

# Russia: school hostage atrocity ends in bloodbath

The Editorial Board  
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The siege of a Russian primary school in North Ossetia has ended in massive bloodshed, leaving possibly hundreds dead.

The deliberate targeting of a school by the hostage-takers and the brutality and the ruthlessness they employed against defenceless children has horrified the people of Russia and the world. It is an atrocity and the Chechen separatists and Islamist terrorists who carried it out are criminals.

Absolutely nothing progressive can come of such terrorist attacks on innocent civilians. There is, in fact, an inseparable connection between the reactionary means employed by the hostage-takers, and their political goals and ideology.

Friday's catastrophe is but the latest in an unbroken chain of social and human disasters that have resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. Those responsible for the bloodbath in North Ossetia avidly supported the break-up of the Soviet Union and are seeking to further fragment the former USSR along ethnic and communal lines. Their demand for an independent Chechnya in no way embodies the democratic and social interests of the Chechen working class. It is a reactionary project, whose realization would benefit only aspiring bourgeois elements and their communalist and Islamic fundamentalist allies.

To recognize this political fact and state it bluntly in no way minimizes the criminal repression carried out by the ruling elite in Russia against the Chechen people. But the actions of the hostage-takers will only strengthen the hand of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and further disorient the broad mass of the Russian people. It is, likewise, a political gift to US President George Bush, who will seize on these events to justify Washington's militarist policies in the name

of the "war on terrorism."

The school was seized Wednesday by an Islamist group. Some 20 men and women stormed the school in Beslan during its opening ceremony for the new term, taking schoolchildren and parents as hostages and herding them into a gymnasium.

Many reports describe the hostage takers as Chechen nationalists demanding independence, but according to the press agency Itar-Tass, the hostage takers demanded the release of fighters who had been captured in the course of assaults on police stations in the region of Ingushetia, which lies between Chechnya and North Ossetia. According to the North Ossetia Interior Minister, the hostage takers were "Ossetians, Ingushetians, Chechens and Russians."

Though officials put the number of hostages at 354, up to 1,500 children and adults were, in fact, taken hostage. Efforts began immediately to negotiate their release. The successful freeing of 26 women and a number of the youngest children on Thursday, after mediation by the former president of the neighbouring region of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev, was to be followed by the release of the bodies of 10 to 20 male hostages who had been killed.

Apparently, one or more of the female assailants—so-called "Black Widows" of slain Chechen fighters—blew themselves up in the gymnasium where the hostages were being kept. The gym was also apparently wired with explosives. Thirty or so hostages made a run for it, and were shot at, sparking an all out fire-fight that culminated Friday morning in an assault by Russian special forces, using helicopters, tanks and armoured cars.

The explosions and the resulting collapse of the school roof led to scores of casualties. The fierce fighting left hundreds injured and wounded, including

many children. Some 10 of the assailants were killed, but 13 others holed up in an adjacent building and continued fighting for hours with Russian troops—preventing firefighters from extinguishing the blazing school buildings. Eventually, three of the hostage takers were captured alive.

A reporter on the spot said there were at least a hundred burned bodies in the gymnasium. This figure was confirmed Friday by the news agency Interfax, which reported that the casualties totalled well in excess of 400 wounded.

At 11:15 a.m., all hostages were reported to have left the school. Most were dressed only in their underwear, having taken off over clothes in the overheated hall packed with people. Many of the victims were covered in blood from gunshots.

The hostage drama in North Ossetia had been preceded by a number of terror attacks in Russia that have been linked to Islamist groups. On the evening of August 24, two passenger planes flying from Moscow to the southern Russian towns of Sotschi and Rostov blew up in mid-flight, killing all 89 passengers. An attack was carried out at a bus stop in Moscow, injuring three people. One day later, on August 31, a suicide bomber blew herself up at the entrance to the Metro-Station “Rishskaja,” killing nine people.

Putin will seize on the incident to justify further brutal acts of repression against the Chechen people and the criminalisation of all domestic opposition to his regime. For his part, Bush lost no time in citing the outrage as legitimisation of his own aggressive military intervention in the Middle East and attacks on democratic rights.

Such methods are not accidental, but flow from the reactionary perspective of Chechen nationalism—the re-emergence of which is one of the many results of the break-up of the Soviet Union, which was engineered by the Stalinist bureaucracy in alliance with the imperialist powers.

The brutal war carried out by the Kremlin for over 10 years in Chechnya has fuelled the growth of separatist movements, increased the desperation of the local population, and driven layers of young people towards Islamist radicalism and suicide bombings.

Already in the first Chechnya war at the end of 1994, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, a significant part of the Caucasus republic was laid to waste. The second

war, commencing in 1999 and continuing up to the present, has seen even more devastation. Tens of thousands have lost their lives in both wars and there is hardly a family that has not suffered one or more casualties. The capital, Grosny, lies in ruins. Even Putin was forced to concede his surprise at the extent of the destruction of the city when he visited Grosny in May, following the assassination of the pro-Kremlin governor, Achmad Kadyrov.

The latest series of terror attacks have followed closely on the heels of the election carried out by Putin on September 2 in Chechnya. The election was a farce. Putin made sure that his favourite, Alu Alchanov, was voted into the post of Chechen president with a large majority—having excluded other candidates and made a proper conduct of the election impossible.



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