127</sup> The contradiction raises many questions. So do subsequent events.

According to *Der Spiegel's* intricate reconstruction of events: "The terrorist at the bomb detonator is sitting in a chair listening to the radio. Larisa Mamitova, the doctor, learns that the government got the message on the slip of paper, but supposedly the phone number does not work. Mamitova asks to speak to 'the Colonel.' She is led to the stairs, and the Colonel comes down from the second floor. The Colonel takes two cell phones and calls

<sup>123</sup> On this, see the summary of the draft report of the Torshin commission in Elena Milashina, "Den' neznaniya," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>124</sup> Sanobar Shermatova, "Peregovory planirovalis'," *Moskovskie Novosti*, September 5, 2004.

<sup>125</sup> Zaur Farniev, "Operatsiya po zakhvatu shkoly proshla na vse sto ballov," *Kommersant*, June 24, 2005.

<sup>126</sup> Sanobar Shermatova, "Peregovory planirovalis'," *Moskovskie Novosti*, September 5, 2005.

<sup>127</sup> "Telekanal NTV pokazal videozapis' sdelannuyu terroristom v shkole v Beslane," *Newsru.com*, September 7, 2004.

one of them with the other. And indeed, the number does not work.” This development then prompted the German reporters to ask: “Has the [Russian] crisis staff in the meantime blocked the number that was working the evening before in order to gain some time? Or to confuse the hostage-takers?”<sup>128</sup>

Whatever the case, “The Colonel dictates a new number to Mamitova. She writes the number down on a slip of paper. She also writes that the terrorists are losing their patience.” Waving her son’s undershirt as a white flag, Mamitova then goes out and delivers the new message. From this point forward, the terrorists began to respond to efforts that were being made by moderate political leaders from the North Caucasus, including Aleksandr Dzasokhov, Aslambek Aslakahanov, Ruslan Aushev, Mikhail Gutseriev. These negotiations will be covered later in this report.

## PRESIDENT PUTIN

This study now moves from consideration of the terrorist’s aims to an examination of the negotiation strategy pursued by Russian president Vladimir Putin and his subordinates. Putin, who had been vacationing on the Black Sea at the resort town of Sochi, returned by plane to Moscow shortly after learning of the hostage-taking incident. Immediately upon his arrival at the airport in Moscow, he held a meeting with the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) director Rashid Nurgaliev, Russian Procurator General Vladimir Ustinov, with FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev, and with the first deputy director of the FSB and commander of the Russian Border-guards, Vladimir Pronichev.<sup>129</sup> The presence of General Pronichev at this meeting is particularly significant. Pronichev oversaw the storming of the Dubrovka theatre in October 2002, in which at least 125 hostages died from the effects of a special gas employed by the FSB.

Following the meeting with his power ministers, Putin placed a secure call to the elected president of North Ossetia, former Politburo member (under Gorbachev) Aleksandr Dzasokhov. At approximately noon, Dzasokhov had been conducting a meeting at an *ad hoc* headquarters formed to manage the Beslan crisis. According to one eyewitness: “At that time there was a call: the President of Russia gave an [oral] command to hand over the organization of the counter-terrorist operation to the organs of the FSB. There then commenced a complete *bardak* [anarchy].”<sup>130</sup> If this account is accurate, Putin effectively disempowered the elected president of North Ossetia and placed control of the operation under FSB leadership. As we shall see, this move significantly reduced the chances of a negotiated settlement.

The next glimpse we have of Putin is on the September 2<sup>nd</sup>. During the televised part of a meeting held in Moscow with King Abdullah II of Jordan, Putin emphasized: “Our chief goal consists, of course, under the situation that has been formed, in saving the lives and preserving the health of those who are hostages. All of the actions of our forces which are concerned with freeing the hostages will be dedicated and subordinated exclusively to that

<sup>128</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>129</sup> “Boeviki poshli v shkolu,” *Politcom.ru*, September 1, 2004.

<sup>130</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” Part III, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 26, 2005.

task.”<sup>131</sup> Putin then remained out of public view until the morning of September 4<sup>th</sup>, when the storming of the school building was completed.

### LOCAL COORDINATION

At noon on September 1<sup>st</sup> Putin telephoned the ad hoc headquarters in Beslan led by President Dzasokhov and ordered that the anti-terrorism operation be placed under FSB command. That order appears in a 400-page report by an “expert commission” charged with examining the crisis. Leaked to *Moskovskii komsomolets* journalist Svetlana Meteleva, this remarkable document contains both analysis and official records. The commission included Reserve FSB Lieutenant General Ivan Mironov and Aleksandr Matovnikov, deputy head of administration for the FSB’s “A” Special Purpose Center.<sup>132</sup>

Following Putin’s oral directive, FSB personnel in Beslan immediately demanded that the MVD take down the “special equipment to scan radio communications” that it had set up. The FSB officers then set up their own equipment. “In sum,” observed one MVD officer, “there existed two headquarters acting in parallel. One, under the leadership of the FSB, concentrated on the operation to free the hostages. But what occurred there and what decisions they adopted—no-one knew. The second, the operational headquarters of the MVD, worked on the territory: it set up cordons, evacuated residents, reacted to all announcements. There was no coordination between the two headquarters.”<sup>133</sup>

Similar statements were made in the Russia’s Federation Council, to the dismay of many Council members. During a session of the Federation Council, FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev confirmed, to the dismay of many council members, that there had indeed been no coordination between the FSB, MVD, and the army during the hostage-taking.<sup>134</sup> These allegations merit deeper consideration. As we shall see below, the FSB was in fact able to impose its will on the MVD and military when it chose to do so.

Soldiers from the FSB’s Special Purpose Center (*spetsnaz*) arrived in Beslan during the afternoon of September 1<sup>st</sup> and immediately began coordinating their activities with the local FSB-led headquarters. Those forces comprises members of the two elite “Al’fa” and “Vypel” counter-terrorist units, led by FSM Colonel General Aleksandr Tikhonov, who was appointed the director of the FSB’s Special Purpose Center in 1998.<sup>135</sup> Another major development occurred late in the afternoon on the first day of the crisis with the arrival of FSB Deputy Directors Vladimir Pronichev and Vladimir Anisimov.

As previously noted, Pronichev, “handled the Dubrovka theater siege in Moscow in October 2002.”<sup>136</sup> Despite their experience, however, commission report cited by Svetlana Meteleva remarks that these two top-ranking generals issued only banal commands such as “Prepare

<sup>131</sup> “Zayavlenie prezidenta Rossii,” *Gzt.ru*, September 2, 2004.

<sup>132</sup> Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” Parts I-III, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 24-26, 2005.

<sup>133</sup> Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 24-26, 2005.

<sup>134</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>135</sup> “Beslanskaya komissiya zanyalas’ spetsnazom,” *Gazeta.ru*, October 28, 2004. See also *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>136</sup> Nabi Abdullaev, “Report: Beslan HQ was run by others,” *Moscow Times*, April 15, 2005.

to provide medical assistance to the hostages and the wounded.” “But possibly,” Meteleva added, “the remaining commands of the generals were so secret that the experts were not told about them. However, immediately following the arrival of Vladimir Pronichev and Vladimir Anisimov at the operational headquarters they remembered about the existence of the press.” Henceforth, responsibility for all public relations was placed on the heads of the local North Ossetian FSB and MVD Generals, Andreev and Dzantiev.<sup>137</sup>

The arrival of these two officials corresponded with the removal of a potential negotiator. After learning about the crisis, Anna Politkovskaya, the esteemed correspondent for *Novaya Gazeta*, decided to fly to Rostov-on-Don and then travel by car to Beslan. She never arrived. “Finally at about 9:00 p.m. [on September 1<sup>st</sup>],” Politkovskaya recalled, “I succeeded in getting a seat on a plane, ordered a cup of tea, and a certain time later lost consciousness. Already in the hospital [in Rostov] a doctor informed me that I had been poisoned with a powerful unidentified toxic substance. I suspect three FSB officers who were flying in business class... One of them addressed the stewardess with a question and the other put a tablet in my cup. I survived by a miracle... I did not conceal that I was going there to initiate negotiations with the terrorists. Honestly speaking, I never thought that they [the special services] would go so far.”<sup>138</sup>

In an October 2004 interview, Politkovskaya elaborated on the negotiations she had been intending to conduct with the terrorists in Beslan. On September 1<sup>st</sup> an article in British newspaper *The Independent* reported that, “she phoned her rebel contacts and pleaded with them to allow Aslan Maskhadov, former Chechen president and rebel leader, to journey to Beslan and persuade the hostage-takers to release their captives. Having agreed to fly to Beslan and negotiate a safe passage for Maskhadov, she set off for the airport.” “My last contact with Maskhadov’s people was ten minutes before I got on the plane,” reported Politkovskaya, “I suppose I did more than a journalist normally does. I then got on the plane and drank some tea and then...nothing.”<sup>139</sup>

Another potential negotiator, Andrei Babitsky of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, who had visited Chechnya incognito on several occasions, was physically prevented from leaving Moscow. Arriving at the airport from abroad, he was first held by police for allegedly having explosives in his pocket, and was then roughly jostled by “hoodlums” before being taken by police to court on a criminal charge.<sup>140</sup> The charge was dropped after the Beslan tragedy concluded. Babitsky was fined and then permitted to return to the West.<sup>141</sup>

Another key development occurred during the afternoon of September 2<sup>nd</sup>. According to the commission report: “At 2:45 p.m., there came a command from the FSB of the Russian Federation (a coded telegram from Patrushev, number 629, dated September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004)

<sup>137</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” Part III, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 26, 2005.

<sup>138</sup> “Anna Politkovskaya: ‘Ya vyzhila prosto chudom,’” *Rtl.fr*, September 10, 2004, Russian translation at *inosmi.ru*, September 10, 2004. See also: Anna Politkovskaya, “Poisoned by Putin,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2004.

<sup>139</sup> Andrew Osborn, “Anna Politkovskaya: Putin, poison and my struggle for freedom,” *The Independent*, October 15, 2004.

<sup>140</sup> “V aeroportu ‘Vnukovo’ militsiei zaderzhan korrespondent Radio Svoboda Andrei Babitskii,” *Svoboda.org*, September 2, 2004.

<sup>141</sup> “Babitskomu zamenil arrest na shtraf,” *Grani.ru*, September 4, 2004.

concerning the naming of the head of the FSB of the Republic of North Ossetia, Alaniya, Andreev, as the leader of the headquarters. As members of the headquarters were to be included the minister of education of the republic, Levitskaya, the head of the 'Zashchita' center, Goncharov, and the deputy director of the information program of 'Rossiya' State Television, Vasil'ev... Now Andreev was the leader on a legal foundation." Andreev appointment proved somewhat unconventional. Though roughly in accord with Russian law, it ought to have come from Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov, and not from Patrushev. At some point, however, Fradkov reportedly did issue a decree officially naming Andreev head of the operations headquarters.<sup>142</sup>

The chain of command still remained muddled. Russian State Duma deputy Yurii Savel'ev of the *Rodina* faction, who was present in Beslan at the time of the crisis, maintained that FSB Generals Pronichev and Anisimov were there merely "as consultants who had had experience in conducting anti-terrorist operations. In particular, Pronichev had led the operation to free the hostages in 'Nord-Ost' in the fall of 2002."<sup>143</sup> In point of fact, however, the two generals were there not as consultants, but rather to run the operation. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, Duma Deputy Mikhail Markelov, who was also present in Beslan throughout the crisis, confided: "I will tell you—the headquarters really worked. It was headed by the first deputy director of the FSB, Vladimir Pronichev."<sup>144</sup> *Novaya Gazeta* correspondent Elena Milashina drew similar conclusions. "Patrushev's deputies—Pronichev, Anisimov and others—were in charge of everything at Beslan," she reported.<sup>145</sup> Pro-Kremlin sources also confirm that observation. A journalist for the government newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, present in Beslan recalled General Pronichev issuing orders at the time of the storming of the school on September 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>146</sup>

In its first draft report, the Kesaev commission noted that Generals Pronichev and Anisimov, as well as General Tikhonov, the head of the FSB Special Purpose Center, and General Kaloev, the head of the FSB for the Southern Federal District, all arrived on September 1st. The presence of these very high-ranking FSB officials created a strange situation: "General Andreev was directing his bosses. However, witnesses who were present at the headquarters state that the Moscow FSB leaders and the employees of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation created their own parallel headquarters where there was no access for either Andreev or Dzasokhov."<sup>147</sup>

The Kesaev commission's draft goes on to assert: "The North Ossetian commission is convinced that the real leaders of the headquarters were precisely high-ranking personnel of the FSB. The commission evaluates extremely negatively the fact that, in the criminal case, there has been no questioning of the basic participants at the headquarters—General Pronichev, General Anisimov, the leader of the Special Purpose Center Tikhonov, and the head of the FSB of the Russian Federation Patrushev. The commission will insist on the official questioning of the above-named individuals..."<sup>148</sup>

<sup>142</sup> Nabi Abdullaev, "Report: Beslan HQ was run by others," *Moscow Times*, April 15, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>143</sup> Nikto ne priznaet otvetsvennosti," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, June 20, 2005.

<sup>144</sup> "Protsess byl nepravlayemy," *Gzr.ru*, September 7, 2004.

<sup>145</sup> Elena Milashina, "Taimuraz Mamsurov," *Novaya Gazeta*, June 16, 2005.

<sup>146</sup> Timofei Borisov, "Na rasstoyanii pryamogo vystrela," *Rg.ru*, September 7, 2004.

<sup>147</sup> Elena Milashina, "Den' nezniya," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

This confusion begs the question: what did the FSB-led headquarters do? According to a number of sources, their primary activity was to prepare for an attack on the school building: “The possibility of an assault was being discussed by FSB deputy chief Pronichev and General Tikhonov, the commander of the Al’fa and Vympel antiterrorist units... The North Ossetian politicians protested vehemently.”<sup>149</sup> The FSB also placed high priority on public relations activities. General Andreev and other spokesmen at the headquarters attempted heavy-handedly to manufacture a symbolic link between the terrorists who were at the school and al-Qaeda.

That narrative was carefully crafted. At 11:10 a.m. on September 2<sup>nd</sup> the website *newsru.com* reported “The head of the Moscow bureau of the Qatar television channel Al-Jazeera, Akram Khazam, denied information concerning the channel’s alleged intention to act as an intermediary in negotiations with the rebels... [General] Valerii Andreev had announced that the Arab television stations Al-Alam and Al-Jazeera had offered their help in establishing contact with the terrorists.” At 2:30 p.m. on the same day, *newsru.com* reported that a journalist working for the channel Al-Alam “announced that the FSB had approached him with a request to be an intermediary in the negotiations.”<sup>150</sup>

Even before the storming of the school building had been completed on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, General Andreev revealed on “Rossiya” State Television that nine of the “destroyed bandits” had been Arabs and that one had been a Muslim “Negro.”<sup>151</sup> In an interview with a reporter for *Time* magazine and other journalists held shortly thereafter, President Putin “blamed the attack [on Beslan] on global jihad... He claimed that nine of the hostage takers were from the ‘Arab world’ and one from Muslim Africa... By linking the terrorists to al-Qaeda, Putin wants to join George W. Bush’s global war on terror...”<sup>152</sup>

Another preoccupation of the FSB-led headquarters was to emphasize that there were only 354 hostages being held in the school. As Aleksandr Torshin, the chair of the Russian parliamentary commission, has noted: “The first to cite the figure [of 354 hostages] was Valerii Andreev.”<sup>153</sup> This figure—a patently false one—was surfaced by Russian state television and radio early in the morning of September 2<sup>nd</sup> and was being repeated as late as 10:30 a.m. on September 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>154</sup> As one anonymous representative of the Russian power ministries noted: “They [the headquarters] did not cite that figure of 354 right away. If they had, one could accept that they were mistaken. But the figure was cited on the second day...”

<sup>149</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>150</sup> “Khronika zakhvata...,” *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2004. General Andreev has confirmed that an approach was made to Al-Alam. See “Protokol doprosa byvshego nachal’nika UFSB RF po RSO-A general-maiora V.A. Andreeva,” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 14, 2005.

<sup>151</sup> “Sredi unishtozhennykh v Beslane terroristov—9 arabov i negr,” *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2004.

<sup>152</sup> J.F.O. McAllister and Paul Quinn-Judge, “The whole world is crying,” *Time Europe*, September 20, 2004. According to an October 14, 2004 *RIA Novosti* press release, Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov claimed at an informal session of the Russia-NATO council held in Romania that “of the 17 identified terrorists killed in Beslan, five were citizens of Arab states.”

<sup>153</sup> Valeii Vyzhutovich, “Shmelei ot komissii ne spryachesh’,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, February 11, 2005.

<sup>154</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

I think that the real figure [more than 1,200] was known to the headquarters. And it was also known to the people in the cordon [around the school].”<sup>155</sup>

The anonymous source continued: “The first and the main thing is that you have to make it so that the criminals are convinced that there will be no storm [of the building]. And then you prepare for a storm. But in Beslan they did the exact opposite. They convinced the criminals that there would be a storm... The authorities can lie, of course, but the lie must be advantageous for the hostages.... The criminals threw out a cassette as well as a note containing demands for the withdrawal of forces from Chechnya and for the arrival of four persons—Dzasokhov, Zyazikov, Aslakhonov and Roshal’.”

“But over the [Russian state] television,” the source continued, “the terrorists hear concerning themselves that those who seized the school are strange people who advance no demands, and that no-one knows that they want. But the TV also says that the terrorists are killing the hostages, and the terrorists are listening to that. The first thought in the minds of the terrorists was likely this: the authorities want to prepare public opinion for the fact that we do not agree to negotiations, that we are suicide fighters [*smertniki*], and that in any case the school will be blown up, so something has to be done. The authorities in the final analysis convinced the criminals that there would be a storm, convinced them by their actions.”

This analysis is borne out by the testimony of a number of the former hostages. According to one hostage, Albegova, “He [Vladimir Khodov] and the others listened to the news on a radio. He told us that the government claimed that there were 350 hostages. ‘They don’t need you,’ he told us. ‘You are expendable. They are lying so that when they storm the building they can cover up the casualties.’”<sup>156</sup> The school principal, Tsalieva, has recalled that the leader of the terrorists, the Colonel, “forced her to watch the television news, claiming such misinformation [about 354] hostages] proved that Moscow had written off the hostages.”<sup>157</sup>

A number of the former hostages have testified that the terrorists “began to act like beasts” after the flagrantly false number of 354 was announced. As a hostage and the mother of a young hostage, Marina Kantemirova, has recalled: “On the first day they permitted the children to go to the toilet. But when on television they announced that there were 354 hostages, the terrorists forbade it. They said: ‘We can do anything we want with you, since there are not 1200 of you, but only 354, and the authorities don’t need you.’”<sup>158</sup>

The North Ossetian parliamentary commission investigating the Beslan incident reached similar conclusions. In its draft report, the commission noted: “The responsibility for the intentionally false information concerning the hostages... is borne by the representatives of the federal center: the employee of the Presidential Administration, Dmitrii Peskov, who

<sup>155</sup> “V etom shtabe kto khotel, tot i komandoval,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 16, 2004.

<sup>156</sup> Mark Franchetti and Matthew Campbell, “How a repressed misfit became the butcher of Beslan,” *Sunday Times*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>157</sup> Mark Franchetti, “Beslan turns hate on school director,” *Sunday Times*, October 17, 2004.

<sup>158</sup> “Svyshe 1360 chelovek postradali v Beslane (svidetel’stva ochevidetsev),” *Newsru.com*, September 13, 2004.

works for the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation, [Aleksei] Gromov, and the employee of the Moscow office of Russian State Television, Vasil'ev."<sup>159</sup>

In addition to repeatedly citing a false figure for the number of hostages in the building, the FSB-led headquarters adroitly thwarted the attempts of the terrorists to enter into negotiations. The cell-phone number that the Colonel had dictated to Dr. Mamitova on September 1<sup>st</sup> was "blocked." A video-tape made by the terrorists on September 1<sup>st</sup> was declared "empty," even though it was shown on NTV several days later. The authorities dragged their feet in securing the release of twenty-seven terrorists captured in June 2004, many of whom could quite realistically have been exchanged for large numbers of hostages, especially young children.

The authorities also sought at one point to bring relatives of the hostage-takers to the school allegedly to put pressure on the rebels. As FSB General Andreev has testified: "One of the hostages, Kastuev, succeeded in fleeing the school. During his interrogation, he identified from a photograph a resident of the Republic of Ingushetia, I.I. Kozdoev, from among pictures of those wanted for serious crimes. At the command of...FSB Major General S.B. Koryakov, his family was located—a [former] wife and three children—and they were transported to Beslan. Their appeal to the terrorists was recorded on a videocassette with the aim of using it in the negotiation process. Analogous measures were taken in regard to other participants in the seizure of hostages as information came in concerning the establishment of their identities."<sup>160</sup>

Such measures were bound to irritate, indeed perhaps enrage, the terrorists. Negotiator Ruslan Aushev has recalled: "The commander [i.e., the Colonel] said, you can bring our relatives over here and kill them in the yard. And we will then kill 50% of the hostages."<sup>161</sup> As military affairs journalist Pavel Felgenhauer has rightly concluded, the negotiation techniques of the Russian headquarters served objectively "to drive the terrorists to a frenzy."<sup>162</sup> Was this not, one must ask, their intention all along?

## THE SOUTH OSSETIAN DIMENSION

If, as some residents of North Ossetia have argued, the actual aim of the FSB-led headquarters, was to storm the building, then the significant number of armed South Ossetians present in the crowd outside the school may have been seen as a potentially useful factor. The president of South Ossetia, a breakaway region of Georgia, Eduard Kokoity, was present at the headquarters building throughout the crisis.<sup>163</sup> In an interview delivered shortly after the Beslan events, Kokoity noted that he had been a Russian citizen since 1992 and that "98% of the population of our republic are Russian citizens."<sup>164</sup> According to

<sup>159</sup> In Elena Milashina, "Den' neznaniya," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>160</sup> "Protokola doprosa..." *Novaya Gazeta*, April 14, 2005.

<sup>161</sup> Seth Mydans, "Negotiator in Russian school hostage case warns revenge could ignite regional violence," *New York Times*, September 29, 2004, p. A8.

<sup>162</sup> Pavel Felgengauer, "'Shmel' i 'svin'?" *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

<sup>163</sup> Timofei Borisov, "Na rasstoyanii pryamogo vystrela," *Rg.ru*, September 7, 2004.

<sup>164</sup> "Yuzhnaya Ossetia—eto uzhe Rossiya," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 17, 2004.

*Moskovskii Komsomolets* President Kokoity had brought “reinforcements” with him from South Ossetia.<sup>165</sup>

The mob was well organized. Among those in the ranks of the *opolchentsy* [homeguard] around the school, were representatives of the “South Ossetian MVD.”<sup>166</sup> On September 6<sup>th</sup>, the leading human rights website *bro.org* reported: “By the evening of 2 September in the area of the House of Culture there began to gather a group of men in civilian clothing. Several of them were armed. At 10:00 p.m... they put on white gauze armbands. To our question, ‘What are those armbands for?’ the citizens in camouflage uniforms without epaulettes (judging from their accents, they were of South Ossetian origin) answered: ‘We are *boeviki* [rebels]. The armbands are so that we will recognize one another.’ ‘Will you storm the building?’ we asked. ‘As long as our commander does not say so, we won’t.’”<sup>167</sup>

Their presisen may have exacerbated the crisis. In early October of 2004, *Chechnya Weekly* editor Lawrence Uzzell published a summary of an interview he had conducted with a journalist, Rustam Kaliev, who had been present in Beslan working as a producer for a Japanese television network. Kaliev told Uzzell that “the gunmen surrounding the school in North Ossetia included South Ossetians—and it was precisely these outsiders who opened fire first on that fatal Friday.” Uzzell continued: “Kaliev said that local residents... who were keeping vigil outside, told him about the South Ossetians. They were well armed, he said, with AK-47 assault rifles and high quality sniper rifles... In Kaliev’s view, the role of the South Ossetians ‘was advantageous to the federal authorities—it helped them avoid responsibility. His theory...is that the South Ossetian gunmen were being indirectly manipulated or controlled by the Kremlin.’”<sup>168</sup>

Vadim Rechkalov, a journalist for the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, has arrived at similar conclusions: “One can also dump a lot on the *opolchentsy* who were surrounding the school. They [the authorities] say that they were armed and it would have been impossible to drive them away from the cordon. No-one drove them away. Because they, too, were part of the plan.”<sup>169</sup>

It has recently come to light that some of these South Ossetians present outside the school were recent arrivals in the North, living in the large village of Nogir not far Beslan. “It is believed that southerners [i.e., South Ossetians] are more fiery and war-like than northerners... They even began to form up detachments of twenty men near the House of Culture [in Beslan] and collected sign-up lists.”<sup>170</sup> After the storming of the building had been completed, *Izvestiya* noted, the Russian secret police cracked down hard on the citizens of Nogir, who were threatening to take active revenge against the Ingush. The role of the armed South Ossetians in the storming of the school will be discussed later on in this report.

<sup>165</sup> Aleksandr Khinsthein, “Rab Allakha Basaev...,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, October 11, 2004.

<sup>166</sup> Elena Milashina, “O chem goroyat i molchat v Beslane,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 11, 2004.

<sup>167</sup> “Beslan: informatsiya pravozashchitnikov,” *Hro.org*, September 6, 2004.

<sup>168</sup> Lawrence A. Uzzell, “A South Ossetian role in Beslan,” *Chechnya Weekly*, October 6, 2004.

<sup>169</sup> Vadim Rechkalov, “Tol’ko tak my pobedim vruga...,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 14, 2005.

<sup>170</sup> Igor’ Naidenov, “Beslanskii sinfrom,” *Izvestia.ru*, August 30, 2005.

## MODERATES NEGOTIATE

In 2003, Putin appointed retired MVD General Aslambek Aslakhanov a special advisor on the North Caucasus. The appointment was something of a consolation prize for the former Duma Deputy from Chechnya, who had been forced by the Kremlin to withdraw his candidacy for the Chechen presidency. Aslakhanov did not seem to enjoy the Russian president's trust, perhaps because he was seen as too independent a figure. Yet it was this perceived independence that made him an acceptable negotiator for the terrorists holding the hostages in Beslan. What is more, Aslakhanov was one of the volunteer negotiators who had come to the Dubrovka theater in October 2002 to conduct talks with the terrorists ensconced there.

In an interview with BBC 4 news, Aslakhanov, who recalled that he "was on the phone to the hostage-takers within hours of their seizing the school," was asked why fifty-four hours were allowed to elapse before he was able to arrive in Beslan. "Aslakhanov's own explanation," the BBC noted, "is confused. Even though he was Vladimir Putin's man, there was apparent reluctance to vest in him the presidential authority needed—perhaps because of Putin's personal reluctance to even engage with those responsible..." "Aslakhanov said: 'I reported my conversations with the hostage-takers to my boss, who's in charge of the President's office. I told him I thought I should fly down there immediately to start the process of negotiating and initiate contact. I was told that until they [the terrorists] announced their demands and conditions, there wasn't any point in my going.'"<sup>171</sup>

"I had two conversations on September 1st" Aslakhanov went on to recall, "I discovered that they had taken not 350 or 400 people, as was being reported, but as he [the Colonel] said, more than 1,200 hostages, over 70 percent of whom were children. I reported this to the media on the first day." The BBC then commented: "But, strangely, it's not what the media was reporting. Aslambek Aslakhanov's information did not get through." Despite these problems, Aslakhanov was able to make some inroads with the hostage-takers. As the account in the *Independent* noted: "At 6:30 in the evening on the second day, Aslakhanov says he agreed with the hostage takers that he would fly down from Moscow the next morning and that at 3 p.m. on the third of September, negotiations would start."

Later that month the former MVD General elaborated on his discussions with the terrorists at a press conference in Moscow: "Aslakhanov said that they [the terrorists] were demanding a complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya, recognition of Chechen independence and the release of those arrested in connection with the attacks in Ingushetia. They said they would execute fifteen children every hour if the troops were not withdrawn within two days. And I told them, 'Look, you are putting forth unthinkable conditions. Do you realize what a withdrawal of troops really means? It is a huge military machine. It would take several months.'"<sup>172</sup>

Aslakhanov elaborated on those events in September 2005. Speaking to journalists on the occasion of the first anniversary of the terrorist he reported that: "The Russian authorities

<sup>171</sup> Jonathan Miller, "Putin knew more," *Channel4.com*, October 14, 2004. URL: [http://channel4.com/news/2004/10/week\\_beslan.html](http://channel4.com/news/2004/10/week_beslan.html).

<sup>172</sup> Kim Murphy, "Critics detail missteps in the school crisis," *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2005.

were prepared to exchange the hostages in School No. 1 in Beslan for those earlier taken into custody on a charge of participating in the attack on Ingushetia in June 2004... He had three telephone conversations with the terrorists who were holding the children ... “The third time I succeeded in reaching the terrorists on 2 September in the evening, at 7:00 p.m. I said to them: ‘You have declared that you want to have your confederates released who were arrested for the attack on Ingushetia. We are prepared to discuss that. Only we have to decide how many children you are prepared to release for each rebel. Ten? Twenty? We have something to talk about.’ They answered me, ‘Good, we will await you at 3:00 p.m. I asked: may I come in the morning?’ He [presumably the Colonel] said, no, come at 3:00 p.m., and we will begin our negotiations. They [the Russian authorities] gave me a government plane, and I flew to Beslan, but I had only arrived there, come to the airport, when one explosion sounded, then a second.”<sup>173</sup> At the trial of Nur-Pasha Kulaev, however, a Beslan resident testified that she had seen Aslakhanov in the town at 11:30 a.m. on 3 September.<sup>174</sup> If accurate, this report suggests that Aslakhanov arrived somewhat earlier than he has indicated.

That said, independent reports appear to confirm Aslakhanov narrative. In mid-September 2004, it was reported: “[Police] operatives have told *Kommersant* that the authorities were in principle ready to agree to the demand of the terrorists that those who had been taken into custody for the attack on Ingushetia on 22 June be freed. The terrorists were speaking about 30 detained persons, but in the Vladikavkaz jail there were only eight of them. And one of that number flatly refused to be freed and to go to his brothers in arms. They succeeded in convincing him only on 3 September.”<sup>175</sup> If accurate, this report appears to be evidence of significant foot-dragging by the Russian authorities. The release of the 27-30 terrorists held in Russian jails constituted a useful bargaining chip that could conceivably have led to the release of many of the children.

Also notable is the role of Mikhail Gutseriev. An ethnic Ingush who had served as a deputy speaker of the Russian State Duma, Gutseriev was the president of the large “Rusneft” oil company. He arrived in Beslan either late in the day on September 1<sup>st</sup> or very early on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. Shortly after his arrival, Gutseriev called the terrorists on his mobile telephone. In his discussions with an individual who called himself “Sheikhu” (presumably the Colonel), Gutseriev reportedly asked, “What are your conditions?” “We will hand them over in writing?” he was told. “To whom?” he asked. “To Aushev?” “Aushev?” Sheikhu replied, “Let him come. We guarantee him his life.”<sup>176</sup>

Aushev then flew to Beslan. He recalls: “I was telephoned by one of the leaders of the FSB and by Sergei Shoigu [the Russian minister for emergency situations]. When we arrived on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Mikhail Gutseriev was there with his brother Khamzat, the former minister of internal affairs of Ingushetia. And they were already talking to the terrorists on the phone... We connected with the terrorists through their ‘press secretary’ [possibly Khodov],

<sup>173</sup> “Aslakhanov rasskazal o chem dogovorilsya s terroristami v Beslane,” *Newsru.com*, September 9, 2005.

<sup>174</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VI, 39.

<sup>175</sup> “Beslan: Boeviki shli na delo sem’yyami,” *Grani.ru*, September 16, 2004. See also, Mariya Martova, “Uslovie No 1: Boeviki trebuyut osvobodit’ militsionerov, rasstrelyavshikh Ingushetiyu,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 3, 2004.

<sup>176</sup> Aleksandr Khinshtein, “Rab Allakha Basaev...,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 11, 2004.

and I told him that I am Aushev, Ruslan, and he promised to report it to the Emir. Then they called back, and they said I could come.”<sup>177</sup>

In their account of this episode, the authors of the *Der Spiegel* report have noted: “Like the Gutseriev brothers who had been alerted out of sheer desperation, Aushev is a man whom Putin dislikes intensely. Like them, he too is not allowed into the crisis staff building where Putin’s envoys are meeting. From then on Aushev does his phoning and organizing from the yard outside.”<sup>178</sup>

Before proceeding to the school, Aushev performed a favor for President Dzasokhov of North Ossetia: “Ruslan Aushev...uses his cell phone to call his old comrade [Chechen separatist spokesperson] Akhmed Zakaev in London.... It is only with the second attempt that a connection is made. Aushev hands the phone over to North Ossetian President Dzasokhov, who, in 1999, when the second Chechnya war broke out, offered Maskhadov’s wife and daughter refuge in his republic. They know each other, respect each other, and owe each other... Zakaev promises to contact Maskhadov and ask him to help. Dzasokhov then calls Putin again. The Russian president is willing to negotiate the release of imprisoned terrorists if, in exchange, a ‘large number’ of children are released from the gymnasium.”<sup>179</sup>

In the protocol of Aushev’s official questioning on September 14<sup>th</sup>, one reads: “At about 2:00 p.m., on 2 September 2004, I [Aushev] went by myself to School No. 1... In the courtyard of the school I was met by rebels in masks who brought me into the school building... A certain time later there entered a man [the Colonel] who seemed to be about thirty, without a mask, with a fluffy beard, without a moustache, with large features on his face. I asked what he was called and he said, ‘Call me Rasul. This man declared that the detachment had come to Beslan on the orders of Shamil Basaev. I asked him to show me the hostages in the gymnasium. Rasul’ permitted it, and, accompanied by Rasul and two rebels, I went into the gymnasium.”<sup>180</sup>

According to a report published by journalist Sanobar Shermatova on 5 September: “In the description of eyewitnesses [i.e., former hostages], the rebels brought [Aushev] into the gymnasium, and one of them began to film on a video-camera the hostages, over whose heads on a wire there hung plastic bottles containing explosives. Having finished this work, the cameraman handed the video-cassette to Aushev. In the opinion of the hostages, to transmit to Putin.”<sup>181</sup> On this cassette, it has been reported, “are hundreds and hundreds of living people. And not ‘200-300 persons.’ State Radio and Television [later] declared the tape to be empty.”<sup>182</sup> A copy of this “empty” tape was later acquired by CBS television.

While in the school, Aushev convinced the terrorists to release a small number of hostages. “Passing by one of the rooms,” he later recalled, “I saw nursing children and asked the head of the rebels: ‘Let the nursing children out,’ and he agreed. One of the small children was

<sup>177</sup> Fedor Chekhov, “Pochemu zagovoril Aushev,” *Strana.ru*, September 28, 2004.

<sup>178</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” Part II, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 25, 2005.

<sup>181</sup> Sanobar Shermatova, “Peregovory planirovalis’,” *Moskovskie novosti*, September 5, 2005.

<sup>182</sup> Dmitrii Muratov, “Odin,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 14 2004.

carried by an older girl. The Emir did not let the girl out, and I took the child out in my arms.”<sup>183</sup> Aushev added: “The Emir took the decision [to release the mothers and nursing children] independently—he didn’t call anyone.”<sup>184</sup>

While he was in the school, Aushev was also given a copy of the written demands of the terrorists written down on a sheet torn from a student notebook. Aushev remembers: “The text began with the words, ‘To His Excellency President Putin’ and it was signed ‘From the slave of Allah, Shamil Basaev.’ I was forced to read what was written aloud, and I remember well its demands: stop the war; withdraw the forces; Chechnya enters into the CIS but remains in the ruble zone; in addition, Chechnya, together with the federal forces, introduces order in the North Caucasus and does not permit any third force there. The decree of the president of Russia concerning a withdrawal of forces must be read on television.”<sup>185</sup> Aushev concluded: “One of the rebels then added to the sheet of paper that for each killed rebel 50 hostages would be executed and for each wounded one—20. They also added [in writing] that with the appearance of a decree on the withdrawal of troops they would begin to release the hostages.”<sup>186</sup>

To date, the Russian authorities have not made public the letter containing these demands public. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, however, Basaev posted what appeared to be its text on the Kavkaz-Tsentr website.<sup>187</sup> The conditions presented the same as those that were summarized above by Aushev. Those similarities suggest that Russian decision-makers knew of, or at least had access to, the hostage-takers’ terms.

## THE CHECHEN RESISTANCE

Aushev also offered some personal impressions of the mind-set of the terrorists: “In the words of Aushev, the terrorists planned to conceal themselves after committing the terrorist act, shielding themselves with the hostages. The rebels did not want to die and, probably, hoped that the situation would develop as it had at the time of the seizure of the hospital in Budennovsk in 1995, when detachments of the extremists succeeded in escaping.” And Aushev added: “The rebels always said that we should conduct negotiations with Maskhadov, as even the radical part [of the separatists] consider Maskhadov to be their president.”<sup>188</sup>

Once he had exited from the school, Aushev handed over the sheet of paper containing the rebels’ demands to FSB General Valerii Andreev, who transmitted it to Moscow. It is not said to whom he gave the video-cassette (later declared to be empty). “According to Ruslan

<sup>183</sup> Andrei Riskin, “Goryachie golovy gotovy razygrat’ ingushskuyu kartu,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 29, 2004.

<sup>184</sup> “Aushev: terrorisy raschitovali uiti iz Beslana,” *Grani.ru*, October 10, 2004.

<sup>185</sup> Andrei Riskin, “Goryachie golovy...,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 29, 2004.

<sup>186</sup> “Aushev: terroristy rasschityvali uiti iz Beslana,” *Grani.ru*, October 10, 2004.

<sup>187</sup> “Zayavlenie Amira Brigady Shakhidov ‘Riyadus-Salikh’ina,” Abdallakha Shamilya,” *Kavkaz-Tsentr*, September 17, 2004, republished in *Chechenpress.info*, September 17 2004, translated into English by BBC Monitoring, published in *Johnson’s Russia List*, no. 8372, September 17, 2004.

<sup>188</sup> “Aushev rasskazal podrobnosti peregovorov s terroristami, zakhvativshimi shkolu v Beslane,” *Newsru.com*, September 28, 2004.

Aushev, everyone hoped that the advisor to the president on questions of the North Caucasus, Aslambek Aslakhonov, would bring from the capital an answer to the ultimatum so that there should be something to talk about with the rebels. All the more so since by that time the headquarters had connected with Akhmed Zakaev...and on one of the sites of the separatists there had been placed a letter by Aslan Maskhadov condemning the terrorist act.”<sup>189</sup>

Aushev recalled several days after the Beslan events that he had been expecting to go to the school on 3 September together with Aslakhonov. He intended to bring with him the “very good statement” that had been posted by Maskhadov on the Internet. “I wanted to show them [the terrorists]: This is what Maskhadov says. What do you need further? Free them [the hostages].”<sup>190</sup>

Although Aushev’s role in gaining the release of 26 hostages and in furthering the negotiation process were appreciated by some commentators in Russia, others criticized him sharply for suspected collusion with the rebels. For example, Duma deputy Yury Savel’ev, who was present in Beslan, asked pointedly: “Why did the rebels release Aushev from the school when they had invited three people there with the goal of killing them?”<sup>191</sup> “They are trying to hang Beslan on Aushev,” noted journalist Natal’ya Gevorkyan, “because those who seized the school did not kill him. Is this normal logic?”<sup>192</sup>

On 12 September, a Russian nationalist newspaper, *Zhizn’*, reported that a relative and former bodyguard of Ruslan Aushev named Magomed Aushev had been among the terrorists killed in the storming of the school building. The German newspaper *Focus* looked into this question. On September 27<sup>th</sup> it concluded that the “[Russian] special services” had indeed reported that Magomed Aushev had been killed in the school building but that in fact “Magomed Aushev is living peacefully in Ingushetia.”<sup>193</sup> In an interview with *Kavkazskii Uzel*, Magomed Aushev affirmed that he was very much “alive and healthy” and living in Ingushetia.<sup>194</sup> This incident seems to indicate an effort by some elements in the special services to link Ruslan Aushev directly to the terrorists.

President Putin’s personal view of Ruslan Aushev emerged during his discussion with four Beslan Mothers in Moscow on September 2, 2005. Putin stated: “The best specialists did everything possible to save the hostages. But the terrorists did not agree to negotiations.” The perplexed Mothers then responded: “What do you mean? Why then did they let Aushev into the school, and why did the terrorists communicate with Gutseriev on the telephone?” To which Putin answered: “All of that was done in stages. At first the terrorists indeed did not agree to negotiations, but then they did. For them Aushev is one of their own [*svoi*], an authority; therefore they agreed to let him in.”<sup>195</sup>

<sup>189</sup> Andrei Riskin, “Goryachie golovy...,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 29, 2004.

<sup>190</sup> Dmitrii Muratov, “My poteryali poltora dnya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 6, 2004.

<sup>191</sup> Dmitrii Muratov, “Odin,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 14, 2004.

<sup>192</sup> Natal’ya Gevorkyan, “Beslanskaya trenirovka,” *Gazeta.ru*, October 14, 2004.

<sup>193</sup> Maksim Artemov, “Beslanskii terrorist voskres iz mertvykh,” *Utro.ru*, September 27, 2004.

<sup>194</sup> “Rodstvennika Ruslana Ausheva ‘pokhoronili’ vmeste s beslanskimi terroristami,” *Polit.ru*, September 22, 2004. See too the article on Magomed Aushev: “Ya ne zakhvatyval beslan!,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 28, 2005.

<sup>195</sup> Natal’ya Galimova, “My donesli do nego pravdu,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 5, 2005.

In a path-breaking series of articles entitled, “Beslan without signature stamps,” journalist Svetlana Meteleva related confidential information obtained from an employee of the Russian special services who had been an eyewitness to events in Beslan. “Keep in mind, no-one will confirm this,” he told her, “But everyone who was at the headquarters and had any relation to the negotiations knows. From the very beginning, the rebels were offered money and a ‘green corridor.’ They designated a figure for negotiations—Maskhadov. They made contact with Maskhadov through Zakaev. Those two were to appear in Beslan under a guarantee of immunity and to take away the terrorists with them. An agreement was achieved.... You want to say [Meteleva asked] that the rebels agreed to leave? Yes. The question concerned the Budennovsk variant. On the night from the third to the fourth Maskhadov and, possibly, Zakaev were to appear. The terrorists would release a majority of the hostages—in the first place, children. With the remaining hostages they would get in vehicles and leave across the border, into Georgia. There they would release the people. Of course, everything was far from immediately resolved, but it was resolved. The vehicles were ready for them...”<sup>196</sup>

Both Maskhadov and Zakaev were willing to come to Beslan to negotiate for the hostages’ release. Maskhadov confirmed his intentions prior to his assassination on March 8, 2005—a fact also verified by his son, Anzor.<sup>197</sup> Zakaev made similar statements. In a September 3, 2004 interview Zakaev noted: “I said [to Aushev and Dzasokhov] that, as far as the question concerns me, I am prepared immediately to come to Beslan and do what I can in negotiations with the group that had seized the school... However, only the participation in the negotiations—through his representative or personally—of Aslan Maskhadov can resolve this crisis. I assured Dzasokhov and Aushev that Aslan Maskhadov takes to heart the fate of the children no less than they do and that he will come to the place of the tragedy if the Russian side can guarantee him his security...”<sup>198</sup>

## THE STORM BEGINS

At 3:20 p.m. on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, General Tikhonov, the commander of the FSB Special Purpose Center, “asked the 58<sup>th</sup> army to send in tanks and armored personnel carriers.”<sup>199</sup> These tanks and APCs then came under the direct control of the FSB. Journalist Elena Milashina chronicled those preparations in an article on September 6th: “We observed the preparation for the storm on 2 September. Practically all residents were removed from the multi-floor houses closest to the school. On the roofs, with short rushes, there moved about our spetsnaz. Professional School No. 48 (located not far from the school) was transformed into a headquarters, where our special services and the soldiers from the 58<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Beslan vez grifov,” Part I, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 24, 2005.

<sup>197</sup> See “Maskhadov gotov byl pozhertvovat’ soboi radi spaseniya detei,” *Chechenpress.com*, September 21, 2004; Efim Barban, “Maskhadov sobiralsya v Beslan,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, spetsvypusk, September 6, 2004; Aburashid Saidov, “Chto predlagaet Maskhadov,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 287, 2004 (interview with Anzor Maskhadov).

<sup>198</sup> “Dobryi znak,” *chechenpress.com*, September 3, 2004. On the assassination of Maskhadov, see Anna Politkovskaya, “Taina unichtozheniya Maskhadova,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 19, 2005.

<sup>199</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

army took up residence.... Into Beslan there arrived practically all the forces needed for an attack—Al'fa, Vympel, the GRU *spetsnaz*, OMON, SOBR etc.”<sup>200</sup>

Shortly before 1:00 p.m. on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, four employees of the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations slowly drove up to the school in order to collect the bodies of the 21 murdered hostages lying in the courtyard. “One of the terrorists came out and demanded that they bring inside [the school] the body of a confederate who was also lying in the courtyard. They did so, and when they came out, an explosion and shots rang out.”<sup>201</sup>

As Doctor Larisa Mamitova later recalled: “He [the Colonel] said to me, ‘There are 21 bodies... Now the Ministry for Emergency Situations will come up and collect the bodies. You should speak through the window with the Ministry for Emergency Situations. Tell them about the condition of the children.’ They wanted in every way possible for the people outside to know about the condition of the children. ‘I said fine.’... [Mamitova then asked] ‘When is the Ministry of Emergency Situations coming, what did they say?’ They answered: ‘They said it would be in five minutes. Go back to the hall. When they arrive, we’ll call you.’... They were all calm. For some reason it seemed to me that precisely with the arrival of the Ministry for Emergency Situations everything began. The shooting began from out there, from out there the storm began.”<sup>202</sup>

In September 2005, journalist Vadim Rechkalov revealed that he had been able to interview one of the four rescuers from the Ministry for Emergency Situations: “On the same day, September 3<sup>rd</sup> [2004], I succeeded in talking with one of the rescuers who survived [two had been shot dead by the terrorists]. He, wounded in an arm, which was bandaged, stood and wept.... I am not naming this person at his request: ‘I had a direct telephone connection with their leader [the Colonel],’ the officer told me at that time. ‘He [the Colonel] warned: ‘Let there be no freaks among you.’ We came up in the truck, opened the doors, opened the side panels, showed that they were empty, carried a corpse of a rebel onto the porch since they themselves were afraid to take it from an exposed place. Then the doctor went with them around the corner, and we remained standing at the fence with our hands up. And here there began shooting. There had been no explosion before this. After someone opened fire, then the rebels began to shoot at us. If no-one had shot, then everything would have been normal. We were absolutely certain that we would return safely.”<sup>203</sup>

And Rechkalov continued: “If one supposes that the authorities planned the storm in advance, then the visit of the rescuers was one of the points in that plan. A vehicle of the Ministry for Emergency Situations enters the territory of the school. A part of the rebels are required to be distracted by that vehicle. To check it out to make sure that under the guise of rescuers the *spetsnaz* did not penetrate into the school. The rebels were not expecting a storm during those moments. At the least, because in their hands there were four Ministry for Emergency Situations personnel. And it was precisely in those minutes that the storm began. And the rescuer said correctly that it was a set-up. Some federals, for the sake of an

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<sup>200</sup> Elena Milashina, “Lozh’ provotsirovala agressiyu terroristov,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 6, 2004. OMON and SOBR are elite forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>201</sup> “Doktor Roshal’,” *Strana.ru*, September 8, 2004.

<sup>202</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VII, 29, 35.

<sup>203</sup> *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 14, 2005.

effect of suddenness, set up other federals—employees of the Ministry for Emergency Situations. And moreover, the rescuer stated that first there was shooting and only then explosions... That is, the battle did not begin with an explosion, as the official version goes, but with the shooting.”<sup>204</sup>

At approximately 1:00 p.m. on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, all hell quite literally broke loose at School No. 1 in Beslan. According to a chronology of events compiled by the web-site *GZT.ru*: “At 1:01 p.m. there resounds the first explosion. Four minutes later—the second. Twenty minutes later—the third... At 1:30 p.m., the roof collapses and there begins a strong fire.”<sup>205</sup> At 1:10 p.m. FSB Major General Andreev, the nominal leader of the attacking Russian force, ordered an armed assault on the school building.<sup>206</sup>

There is a major difference of opinion between the Russian Procuracy and both the Kesaev Commission and the Beslan Mothers, concerning what caused the explosions, the fire, and the collapse of the roof of the gymnasium. Those differences merit deeper examination. In its draft report, the Kesaev commission has concluded: “The first explosions unquestionably had a behind the scenes dimension, both a legal and a political one. The possible appearance in Beslan of Maskhadov and Zakaev placed the Kremlin before a complex choice: to permit the saving of the hostages and thus to legalize the figure of Maskhadov and to permit the possibility of a political regulation of the Chechen problem. An unprepared storm, as a variant of the development of events, by contrast, allowed such a situation not to be permitted.”<sup>207</sup>

A resident of Beslan, El'brus Nogaev, pointedly asked deputy Russian procurator general Vladimir Kolesnikov in September 2005: “Why did the explosion take place precisely when agreement had been reached with Maskhadov? That he was to come—that is contained in the testimony of Dzasokhov. He [Dzasokhov] convinced [the residents of Beslan] that new people were to come, in two hours... In the newspaper I read the testimony of Dzasokhov that he had come to agreement with Maskhadov through Zakaev, and he announced at the Palace of Culture that Maskhadov was coming. And an hour later there occurred the first explosion... Was that really accidental? [Kolesnikov responded:] I don't know... We'll check it out...”<sup>208</sup>

At the trial of terrorist Nur-Pasha Kulaev, the accused visably angered Russian procurators by remembering aloud that, directly after the first explosion occurred, the Colonel had shouted to his confederates that a Russian sniper had killed the terrorist whose foot was on a pedal controlling a powerful bomb. Despite hostile questioning by the procurators, Kulaev stuck stubbornly to his story. Russian deputy procurator general Nikolai Shepel' insisted, in sharp contrast, that, the “examination has shown that snipers present around the school could not have shot the rebel who was controlling the button [pedal], inasmuch as he was located behind plastic, non-transparent windows, and the sniper could not have seen him.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> “Tri dnya v Beslane,” *Gzr.ru*, August 31, 2005.

<sup>206</sup> “Zamgenprokurora zayavil, chto shturma v Beslane ne bylo,” *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2005.

<sup>207</sup> Elena Milashina, “Den' neznaniya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>208</sup> “Vladimir Kolesnikov,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 12, 2005.

<sup>209</sup> “Zamprokurora zayavil, chto shturma v Beslane ne bylo,” *Newsru.com*, September 3, 2005. The large windows in the gymnasium were reported to be “two stories tall.” See *Kremlin Rising*, p. 16.

At one point one of the procurators addressed Kulaev sarcastically: “How could a sniper, through windows that were screened with plastic, see the rebel standing on the button and kill him? [Kulaev responded:] It [the plastic] wasn't there. They removed it so that the people could breathe. They took away the plastic... The Colonel said that a sniper shot him from the roof, from a five-story building. But you didn't see it? I know that they removed plastic from the windows.”<sup>210</sup>

Kulaev's statements were corroborated by testimony from former hostages: “On the first day, the older students [acting under orders from the terrorists] smashed out the windows with something wooden. The glass was smashed out on the upper parts of the windows from the side of the courtyard. Then, on the second day, they smashed out all the windows completely... In the middle [of the gymnasium] a terrorist was sitting on a chair. He called over another rebel and showed him something in the window. The other one looked over there, and they then forced men [i.e., hostages] to crawl up there, and they hung up a black curtain. How many windows were smashed out? From the right side only the upper [parts of the] windows. And from the other side they smashed one out, and then they saw something and hung up a curtain.”<sup>211</sup>

Journalist Svetlana Meteleva was able to interview an expert on explosives who had examined the evidence at Beslan: “[Meteleva:] If one proposes that the reason for the explosion was the death of the operator, could he have been ‘removed’ by a shot from our [Russian] sniper? In the protocol it is said clearly: the operator put into action the explosive chain either through carelessness or because he was wounded or killed. Therefore, yes, our sniper could have shot the terrorist.”<sup>212</sup>

During Putin's meeting with four Beslan Mothers on 2 September 2005, the issue of a possible Russian sniper surfaced: “Putin [the Mothers reported] said that there is an eyewitness who saw how a rebel was reading the Koran and then he took his foot [off the pedal] and an explosion sounded. But we told him there was no such testimony at the trial... ‘That means [Putin then said] that I have incorrect information. I will have it checked.’”<sup>213</sup> As it turns out, however, both the Mothers and President Putin were in error in their statements on this question.

During the Kulaev trial, former hostage Madina Sasieva-Salbieva was asked by a procurator: “Were you watching closely the rebel at the controls? Yes. What were his actions before the explosion? When he was reading the Koran or what he did after?... Well, when he was reading what did he do? He just stayed there, and he was killed. Did he take his foot off the controls when he finished reading? I did not notice. Are you giving the same testimony today that you gave in the preliminary investigation? As regards that rebel?... You said then that he finished reading the Koran, put it aside, and then took his foot off the controls. Well, I did not notice that he took his foot away.... There in the records it is written that he was reading the Koran and took away his foot. I didn't say that. How are we to understand

<sup>210</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, III, 35.

<sup>211</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, VI, 35.

<sup>212</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, “Beslan bez grifov,” Part I, May 24, 2005.

<sup>213</sup> Ntal'ya Galimova, “My donesli do nego pravdu,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 5, 2005.

that? You mean, they wrote it down incorrectly? Didn't you read what the investigator wrote down!!! I read it. I have no further questions."<sup>214</sup> Given that testimony, it seems likely that the former woman hostage had been pressured by investigators into giving false testimony concerning the terrorist at the pedal but had then bravely repudiated it at the open forum of the trial. Presumably Putin was not informed about her change of testimony.

Another hostage, Zarina Tokaeva, claimed to have been watching the rebel manning the pedal at the moment that he was shot: "When the [first] explosion occurred I well remember the sound of tape coming unstuck....My head was turned toward the rebel who sat on the button. When the tape came unstuck, I paid attention that he...without writhing fell over on his left side. After that the explosion sounded. That is, he lost consciousness? I don't know what was with him, but when people lose consciousness they go limp. But he was just sitting there and then he fell over on his side."<sup>215</sup>

At the trial of Nur-Pasha Kulaev, Beslan policewoman Fatima Dudieva testified that, growing stiff from lack of physical activity, she had stretched her arm up above one of the window sills in the gymnasium as a form of exercise and "At that moment it was if someone had thrown a stone through the window. There was a wild shot of some kind. I sensed that the shot had come from outside [the school]...I noticed that blood was flowing from my hand and that my hand was spinning about. I sensed that the glass [in the window] was flying and I heard the sound of [broken] glass." The first explosion then sounded. "The second explosion came not immediately but two minutes later."<sup>216</sup>

At the moment when the first explosion and initial gunfire sounded, negotiator Mikhail Gutseriev and the Colonel were engrossed in negotiations concerning the imminent arrival of Aslakhanov and Aushev at the school. Both were reportedly taken by complete surprise: "What have you done?!" screamed Gutseriev into the receiver. 'You deceived us,' roared 'Sheikhu' [the Colonel] in response. 'Now you will bear responsibility for everything.' "There is no storm,' Gutseriev tried to calm him. However the situation went out of control."<sup>217</sup> Seeing children escaping from the school, the volunteer *opolchentsy* who were positioned close to the building rushed in to rescue the children. A number of them, as has been noted, were armed South Ossetians; in addition to saving children they intended to kill terrorists. The storm had begun.

There is also possible evidence regarding the second explosion. Journalist Vadim Rechkalov of *Moskovskii Komsomolets* has recalled a conversation from the day following the storm: "I walked around the courtyard of the Beslan school together with an acquaintance, an employee of the central apparatus of the FSB, on the afternoon of September 4, 2004. The corpses of the rebels still lay there in a row. The [deceased] children had already been carried away. We went up to the frame of the gymnasium. Under the right lower window there yawned a hole 80 centimeters in diameter. The wall, with a thickness of forty

<sup>214</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIX, 33-35.

<sup>215</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XVIII, 13.

<sup>216</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 35. See also the account of Dudieva's statement at the trial in "'Gde te troe, kogo poimali vmeste s Kulaevym,'" *Gazeta.ru*, July 12, 2005.

<sup>217</sup> Aleksandr Khinshtein, "Rab Allakha Basaev ego prevoskhoditel'stvu Putinu...," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 11, 2004.

centimeters, had been pierced through. I asked my companion how that opening had been formed. This is what he answered at the time: 'Our explosive specialists blew out the wall after the beginning of the storm. They did it with a directed explosion. They made a hole so that it would be easier for the children to run out.'<sup>218</sup>

"At that time," Rechkalov recalls, "I did not ascribe any importance to his words. But in Moscow it had already dawned on them that that explosion was one of the indirect proofs that the rebels in the gymnasium had not blown anything up, that on 3 September 2004 at 1:05 p.m, the storm [of the building] had begun. And the blowing out of [a section of] the wall of the gymnasium represented the beginning of the storm."<sup>219</sup>

### COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The attack on the school raises more questions than it answers. During a June 2005 interview with the website *vremya.ru*, North Ossetian parliamentary commission chairman Stanislav Kesaev remarked: "There is the testimony of the [Russian military] sapper who, after the first two explosions, broke into the building [the gymnasium] and disconnected the chain [of explosives]. The fire there was small, and we have testimony that fire-extinguishers could easily have put it out. That is, the sappers who broke into the building after the first two explosions disconnected the chain [of explosives], and those bombs could not then be detonated? Yes, they could not be detonated. But the third explosion occurred 20-25 minutes later. That is, when everything began."<sup>220</sup>

Former hostage Marina Karkuzashvili-Miskova provided corroborating testimony for Kesaev's statement: "After the [first two] explosions there was no fire in the hall... The glass was knocked out. The walls were damaged. There were many corpses along the walls. But the roof maintained intact... The roof began to burn when they [the Russian forces] began to fire at it with some projectiles."<sup>221</sup>

"The most terrible thing occurred," Kesaev noted, "when the ceiling began to burn. Here there are also questions... It [the roof] burned only from above, and then the roof fell down on those people, and they burned up precisely under it. In addition, there are the initial testimonies of the deputy of the State Duma, Vorob'eva, a doctor, concerning the character of the burns encountered by the medics... In the history of the illness of each victim there are notes concerning burns from a substance similar to napalm. So you believe that during the storm they used flamethrowers? Yes, there were flamethrowers. The first batch of the flamethrowers that were used, which the member of the Federation Council Panteleev found in my presence, were given to the investigation. But the investigation simply washed them away. You are saying that the investigation simply destroyed them? No, it was done very simply. The wrong [serial] number [for the flamethrower] was written down, as if it were a

<sup>218</sup> Vadim Rechkalov, "Tol'ko tak my pobedim vruga..." *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 14, 2005.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ivan Sukhov, "My sdelaem vse vozmozhnoe, chtoby ustanovit' istinu," *Vremya.ru*, June 28, 2005. See also the discussion of the role of the Alfa and Vypel FSB spetsnaz units, "Shturmovat' shkolu nachali tol'ko cherez 30 minut posle pervykh vzryvov," *Vremya.ru*, September 6, 2005.

<sup>221</sup> Elena Milashina, "Kak shturmovali shkolu," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

mistake. Then when a *zapros* was submitted, it turned out there was no such batch... Later when they found other flamethrower parts, I advised the citizens to hand them over, but with that action being filmed by a television camera and with the numbers and everything written down according to protocol.”<sup>222</sup>

The discovery of the flamethrowers incensed the residents of Beslan. “In a meeting with the residents of Beslan, Nikolai Shepel’ declared that the flamethrowers had been used by the rebels [and not by the Russian forces]. The people did not believe him, since they understood perfectly that to fire from flamethrowers from within a building is impossible... It was precisely then that the residents of Beslan conceived a strong distrust toward the procuracy.”<sup>223</sup> Local residents testified that on the roofs of the buildings from which the flamethrowers had been fired “were located not rebels but employees of the [Russian] special services.”<sup>224</sup> “People here,” journalist Elena Milashina wrote from Beslan in December 2004, “directly accuse our military of having used flamethrowers and having ignited the roof of the school thirty minutes after the explosions in the gymnasium. This led to a fire, as a result of which the burning roof collapsed on the wounded but still living hostages.”<sup>225</sup>

In an article appearing in the October 7, 2004 issue of *Novaya Gazeta*, leading military affairs analyst Pavel Fel’genhauer wrote that weapons similar to “Shmel’” flamethrower/grenade launchers had been spotted on the roof of a building opposite the school. These weapons, he noted, had even been filmed by television crews.<sup>226</sup> Describing how a “Shmel’” works, *Chechnya Weekly* has observed: “The ‘Shmel’ is a so-called ‘thermobaric’ weapon, similar to the controversial ‘fuel-air’ bombs used by the U.S. military in heavy combat. It disperses highly explosive droplets of petrochemicals into a space occupied by the enemy—and then ignites them. The intense shock and heat of the resulting blast are devastating even to troops sheltering in entrenchments... One can only imagine the effect on a conventional building such as a school.”<sup>227</sup>

In July 2005 the *Moscow Times* After cited the opinion of Aleskandr Cherkasov, a senior member of the Memorial human rights organization, that the assault violated an international convention banning the use of incendiary weapons. The article then observed that: “Although classified as a flamethrower, the Shmel’ in fact launches rocket-propelled projectiles... The Shmel’ has three modifications: the RPO-A, whose shells explode; the RPO-Z, whose shells are incendiary; and the RPO-D, whose shells create smoke. The commandos used the RPO-A type, [deputy procurator general] Shepel’ told reporters on July 12 [2005]. Its shells contain fuel-air explosives that on detonation form a ball of fire, creating a powerful blast effect. Shepel’ said the fire lasts only a split second, while exposure of three to five seconds is required to inflict burns on a person or set fire to a building.”<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> *Vremya.ru*, June 28, 2005.

<sup>223</sup> Ol’ga Bobrova, Elena Milashina, “Sensatsionnoe zayavlenie predstavatelya prokuratury,” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 7, 2005.

<sup>224</sup> Pavel Fel’gengauer, “‘Shmel’ i svin’i,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

<sup>225</sup> Elena Milashina, “Logika ‘Shmelei,’” *Novaya Gazeta*, December 20, 2004.

<sup>226</sup> Pavel Fel’gengauer, “‘Shmel’ I svin’i,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

<sup>227</sup> *Chechnya Weekly*, October 11, 2004.

<sup>228</sup> Anatoly Medetsky and Yana Voitova, “A reversal over Beslan only fuels speculation,” *Moscow Times*, July 21, 2005.

Shepel's comments evoked derision on the part of a number of Russian commentators. As State Duma deputy and a former commander of the "Vypel" FSB special forces unit Anatolii Ermolin declared: "To claim that the roof could not ignite from the use of a 'Shmel' is nonsense. Any explosion can cause a fire."<sup>229</sup>

The issue of the use of flamethrowers in the storming of the school came up in the conversation President Putin held with four Beslan Mothers on 2 September 2005. Putin, the Mothers subsequently recalled, read from a *spravka* (presumably prepared by the General Procuracy) that the flamethrower in question did not have an incendiary effect. "We [the four Mothers] then said to the president: 'Let the flamethrower be called a water cannon. But we discovered flamethrowers at the crime scene. With two strips (RPO-A) and with three (RPO-Z), we have all the parts. That is, during the storming of the school both thermobaric and incendiary ones were used.' To this the president said: 'But they were firing from flamethrowers not at the gymnasium but at the school.' To which I [Susanna Dudieva] said: 'Vladimir Vladimirovich! In the school not one classroom was burned, not one window opening bears a trace from a flamethrower. Not one wall was burned through by a flamethrower. Only the gymnasium burned, which means that the flamethrower was fired only at the gymnasium. And there were no other shots [from a flamethrower]. I know how a flamethrower acts. I have read the literature on it and have read that it is used to destroy a sniper. Let's admit that.'<sup>230</sup>

An expert on explosives who examined the Beslan school after it had been stormed by Russian forces told journalist Svetlana Meteleva: "Judging by the diameter of the openings in the wall, the explosions were rather localized. Not one of them could have produced the collapse of the roof, nor a broad-scale fire. And from examining the place of occurrence there emerges with all obviousness the conclusion: the hostages who were present in the gymnasium were literally buried under the collapsed roofing, after which they burned up. And what could have been the reason for the fire? The most likely one is the use of a flamethrower. If, say, someone outside the building decided that there was a rebel-sniper on the roof and fired at him from a flamethrower, the ensuing events look at least logical. The roofing would immediately have begun to burn and virtually any detonation would have been sufficient for its collapse—[say] a shot from an armored vehicle directed at the gymnasium... In the protocol of the examination of the place of occurrence, which was commenced at 7:00 a.m. on 4 September, it is clearly stated: the roofing of the gymnasium is missing. That is—I underline—the question concerns not only some burned out or fallen sections but the roof in its entirety. Such a result would not have been elicited by two or three explosions."<sup>231</sup>

According to Stanislav Kesaev, the explosion occurred in the region of the attic located above the gymnasium. It was in the attic that the terrorists had made a hole in the roof and set up an extremely elaborate sniper's nest, fortified "with bricked-in areas and surrounded inside with sacks of sand."<sup>232</sup> It seems likely therefore that the Russian special forces were

<sup>229</sup> "Zdanie polnost'yu razrusheno, no ne zagorelos'," *Gazeta.ru*, July 12, 2005.

<sup>230</sup> "Vladimir Kolesnikov," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 12, 2005.

<sup>231</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, "Beslan bez grifov," Part I, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 24 2005.

<sup>232</sup> Elena Milashina, "Vyshe nekuda," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 5, 2005.

attempting—at about 1:30 p.m. on September 3<sup>rd</sup>—to destroy a heavily defended enemy position located on the roof before launching a full-scale assault on the building. Like the use of a special gas at Nord-Ost in October of 2002, this action had unexpected and highly lethal consequences.

The use of other weapons raises similar questions. The Russian Procuracy has adamantly insisted that tanks and grenade launchers were used during the assault on the school building only after all of the hostages had either died or been evacuated. Yurii Savel'ev, a Duma deputy from the Russian nationalist *Rodina* faction and a member of the Torshin Commission, has stated: “According to the official version, the tanks opened fire on School No. 1 when all of the [living] hostages had been evacuated from the building and there were only terrorists in the basement, that is, at about 8:30 p.m.” But Savel'ev then “declared that he possesses more than twenty testimonies in which eyewitnesses maintain that three tanks were used... at about 1:30 p.m.”<sup>233</sup>

Similar findings abound. In its draft report, the Kesaev commission concluded: “In the materials of the criminal case...there is exhaustive information concerning the fact that a tank platoon of the 58<sup>th</sup> army was given over in subordination to the Special Purpose Center of the FSB of the Russian Federation. The order to use the flamethrowers and tanks was given by the head of the Special Purpose Center, General Tikhonov.... The commission possesses sufficient facts to show that the flamethrowers and tanks were employed during the day of September 3<sup>rd</sup> at a time when a large number of hostages were present in the school.”<sup>234</sup>

For its own part, *Der Spiegel* reported that at precisely 1:30 p.m. on September 3<sup>rd</sup>: “Two tanks have moved up, plus armored vehicles, and lethal grenade-launchers and flamethrowers have been brought into position. Hardly rescue equipment, a lot of equipment for waging war. MI-24 helicopter gunships circle above.”<sup>235</sup> Likewise, one Beslan resident and eyewitness of events has recalled: “The tanks began to fire between 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. They were also firing from grenade launchers.”<sup>236</sup>

Similarly, Journalist Elena Milashina has reported that, during the storm of the school building, military units “made use of RPO-A ‘Shmel’ flamethrowers, grenade launchers and a T-72 tank. The soldiers of unit v/ch 12356 alone, in addition to employing seven flamethrowers, made use, during the storm, according to official statistics, of 7,210 bullets and 10 grenades, while seven shots were fired from a tank.”<sup>237</sup>

Citing the aforementioned classified expert commission report, journalist Svetlana Meteleva has written: “An aide to the military procurator of the Vladikavkaz [North Ossetia] garrison, Major of Justice Eminov, having examined the report of an [alleged] crime contained in the actions of the soldiers of the units and sub-units of the 58<sup>th</sup> army of the North Caucasus

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<sup>233</sup> “Yurii Savel'ev: Bolee 20 svidetelei utverzhdayut, chto tanki v Beslane strelyali dnev,” *Rodina.ru*, September 8, 2005.

<sup>234</sup> Elena Milashina, “Den' nenznaniya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, September 1, 2005.

<sup>235</sup> *Der Spiegel*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>236</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, X, 38.

<sup>237</sup> Elena Milashina, “Kak shturmovali shkolu,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

Military District of the Russian Federation and of the 59<sup>th</sup> Special Purpose Brigade of the North Caucasus District of the Internal Troops of the MVD of the Russian Federation, ruled: during the storm of the school building and the freeing of the hostages, these personnel made use of the flamethrowers RPO-A 'Shmel', RPG-25 grenade launchers and also a T-72 tank. These forms of weaponry and armor were employed in the course of the storm during the firing at the building on 3 September 2004, which could result in the death of the hostages or in their receipt of bodily harm of various degrees.<sup>238</sup>

As the burning roof was threatening to collapse upon the injured and stunned hostages, a group of the terrorists, led by Vladimir Khodov, who was shouting in Ossetian, herded those hostages who were still alive and able to walk out of the gymnasium and into the cafeteria that was situated on the first floor. At this point, tanks and Russian soldiers with automatic weapons began firing at the cafeteria according to the eyewitness testimony of a number of hostages who were present there.

A report published by *Kommerasant* chronicles these events: "Rima Kusraeva related how the rebels [in the cafeteria] placed women and children in the window openings and gave them curtains to wave. Waving the curtains like white flags, they were to show that they [the Russian forces] should not fire at the windows. "Then there came up an armored vehicle from which three soldiers jumped out and began to fire at the windows. I myself saw how a woman fell, after which there was a mountain of corpses on the window-sill."<sup>239</sup>

Journalists from *Novaya Gazeta* published similar stories: "Several women and children were forced [by the terrorists] to stand on the window-sills and wave white school blouses. And to shout: 'Don't shoot at us!' On the window-sill stood my sister Lora and my daughter Diana and they were shouting. But who would hear them? Lora pushed my Diana down to the floor. One woman fainted. The rest, including Lora, were shot." The woman hostage "confidently maintains that our people [the Russian forces] shot them. And the medics confirmed that they were shot in the chest and not the back."<sup>240</sup> Another woman hostage has recalled: "There was a real war going on there [in the cafeteria]. They were firing at us from tanks. How do I know? I know how tanks shoot because I am from South Ossetia. I witnessed a war there."<sup>241</sup>

The crisis was compounded by the late arrival of local emergency personnel. In his report concerning the fire, the North Ossetian minister for emergency situations, Dzgoev, notes that he reported a fire in the building at 1:05 p.m., shortly after the initial explosion in the school. "I was given a command to await further orders and was told not to set about extinguishing the fire."<sup>242</sup> It was not until 3:20 p.m. that Dzgoev was able to send seven fire engines to the school. It then took some time for the equipment to arrive.

In their conversation with President Putin on September 2, 2005, the four Beslan Mothers present "spoke about the actions of the firemen. Why did the command to put out the fire

<sup>238</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, "Beslan bez grifov," Part I, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 24, 2005.

<sup>239</sup> Zaur Farniev, "Po nam terroristy voobshche ne strelayali," *Kommersant*, June 15, 2005.

<sup>240</sup> Elena Milashina, "Kak shmturmovali shkolu," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2004.

<sup>241</sup> *Pravdabeslana.ru*, XIII, 17.

<sup>242</sup> Svetlana Meteleva, "Beslan bez grifov," Part III, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, May 26, 2005.

[in the gymnasium] come to the firemen forty minutes late, and why then did it then take another forty minutes for the firemen to make their way to the school? During those eighty minutes everyone there burned up... People should also bear responsibility for this, for the fact that there was not an immediate extinguishing of the fire and for the fact that the units of the firemen were not prepared. The president said: 'Yes, unquestionably.'<sup>243</sup>

## AFTERMATH

When all of the firing had ceased early in the morning of September 4, 2004, a reported 317 hostages lay dead, including 186 children. Most of them were incinerated under the burning rubble of the gymnasium's collapsed roof. Ten soldiers from the Russian *spetnaz* were also killed, as were two representatives from the Ministry for Emergency Situations. Thirty-two terrorists lay dead. An undetermined number, including, evidently, the Colonel, succeeded in escaping. Between one and four terrorists—including, according to some reports, Vladimir Khodov—were captured.

At about 5:00 a.m. on September 4<sup>th</sup>, "Putin arrived in Beslan. No-one met him at the airport except for his personal guard. From the airport the president immediately went to the district clinical hospital, where he was joined by the head of North Ossetia, Aleksandr Dzasokhov. The two then visited all of the rooms containing victims... He went up to the badly wounded but still conscious principal of School No. 1, Lidiya Tsalieva. Having stayed in the hospital for thirty minutes, the president then attended a session of the operational headquarters to free the hostages, located in the town administration building."<sup>244</sup> In attendance at this meeting were the first deputy director of the FSB, Vladimir Pronichev; the minister for emergency situations, Sergei Shoigu; the deputy procurator general Sergei Fridinskii; the commander of the Fifty-eighth army General Sobolev; the head of the FSB for North Ossetia, Valerii Andreev; and the minister of internal affairs of North Ossetia, Kazbek Dzantiev.

Looking directly into the camera of Russian state television Channel 1, Putin declared: "We examined all possible variants and did not ourselves plan an action using force. Events developed very quickly and unexpectedly, and the personnel of the special services manifested particular courage." He also voiced his opinion that the aim of the terrorists had been "to sow inter-ethnic enmity to blow up the entire North Caucasus."<sup>245</sup> Then, apparently without visiting the site of the ruined school, Putin returned to Moscow.

Later in the day, Putin addressed the nation on state television: "To speak is difficult and bitter," he began. "A terrible tragedy has taken place on our land.... We live in the conditions formed after the collapse of an enormous, great state [the USSR]... We exhibited weakness, and the weak are beaten." Putin concluded by announcing that, "in the very near future a complex of measures will be prepared toward strengthening the unity of the

<sup>243</sup> "Vladimir Kolesnikov," *Novaya Gazeta*, September 12, 2005.

<sup>244</sup> "Putin ne doekhal do razrushenoi shkoly," *Gazeta.ru*, September 5, 2004.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

country.”<sup>246</sup> The decision to abolish the election of Russian governors, it emerged, was chief among the measures he had in mind.

On September 13, 2004, “Vladimir Putin removed from their posts the minister of internal affairs of North Ossetia, Kazbek Dzantiev, and the head of the FSB of the republic, Valerii Andreev.” The move came in response to intense anger on the part of the surviving hostages and the relatives of those who had perished in the school. By early 2005, however, it became clear that both generals had received prestigious new posts: “Dzantiev became the deputy commander of the internal troops of the Moscow Military District, while Andreev received the post of deputy head of the Academy of the FSB of the Russian Federation.”<sup>247</sup> In mid-2005 it was announced that FSB first deputy director Vladimir Pronichev, the man who had overseen the storming of the school, had been promoted to the rank of four-star general.<sup>248</sup>

In September 2005, journalist Mariya Mstislavskaya accurately summed up the gaping differences presently obtaining between the “official” interpretation of the Beslan events being articulated by the Russian General Procuracy and the view being advanced by both the Kesaev commission and the Beslan Mothers. “In essence,” she wrote, “the version of the [official] investigation is a simple one: there were 32 terrorists in all, they brought all of their weapons with them, they advanced indistinct demands, and during the storm they were all killed—with the exception of Kulaev. Both the police and the FSB didn’t do all that badly: although they failed to notice the terrorists and let them into Beslan, they didn’t permit any of them to leave. The authorities showed themselves in good light: they created an operational headquarters, they entered into negotiations with the terrorists, and they did everything possible to avoid a storm. And the storm began when the terrorists began to shoot in the backs of the fleeing hostages. And, of course, losses could not have been avoided.”

This “official” version stands in stark contrast with the narratives put forward by the Kesaev commission and the Beslan Mothers: “The relatives of those who perished in Beslan and several former hostages place the responsibility for the death of the people directly on the authorities and on the special services. Those who spoke as witnesses at the trial of Kulaev declared that at least several of the terrorists had succeeded in getting away. Many of the victims also maintain that the weapons were brought into the school in advance. And the majority of the victims, in their words, perished under the rubble of the roof of the gymnasium, burning up after the soldiers began to fire at the school from flamethrowers.”<sup>249</sup>

On September 30, 2005, Russian deputy procurator general Vladimir Kolesnikov held a press conference in Vladikavkaz to summarize the results of the investigation that the General Procuracy had conducted following the President Putin’s meeting with four Beslan

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<sup>246</sup> “Vladimir Putin vystupil v subbotu s obrashcheniem k natsii v svyazi s tragediei v Beslane,” *Newsru.com*, September 4, 2004.

<sup>247</sup> Valerii Panyushkin, “My khotim dokazat’, chto vlasti vinovaty v gibeli detei,” *Kommersant-Vlast’*, February 28, 2005.

<sup>248</sup> “Shpionov zamenili narkur’ery,” *Argumenty i fakty*, June 1, 2005.

<sup>249</sup> Mariya Mstislavskaya, “Chelovecheskoe, slishkom chelovecheskoe,” *Lenta.ru*, September 13, 2005.

Mothers on September 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>250</sup> In his remarks Kolesnikov indicated that the procuracy had run out of patience with the Kesasev Commission, terming it an illegitimate body whose sessions were “not competent” in a legal sense.

As for the issues that had been raised by the Beslan Mothers, Kolesnikov reported that the procuracy in its investigations had found no reason whatsoever to alter its original conclusions. No weapons, he said, had been concealed in the school prior to the terrorist attack; there had been only thirty-two terrorists; and no Russian sniper had killed a rebel at the explosives-pedal. A written report, Kolesnikov concluded, would be submitted by the procuracy in three weeks' time.

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<sup>250</sup> See “Besslanskoe rassledovanie zakoncheno,” *Gazeta.ru*, September 30, 2005, and “Genprokuratura: Respublikanskaya komissiya po Beslanu nepravomochna,” *Grani.ru*, September 30, 2005.