

Putin's gas attack in Moscow—the outcome of Russia's barbaric war in Chechnya

The Editorial Board
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The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns the storming of the Moscow musical theatre by special units of the Russian secret police. With this brutal action, employing poison gas, the government of Vladimir Putin brought the type of indiscriminate killing it routinely employs against the Chechen masses into the nation's capital, directing it against Russian hostages as well as Chechen hostage-takers.

Although Putin has spread a cloak of secrecy over the events of last Saturday and muzzled the media, it is now clear that well over a hundred of the hostages who lost their lives in the storming of the theatre died as a result of the gas employed by secret service special forces. Just one of the hostages died of gunshot wounds, although who fired—hostage takers or the police—is not clear.

As socialists, we are unalterably opposed the methods of the Chechen separatists, who had taken an estimated 800 innocent civilians hostage. This latest tragedy underscores once again the politically bankrupt and fundamentally reactionary perspective that underlies the methods of terrorism. But the homicidal measures employed by the Russian government cannot be justified by the actions of the hostage-takers.

Putin refused to negotiate to save the lives of the hostages. His overriding aim was to demonstrate, though a ruthless and violent action, the power of the state, and thereby intimidate not only the Chechen masses, but also the growing anti-war sentiment within Russia. In so doing, his government displayed utter arrogance and disdain towards its own people.

Of the 53 hostage-takers, 50 were killed. Many of them, including the female members of the group, were executed as they lay slumped and defenceless in their seats, knocked unconscious by the gas. In an interview with the newspaper *Moskowski Komsomolez* a special units member stated: "Our specialists killed the terrorists with a shot in the neck or head."

The operative argued that this was the only way to deal with "people who have two kilos of explosives strapped to them." In common with all of the official statements made concerning the operation, this argument falls apart upon critical examination. In the first place, use of gas would not have prevented a determined suicide bomber from blowing himself up, were that his intention. According to the reports of witnesses, some of the hostage-takers noticed the gas and attempted to put on gas masks before being overcome.

One hostage was able via his cell phone to tell people on the outside about the penetration of gas into the building. The suicide bombers certainly had the split second necessary to activate their explosive devices. This raises the suspicion that the hostage-takers were wearing fake devices instead of genuine explosives. Some newspaper reports

indicate this may well have been the case.

Secondly, after breathing in large quantities of the gas, the hostage-takers no longer represented a danger. They could easily have been disarmed. Under such circumstances, their shooting by the special forces constituted murder.

The Russian government is still refusing to reveal the type of gas it used in the operation, although doctors have made clear that such information could have saved many lives and continues to be vital for the treatment of the large number of hostages who were seriously injured and remain in hospital. Some experts conclude that the government is not prepared to concede that the special units used a nerve gas banned by international law.

Among the types of gas that may have been used are the chemical poison 3 BZ, which was produced in the 1960s in the US and induces paralysis for up to 48 hours. Another possibility is a gas related to the Sarin type. Both gases are banned by the international treaty governing chemical weapons that Russia signed in 1997.

One fact is not in dispute: the Russian government used poison gas against its own citizens. This, of course, is one of the main accusations levelled by the US and other governments against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein to justify Washington's plans for an invasion and occupation of the Persian Gulf nation. Not surprisingly, this bitter and tragic irony has been passed over in silence by the Bush administration and virtually every media outlet.

The contempt expressed by the Russian government for its own citizens did not cease with the end of the hostage drama. Since Saturday, desperate relatives have been gathering in large numbers in front of Moscow hospitals. Two days after the police/military operation, they still do not know if their loved ones are dead or alive. The government has denied them access to the survivors, and has refused to give out even the most basic information.

With his brutal action against the hostage-takers in Moscow, Putin is continuing the course carried out against rebellious minorities by every Russian government since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Between 1994 and 1996 Russian Premier Boris Yeltsin carried out a merciless war in Chechnya aimed at the suppression of separatist tendencies in the small Caucasian republic. Putin's own rise to power was intimately bound up with the second war launched against Chechnya.

Following a series of crises and corruption scandals, Yeltsin in August 1999 nominated the largely unknown former security service veteran, Putin, as head of the government, paving the way for Putin to then take over Yeltsin's post as president. Shortly afterwards a series of bomb attacks demolished blocks of flats in Moscow and other Russian cities, claiming hundreds of victims.

Although the perpetrators were never properly identified, there were many indications that the secret service agency FSB was involved. Putin used the bombings as an excuse to once again undertake a full-scale military mobilisation against Chechnya. Appealing to Great Russian chauvinism and making crude attacks on Chechens—"Flush the bandits down the toilet" was one of his slogans—he was able to secure a victory in the ensuing presidential election.

The Russian army established a dictatorship in Chechnya based on naked terror. At least 80,000 have died since 1994. All of the major towns, including the capital city of Grozny, have been razed to the ground. Inhabitants have been subjected to continual house searches, kidnappings, executions, rapes, and extortion. Normal life has been made impossible.

This has given new impetus to the most extreme elements among the separatists. When the Soviet Union was falling apart, Islamism barely played a role in Chechnya. Many of the current Chechen irregular soldiers studied at Soviet universities, made their careers in the Soviet army and only turned to Islamism following the war offensive by Moscow. The leader of the hostage-takers in Moscow, Mosvar, is the nephew of the separatist leader Abi Barajev, who was formerly a traffic policeman in the Soviet Union.

The terrorist methods employed by these groups are reactionary and counter-productive, and can neither be supported nor defended. In the final analysis, despite the extreme and violent character of their methods, such organisations are guided by a perspective that boils down to pressuring the Russian government to come up with a deal. They evince contempt for the Russian working class and are neither capable of nor interested in winning the support of the oppressed Russian masses.

Nevertheless, the main responsibility for the tragic events in Moscow lies with Putin and the ruling elite of Russia. The hostage-taking, or some similar action, was the inevitable consequence of a war that has long since taken the form of state-organized terror. Most of the hostage-takers who met their deaths were barely twenty years of age. For their entire conscious lives they have known nothing other than war, violence, death and repression.

Notwithstanding the reactionary character of their methods and the bankruptcy of their communalist perspective, the basic demand of the hostage takers—the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Chechnya—was and remains entirely legitimate. This demand is winning growing support within Russia itself.

According to opinion polls prior to the hostage-taking, just 40 percent of Russians were in favour of war in Chechnya. Three years ago the comparable figure stood at nearly 80 percent. During the siege in Moscow, hundreds of relatives of the hostages gathered in front of the theatre to call for peace in Chechnya. Peace demonstrations also took place in front of the Kremlin.

Putin cannot yield to this demand. the war against Chechnya is, for two major reasons, indispensable for the continuation of his government.

Domestically, the war gives him the excuse he needs for the building up of the repressive state apparatus. Unable to resolve any of the intolerable social conditions wracking the country, Putin employs the threat of "terrorism" to legitimise his posture as a bulwark of law and order and security. Since he took over as president, the powers of the secret intelligence services, police and army have been massively expanded. The media has been subjected to rigorous censorship and subordinated to government control.

Putin's crude methods of rule typify the new social elite that has

emerged in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Recruited from the former nomenclatura and mafia elements, this social layer has employed gangster methods to plunder state property and industry. Never has a country in peacetime been plunged into such desperate social straits in such a short period of time. Yeltsin made very clear what these ruling layers understand by democracy when, in 1993, he ordered the bombardment of the Russian parliament by tanks—an action that led to hundreds of deaths.

In relation to foreign policy, Putin's measures in Chechnya are aimed at asserting the Great Power ambitions of the Russian ruling elite. The loss of the Caucasus republic would decisively weaken Russian influence in a region with vast international significance because of its own oil deposits as well as its strategic proximity to other rich oil and gas reserves.

The brutal action of the Russian government has been rubber stamped by Washington, London, Paris and Berlin. As early as last Thursday, prior to the gas attack by the Russian special forces, US President Bush spoke to Putin by telephone and offered "any support and assistance" that the United States could provide. The US envoy in Moscow, Aleksander Vershbov, said the US security services were working with their Russian counterparts to help free the hostages. Vershbov himself "appeared almost like a leading member of the inner Kremlin circle," as a German newspaper put it.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder all congratulated Putin on the ending of the hostage crisis. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said no one but the hostage-takers could be held responsible for the great loss of human life. He was shocked, he said, "that once again so many innocent people have fallen victim to international terrorism."

Western governments bear a large share of the responsibility for the tragedy in Moscow. Initially there had been sporadic international criticism of Russia's actions in Chechnya, but this has virtually ceased since 11 September 2001. In return for his support for the US war in Afghanistan, Putin was given free rein in Chechnya. Even mild appeals to respect human rights have been scotched. Washington considers Russia's attacks on the Chechen people a legitimate contribution to its "war on terrorism." German Chancellor Schröder, a former critic of Moscow's scorched earth policy, now favors a "more differentiated position" on the Chechen question.

There are indications that the unity between Moscow and Washington over the recent crisis may prompt Russia to change its position on the question of Iraq. In return for US support for the bloody ending of the hostage drama, Russia may support a UN resolution that gives the US government the go-ahead for war against Baghdad.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the "war against terrorism" is a formula used by the governments of the imperialist powers to justify violent aggression against other nations, as well as the oppression of minorities and oppositionist tendencies within their own borders.



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