



# No One Bargains with Terrorists, Do They? Beslan 10 Years Later

By Vladimir Voronov

*Foreword by David Satter*

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## Foreword

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Ten years have passed since the Beslan school tragedy. In this investigation, written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty<sup>1</sup>, Russian journalist Vladimir Voronov shows that there has been no honest investigation in Russia of one of history's most atrocious crimes. By seizing a school, the terrorists reached a new low in depravity. But the Russian authorities who authorized an indiscriminate attack on the school with flame throwers and grenade launchers were little better.

The Russian regime's disregard for human life was demonstrated again this summer when it provided powerful anti-aircraft missiles to the separatists in eastern Ukraine leading to the downing, on 17 July, of the Malaysian airliner MH 17. Unfortunately, to this day, the lessons of Russian actions during the Beslan crisis have not been fully learned.

-- David Satter

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<sup>1</sup> Voronov, V. 'S terroristami ne dogovarivayutsya, ne tak li? Beslan 10 let spustya', *svoboda.org*, 1 September 2014, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26559470.html>

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Ten years ago, on 1 September 2004 at 9.20am, terrorists seized almost all of those who had gathered for the celebration of the first day of school in the yard of School No.1 in Beslan, North Ossetia. In all, 127 people were taken hostage: pupils, their parents, relatives and friends, teachers and even babes-in-arms.

Soon after the siege began, 17 male hostages were shot dead. On September 2, the terrorists freed – thanks to the intervention of Ruslan Aushev [*the president of Ingushetia, 1993-2001 – Ed.*] – 11 women and 13 children. The bloody finale took place on September 3. During the chaotic slaughter, which is still officially called an “anti-terrorist raid”, 334 people were killed, including 318 hostages, 186 of them children. Also killed were 12 Russian commandos and emergency officers. More than 800 persons were injured. Of these, 72 children and 69 adults became invalids. A total of 1,343 persons were injured or killed in the siege.

At the time of the siege I was next to the school, having arrived in Beslan on 2 September 2004. My first impression was of total administrative chaos. If there were terrorists and hostages in the school, around the school there was a complete power vacuum. There was a whole crowd of officials, both local and federal, but no one managed anything. So, it’s not really surprising that 10 years later the official version of the incident is full of obscurities and half-explained facts. Everything’s “clear” only to the prosecutors

The soot of the burned school had not yet settled when everything was already clear to the prosecutors. Namely: the instigators of the terrorist attack were Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev; in total, there were 32 terrorists; and members of the terrorist group were chosen at random within just a couple of days. On August 30-31, the terrorists gathered in a forest near the village of Psedakh, Ingushetia and by the early morning of September 1 had started moving towards Beslan. To do so – if we believe the prosecutors – all 32 bandits squeezed into a single GAZ-66 truck which has a carrying capacity of two tons. Near Khurikau, an Ingush village in North Ossetia, they also captured the small Zhiguli automobile of a local police officer.

On their arrival in Beslan, the terrorists got out of the truck and seized the school, forcing everyone they found in the yard into the gymnasium. After that they mined the gymnasium. According to the prosecutor’s office, the terrorists stayed inside the school without making any demands until the end of the siege. On September 3, between 1.03pm and 1.05pm, two explosions occurred in the school, after which the raid began. The reason for the explosions, the investigators suggested, was the accidental detonation of two bombs owing to heat. In the fight which followed all but one of the terrorists was killed, and the only survivor, Nurbashi Kulaev, was captured and made a “confession.”

At Kulaev’s trial, the prosecutor’s version of events was repeated in a slightly modified form. Kulaev rejected parts of his own “heartfelt” confession but this did not alter the general “evidentiary line”. Likewise, it wasn’t altered by the evidence given by former hostages whose testimony contradicted it. The court chose to hear only the things which the prosecution wanted to prove.

There was no answer given to the question of who really organised the terrorist attack – conceived it, chose the target, carried out the arrangements to seize the school, undertook the reconnaissance of the territory, or who pulled the strings controlling the terrorist-puppets. On 17 May 2005, on the first day of Kulaev's trial, the chief prosecutor, Nikolai Shepel, laid out the official version of what happened. (I am citing shorthand notes of the proceeding, published on the website PravdaBeslana.ru),

“Part of the armed group was created by Basaev, Maskhadov, Khadzhiev and a national of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Abu Dzeit. In July-August 2004, Basaev, Maskhadov, Khadzhiev, Abu Dzeit and their supporters developed a plan for committing a large-scale act of terrorism on the territory of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania”.

As it follows from the indictment,

“The leaders of the gang... chose the target for the hypothetical attack: School No.1 in Beslan, Pravoberezhny region, Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. Also, the leaders of the gang chose the date of the attack, 1 September 2004 – the day of the festive events held on the occasion of the start of the academic year”.

The role of Basaev, Maskhadov, Khadzhiev and Abu Dzeit was continually stressed during the trial proceedings. However, neither in the materials of the trial nor in the report of the commission of the Federal Assembly assigned to gather information about the tragedy (the “Torshin Committee”) is there any evidence or testimony, or even an anonymous reference to secret sources or operational documents, to support this. Who determined that they were involved in the attack, and how it became known to the Investigative Committee – not a word is said of that anywhere. When, during my recent visit to North Ossetia, I asked this question to the first deputy chairman of the Parliament of the Republic of North Ossetia Stanislav Kesaev, who headed the Republic's own parliamentary committee that investigated the attack, he just smiled sadly: “Well, no one was holding a candle there, right?”

The role of Aslan Maskhadov, who was killed on 8 March 2005, in organising this terrorist attack was not really examined. However, in their statements for the media, representatives of the general prosecutor's office claimed that Maskhadov's computer contained documents and materials proving this. Nevertheless, none of those findings (or supposed findings) has ever been released to public. Thus, from a juridical point of view, the statements of the Russian general prosecutor were inconsistent if not outright mendacious.

Another organiser, according to the prosecutors, was Shamil Basaev. It seems that this is beyond doubt. Basaev assumed responsibility for the attack, and a year later even described some details of the events claiming that one of the terrorists, Vladimir Khodov, was a double agent. Khodov, Basaev suggested, worked both for the FSB and for Basaev. He also claimed that the terrorist act was prepared with the help of the FSB. In 2005, in an interview with the journalist Andrei Babitsky, Basaev stated that it was he who ordered terrorists to seize the school in Beslan (although he refused to assume responsibility for the death of the civilians). However, none of

these claims – either of the general prosecutor’s office (about Basaev’s role) or of Basaev himself – can be verified: they are just words with no evidence. Likewise, little can be proved and explained about the note that strangely appeared in the court trial and was said to have been written by Basaev – prosecutors claimed the note was passed to representatives of the authorities by the terrorists who seized the school.

Khadzhiev, who was also mentioned in the case, is a mystical figure. Khadzhiev is placed alongside leaders of the Chechen underground resistance, still nobody knows who he is! Among prominent field commanders of the time there are no any Khadzhievs. Absolutely no information about him can be found in the proceeding materials.

That leaves ‘Abu Dzeit’ – an almost mythical figure. It was reported that he was a national of Saudi Arabia. At the same time, other sources persistently claimed that he was a member of Al-Qaeda in North Caucasus, a native of Kuwaiti, a certain Taufik Al-Jedani who had a lot of nicknames, such as Little Omar, Abu Omar Al-Kuwaiti, Hussein, Maurus, Perses, Abbas, and so on. Abu Dzeit himself (if he even existed) is unable to clarify any of this as, according to the prosecutors, on 16 February 2005 he killed himself during an FSB operation in the village of Kantyshevo, Ingushetia. And here is another inconsistency. As early as 3 September 2004, when the name ‘Abu Dzeit’ was first mentioned in relation to the events in Beslan, Ingushetia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that there was no way this figure could have anything to do with the terrorist attack as he had been killed in Malgobek in June 2004.

These and many other irregularities which came out with a constantly changing “list” of ideologists and leaders of the Beslan terrorist attack were pointed out in the report of the above mentioned North Ossetian parliamentary committee headed by Stanislav Kesaev:

“Since the very first day of the tragedy”, the report said, “certain officials at the federal level, particularly the then deputy prosecutor general S. Fridinsky, tried to “internationalise” the list of terrorists, claiming there were “ blacks, Arabs, Ossetians, etc.” As evidence, they presented for a black the burned corpse of a terrorist, for an Ossetian – a bandit with an Ossetian surname. Another example was the claim of [*President Vladimir – Ed.*] Putin’s advisor A. Aslakhonov that “among [*the terrorists – Ed.*] there were 11 Arabs, 2 blacks, a Kazakh, a Tatar and not a single Chechen”. As stated in the report of the Kesaev’s committee, “the list of the identified terrorists is constantly growing, at times undergoing unexplainable metamorphoses. For instance, the terrorist I. Gorchkhanov who was wanted for participating in the attack on Nazran, took part in the school seizure in Beslan and, according to Shepel, was killed! Then, according to the prosecutor’s office, he, by a strange coincidence, organized [*a terrorist attack in – Ed.*] Nalchik, on 13 October 2005, more than a year after his supposed death. ...And the infamous V. Khodov was listed in the federal wanted list for many months after he was officially identified among the killed terrorists in Beslan”. “At that, - as it is ironically mentioned in the report, - from time to time the wanted list suffers changes for the reason that those named there were found to have been killed in Karabulak, Nazran, Nalchik, etc.”

**“Where they told me to sign, there I signed...”**

Kulaev's testimony, given both during the preliminary hearing and the trial, are a separate issue. Conclusions as to its “value” may be drawn from a couple of quotations. During the proceeding, on 31 May 2005, a witness asked Kulaev how he knew that among the terrorists (whom he claimed to have seen for the first time) there were Arabs and even Ossetians: “Do you speak Ossetian? – No, I don't. – Then why did you decide that one of them was an Ossetian? – The FSB agents told me that...” The witness repeated the question: “Why did you decide he was an Ossetian? – The FSB agents told me that on the first day when I was arrested”. Another question: “Did you know that his name was Vladimir Khodov? – No, the FSB agents told me that...” During the proceeding on 2 June 2005, Kulaev is asked whether his lawyer was present during the questioning: “During these months I saw my lawyer only twice. Where they told me to sign, there I signed”.

Teimuraz Chedzhemov, the lawyer who represented the victims during the proceedings, said to me in a conversation that even though he took little interest in Kulaev, it was clear to him from a legal perspective that the evidence against Kulaev was weak, to put it mildly. In relation to Kulaev, the investigators did not collect evidence or carry out any type of expert analysis. They relied instead on his confession. On the basis of the transcript of all the proceedings in Kulaev's case, one is led to the conclusion that during the trial there was not presented a single piece of conclusive evidence that Kulaev held a weapon, shot and killed someone or was even at the site of the tragedy between 1 and 3 September 2004! If it was proved during the preliminary inquiry, the materials supporting this were not presented at the trial. The most surprising thing is that even the simplest expert examinations were not conducted on Kulaev, such as “handwipes” (a process that checks the presence of gunshot residue left after a gun has been fired). One of the members of Kesaev's committee expressed doubt that Kulaev was in the school at the time of the attack, in the first place. To his knowledge, Kulaev by that time had already been serving time in a labor camp for a long time but was quickly delivered to Beslan when a live terrorist was needed.

**Physical evidence can be thrown away**

Even to the untrained eye, the reconstruction of the events on the basis of the materials collected by the prosecution looks shaky. From the materials of the proceedings it follows that even though the terrorists began gathering in their base on 25 August 2004, they spent just... several hours preparing for the terrorist attack.

All my current and previous conversation partners said that there were more terrorists than the prosecutors admitted, and they arrived in several groups, with some of the groups arriving beforehand. It is possible that they even took up positions in the school in advance. My conversation partners included: Stanislav Kesaev, the former head of the North Ossetian parliamentary committee; Teimuraz Chedzhemov, the lawyer; Valery Karlov, who conducted a private investigation and who wrote the book “Beslan. Seven years ago...” (and who lost his father during the terrorist attack); and, Israil Totoonti, Kasaev's deputy, who saved children from the fire during the slaughter in the school and who later helped with the independent investigation of the incident.

The investigators claimed that nothing was done in advance to put weapons, ammunition and explosives in the school (or elsewhere in Beslan). It was claimed that the terrorists brought all the ammunition in the notorious GAZ-66. However, I remember perfectly the “generosity” with which the terrorists used their military supplies spreading “disturbing” fire around the environs with automatic weapons and under-barrel grenade launchers long before the storm of the school began. Even to an amateur, it was obvious that ammunition was not a problem for them. And one should just try to place an entire ammunition load in one GAZ-66 along with all the armed men as well! And in this car, fully packed with people, weapons, ammunition and explosives they not only had to travel on bumpy country roads for several hours, but also to get out at the school site right on time – exactly at the moment when the assembly began. An experiment conducted some time later clearly proved that the terrorists, even if they could have – with enormous difficulty – fitted in this vessel (at that, with a very limited ammunition load), it is very doubtful that they could have successfully managed a 35-40 kilometre drive through intervening local communities. A range of witnesses – both in the trial and outside the court room – claimed that one or several groups of terrorists were already in the school when the attack happened, while another group carried out the attack itself. Furthermore, it’s possible that part of the building was mined beforehand as well. In the opinion of Valery Karlov, the placement of a cable used by the terrorists is evidence of this. From the teachers’ common room, it was brought to the attic, then – along the attic – around the whole school. After that, through the dormer-window of the main building one had to “climb to the roof of the gymnasium, make a hole in the asbestos wallboard, climb down to the earth, go to the garages and get back to the school and continue to lay mines”. And here Valery Karlov asks rhetorically: was it possible to do all this after the seizure of the school and in a way that no one noticed it?!

Some of the former hostages said that among the corpses of the terrorists they were asked to identify there were no people they saw in the school. The investigators firmly claimed there were two female terrorists. This is the number of females that were identified among the dead terrorists. However, according a number of witnesses, there were at least four.

From the very beginning the hostages claimed that among the terrorists were individuals armed with snipers’ weapons – rifles with a telescopic sight. One of the victims, Tabiev, stated that his relative “was shot point blank by a man with a sniper’s rifle who jumped out of the GAZ-66”. Yet, among the dead terrorists there were no people matching the description of those the hostages called snipers. And among the weapons that were found there was not a single sniper’s rifle. There were machine guns, sub-machine guns, pistols, grenade launchers, working and burned ones – all present, but there was nothing at least vaguely resembling snipers’ weapons! They were there but disappeared. Apparently, together with the owners...

By the way, the number of weapons found at the school fire site also does not accord with the official number of terrorists. According to the witnesses, automatic weapons were at the disposal of all terrorists but the women. During Kulaev’s trial, however, the following list of the weapons was read out: 24 machine guns (including 2 with under-barrels), 1 light machine rifle, 1 belt-fed rifle, 6 pistols and 1 revolver.

There are many such “inconsistencies” in the investigation. I can offer my personal observations. As soon as the day after the tragedy, on 4 September 2004, I witnessed the destruction of material evidence: in the school yard an excavator scooped all the “garbage” and loaded it into onto the beds of Kamaz trucks that took it all to a garbage dump. The authorities not only disposed of things which could be useful for the experts and for, they disposed of human body parts as well. In spring 2005, pieces of school desks, burned beams, patches of children’s clothes, footwear, a dud, a rucksack (which supposedly belonged to a terrorist), and parts of human bodies were discovered at a waste deposit site... In this pile of terrible garbage some people even identified clothes and footwear of their children who were killed or who disappeared during the terrorist attack.

The first reaction of the security services to this finding was “We knew nothing of that!” Once they had recovered, they went into complete denial: claiming there was nothing at the site that was related School No.1. Surely, they couldn’t acknowledge that after the raid everything was just scooped in a pile and brought to a waste deposit site. It is called destroying material evidence. Each speck of dust and each grain of sand has to be carefully studied at the crime scene. To establish all the circumstances of the terrorist attack, to restore the full picture of the crime, to determine the exact reason of death of each person, to identify the persons who were killed, every little bit of evidence is highly important as no one can tell in advance which of those scintillas will become that lacking fragment of the mosaic, that link that will make it possible to restore a more or less objective picture.

And no one can say that those who ordered the “garbage” to be disposed of didn’t understand this. As a result of this wilful destruction of evidence, it is impossible to fully restore the sequence of the events, as expert examinations conducted on randomly chosen material are not worth a dime. In these circumstances, it is impossible to find out why and where the roof started burning, burying hundreds of people. Was it because the terrorists’ mines exploded or because of the projectiles fired from grenade launchers and flame-throwers that hit the school during the storm? Many of the things that could have helped to shed light on these questions were taken to the garbage dump.

The one thing left to be understood is what the investigators wanted to hide, what they didn’t want to be found and released? Perhaps, the aim was simple and trivial: to cover the complete incompetence of the authorities, both central and local, who didn’t manage to prevent the terrorist attack which, as it follows from a range of documents, was expected and predictable. It is also possible that the investigators wanted to cover the actions of the leaders of the counterterrorist “headquarters”, which failed both to start negotiations with the terrorists and to prepare for the storm. Or, perhaps, they wanted to cover up the fact that the reason for the explosions in the gymnasium were the shots fired from a grenade launcher or a flame-thrower used by federal agents in order, in the opinion of many people in Beslan, to hasten the end of the siege – as “no one bargains with terrorists”, do they?





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