

Britain's *Observer* newspaper suggests Russian secret service involvement in Moscow bombings

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An article in Britain's *Observer* newspaper on Sunday, March 12 claims to have uncovered evidence of Russian secret service involvement in last year's bombing of two Moscow apartment houses. The blasts killed 200 people.

Acting President Vladimir Putin blamed Chechen terrorists for the explosions, which became the pretext for Russia's military offensive against Chechnya. But the *Observer* alleges that research it conducted, along with Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme, "puts secret police in [the] frame for Moscow atrocities".

The newspaper reports that following the two explosions, a third apartment house was targeted to be bombed—in Ryazan, 100 miles south of Moscow. The 13-storey working class block of flats on Novosyolov Street is home to 250 people. The bomb was uncovered in the basement of the block on September 22 at 9 p.m. after Vladimir Vasiliev, an engineer, reported to police that three strangers were behaving suspiciously nearby.

Police arrested the three. According to the *Observer*, "They were Russian, not Chechen, and when arrested by local police they flashed identity cards from the FSB—the new styling for the KGB, the secret police Putin headed before he became acting President."

In an interview with the *Observer*, Vasiliev described how the car being used by the three had its front number plate covered up with a piece of paper, but the back plate displayed Moscow's regional code. The engineer heard the three checking if they had taken everything and insists that they were Russian.

Two days after the arrest, the FSB announced that the third bomb had been a "training exercise". However, the *Observer* reports it has evidence that the bomb involved real explosives and a detonator and carried a

photograph of what it said was the bomb's detonator, pre-set to explode at 5:30 a.m.

The newspaper also interviewed bomb squad officer Yuri Tkachenko, who defused the explosive. Tkachenko told the *Observer* that "it was a live bomb. I was in a combat situation." Tkachenko says he tested the basement with a portable gas analyser and obtained a positive reading for Hexagen, the same explosive used in the Moscow bombs.

According to Police Inspector Andrei Chernyshev, one of the first to enter the basement, "We could see sacks of sugar and in them some electronic device, a few wires and a clock. We were shocked. We ran out of the basement and I stayed on watch by the entrance and my officers went to evacuate the people."

Vasiliev said that on September 24 he heard the official report on radio "when the press secretary of the FSB announced it was a training exercise. It felt extremely unpleasant."

The *Observer* report also quotes Boris Kagarlitsky, a member of the Russian Institute of Comparative Politics, stating, "FSB officers were caught red-handed while planting the bomb. They were arrested and they tried to save themselves by showing FSB identity cards." The newspaper continues, "when the FSB in Moscow intervened, the two men were quietly let go."

The *Observer* interviews were made as part of a Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme, "Dying for the President", screened on March 9. The programme reviewed Putin's appointment as acting president in the spring of 1999.

FSB head Putin had been a virtual unknown until he was selected by President Boris Yeltsin to take over when his own hold on power had become tenuous. The

programme summary states that no one believed Putin—then known as the “grey cardinal”—“could win the presidential election due in 2000 unless something exceptional happened.”

The summary continues: "It did. A bomb in a block of Moscow flats killed 90 people. Another, shortly afterwards, had an equally devastating effect. Putin blamed Chechen terrorists. Denouncing them as 'mad dogs', he promised to have them 'wasted on the toilet'. He launched the Chechen war soon afterwards, rising to unprecedented popularity levels in the wake of public outrage about the bombings."

In light of the information it uncovered of a third alleged bomb attempt, *Dispatches* asked pointedly: "Was Vladimir Putin, now the favourite to win the imminent presidential elections in Russia, implicated in an atrocious conspiracy to justify the terrible Chechen war? Were the Moscow bombings and the massacre in Katyr Yurt [a Chechen village where an estimated 363 people were killed by Russian forces] part of the bloody price that had to be paid to get him elected to the Kremlin?"



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