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THE LONG SHADOW OF “NORD OST”

By David Satter



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Ten years after the worst terrorist act in Moscow history, the seizure on October 22, 2002 of 979 hostages in the Theatre on Dubrovka during the musical “Nord-Ost,” mystery still shrouds the role of the Russian authorities in the crisis.

In the end, 129 hostages are known to have died when Russian forces flooded the theater with gas on the morning of October 26 and then stormed the building. But the real number of dead may have been higher; 75 persons believed to have been in the building were unaccounted for.

The organizers of the storm received “Hero of Russia” awards and the day after the theater was “liberated,” Putin invited the commandos from the Alpha and Vypmel units that conducted the operation to a reception in the Kremlin. Survivors of the siege and relatives of the victims, however, have long insisted that the Putin regime was culpable in the hostages’ deaths for recklessly mounting a lethal attack without provision for the rescue and medical treatment of the hostages.

The theater was seized by 40 terrorists, including 19 female suicide bombers who had bombs strapped around their waists. They quickly attached dozens of other bombs to the building’s main supports. The women were veiled and dressed in black and the men had signs in Arabic reading “Allah Akbar” and were filmed with the Koran. The terrorists threatened to detonate the bombs if their demands were not met. In an interview with the London *Sunday Times*, one of them said, “We are a suicide group. ... Let the Russians try to storm the building... We cherish death more than you do life.”

To the surprise of many, however, the terrorists’ demands were moderate. In their first statement, they said that they would free the hostages if there was an immediate end to the war in Chechnya and the withdrawal of Russian troops. These steps, according to polls, were supported by 65 per cent of the Russian population. On October 25, the second day of the crisis, the terrorists softened their conditions. They said they would free the hostages in exchange for a statement by Putin that the war was over and the verified withdrawal of troops from only part of Chechnya.

Although the terrorists were heavily armed, as later became known, the bombs had not been activated. This suggested that the terrorists never intended to blow up the building. The FSB was aware that many of the bombs were inoperative because an FSB agent was among the hostages and he provided detailed information to his superiors by cell phone about the number of terrorists and the condition of the bombs.

The Russian authorities, however, never engaged in, or apparently even considered, serious political negotiations with the terrorists. They did not react to the proposal for a partial withdrawal from Chechnya and they agreed to

talks between the terrorists and Viktor Kazantsev, a presidential representative, only as a diversionary maneuver. At 5 a.m., on October 26, six hours before negotiations were scheduled to begin the theater was flooded with toxic gas and stormed by FSB and Special Forces units. The Russian authorities later said that the storm began because the terrorists started to execute hostages but Georgy Vasiliev, the producer of the musical and the chief spokesman for the hostages denied this. "I want to say that there were no executions – only threats," he said.

As gas flooded the theater, the terrorists had time to open fire with automatic weapons on the hostages but did not do so. Although they were overcome by the gas, all of the terrorists were summarily executed by the Russian forces, apparently in order to silence them.

According to Mikhail Trepashkin, a former officer in the Federal Security Service (FSB), there began to be reports in May, 2002 from "sources in the criminal world" that Chechens were concentrating in Moscow in numbers that had not been seen in the previous two years. He later added, "At the end of July-August 2002... I received information about a concentration in the city of Moscow of armed Chechen extremists... They were especially concentrated in the Southwest and Central districts of the city of Moscow." This information, however, apparently did not provoke any reaction from the authorities.

The leader of the terrorist band that took over the theater was Movsar Baraev, the nephew of a notorious Chechen kidnapper and murderer who had long appeared to have a privileged relationship with the Russian authorities, including a pass from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs that allowed him to travel freely all over Chechnya. In August, Russian military intelligence announced the arrest of the younger Baraev. Two months later he was free to lead the takeover of the theater. Among the suicide bombers in the theater were two women who had earlier been placed under arrest by the federal authorities but now were mysteriously free. It was also reported in the Russian press that eight other women suicide bombers were able to take up residence in a former military city in Moscow on Ilovaiskaya Street not far from the theater. This complex was apparently under the protection of corrupt elements among the Moscow police.

The Russian authorities have insisted that the gas used in the storm was harmless. On September 30, 2003, in answer to questions from journalists, Putin said that the hostages did not die because of the gas because "this gas was harmless and could not have done any damage to people. The victims died as a result of a set of circumstances—immobility, chronic diseases and the fact that they had to remain in this building."

The effects of the gas, however, are still being felt. In April, 2003, a lawyer representing some of the former hostages asserted that in the months following the siege approximately 40 more hostages had died. In October, 2003, the newspaper *Versiya* said that on the basis of its investigation about 300 of the former hostages were dead.

Consistent with the notion that the gas was harmless the authorities made no provision to save the hostages that had been exposed to it. According to Sergei Karpov, who lost his son in the siege, "When the Special Forces and medical personnel entered the theater, they saw an entire hall of corpses. People sat and lay without consciousness, everyone had a blue color. The doctors were confused. They had been warned that there could be victims with shrapnel wounds and gunshot wounds, missing limbs. But not a word was said about gas."

There was no proper transport of the victims. All of them were laid out on the asphalt and then taken in buses or minivans to the hospitals. Even though many were beginning to throw up they were laid out on their backs and carried that way. They were seated in the buses with their heads thrown back with the result that they choked on their own vomit. According to information collected by the relatives, 58 persons died in buses and hospitals.

In December, 2011, the European Court on Human Rights ruled in favor of the former hostages. The Court found that the Russian authorities through their actions deprived the victims of Nord Ost of their "right to life" and ordered the Russian authorities to conduct an effective investigation in order to establish the reasons for the deaths of the hostages and the degree of responsibility of officials for their death.

The Court's decision took effect on June 4, 2012 and Igor Trunov and Lyudmilla Aivar, the lawyers for the group, "Nord Ost," which represents the interests of the former hostages, asked the Russian Investigative Committee to start a criminal case against the members of the operational staff that carried out the storm of the theater and was responsible for the rescue of the hostages. On the eve of the tenth anniversary, however, the lawyers received a

refusal from the Investigative Committee. They immediately protested this decision in court and are preparing for a long and probably futile process in the Russian courts before again appealing to the European Court.

The Nord Ost terrorist act is not forgotten in Russia because no one knows what kind of gas was in the attack on the theater. This raises the possibility that the authorities flooded a hall full of innocent hostages with a banned gas being well aware that it was lethal. At the same time, no one is sure whether Russian officials were complicit in the terrorist attack and using it to discredit the Chechen resistance, particularly, the moderate leadership under the elected Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov. Finally, and perhaps most important for the average Russian, no one can be sure that faced with an identical situation, the Putin regime will not resort to similarly barbarous methods in the future. Moscow is the only European capital to be hit repeatedly by terrorist attacks and Nord Ost, along with the Beslan school massacre in September, 2004, stands as a symbol of the Russian authorities' disregard for human life in hostage situations.

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