



Placing blame: Making sense of Beslan

Gearóid Ó Tuathail

School of Public & International Affairs, Virginia Tech, Alexandria, VA 22314, USA

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Terrorism
Russia
North Ossetia
Geopolitics
Indiscriminate geographies
Violence

The aftermaths of terrorist spectacles are intensely consequential moments in the making of geopolitical meaning. This paper develops a critical geopolitical account of the ways in which key actors involved in the terrorist incident at School Number 1 in Beslan North Ossetia constructed its meaning and justified their actions. The event is examined from three perspectives: the terrorist's Beslan, the Kremlin's Beslan and the contested meaning of Beslan among Ossetians and others in the North Caucasus. Multiple sources are utilized in the construction of the account: an English language archive of Russian reporting on the event, accounts of the siege, statements by key protagonists, elite interviews in North Ossetia, and the results of a survey question in North Ossetia and the North Caucasus on Beslan. The paper examines the construction of blame by the various actors and relates it to indiscriminate geographies, sweeping acts of abstraction whose homogenizing effects make (counter)terrorist violence possible.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

On 1 September 2004 a group of terrorists surrounded a community of children, parents and teachers celebrating the first day of the new school year in Beslan, a southern Russian town in the republic of North Ossetia, and took them hostage. Responding officials put the number held at a few hundred, downplaying the reality that 1127 people were captive. For 3 days, the hostages were held in the cramped conditions of School Number 1 (Fig. 1). At least 30 hostages and 3 terrorists died the first day. On the second day, former President of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev negotiated the release of 26 hostages, 11 women and 15 children. No further progress was made. Shortly after 1 pm on the third day, an unexplained explosion punctured a hole in the roof of the school followed by another less than 2 min later. A third explosion rocked the gymnasium where most of the hostages were held killing scores. The explosions precipitated a dash for freedom by some hostages while Russian Special Forces stormed the school, aided by an *ad hoc* group of local Ossetian men with guns. Thermobaric weapons and tank rounds were fired into the school. The gymnasium roof was soon aflame and collapsed upon those beneath (Fig. 2). Only at 10:25 pm did the guns fall silent with all terrorists, bar one pronounced dead. It took considerable time to establish that 334 hostages had died in the school, 188 of them school children. Over 600 people were wounded, more than half children. The Beslan hostage-taking was a global media event, a breathtakingly cruel terrorist spectacle. Enthralled, the mass media flocked to the scene and projected it to a worldwide audience in melodramatic terms. But while the media frames were familiar, the location – a school in an obscure part of Russia – was not.

Uncertainties hovered. Was this another episode in the 'global war on terror' or something peculiar to Russia? Who were the perpetrators: 'international terrorists,' 'Chechen rebels,' 'jihadis' or simply neighboring Ingush fighting Ossetians over a local territorial dispute? And, as the horrific dénouement unfolded, was the Putin administration culpable for the high death toll among the hostages?

Terrorist outrages are moments of collective emotional intensity which alter politics as usual and imperil democratic norms. All too often those in power use the aftermath to impose decrees and pass legislative measures which concentrate executive power, a historical pattern evident in the United States since 9/11. For Russians, recent terror driven politics dates back to August 1999 when a relatively obscure functionary, Vladimir Putin, was appointed Prime Minister by the ailing Boris Yeltsin. Soon thereafter Russia was gripped by a national security panic as a series of deadly and mysterious explosions claimed the lives of over 300 people (Lucas, 2008: 23). In the same month, a group of Chechen rebels seized two mountainous villages in Dagestan in an apparent attempt to destabilize the largest multiethnic Muslim republic. This 'invasion' gave Putin a territorial target and he responded with passion, vowing to "wipe out" "the terrorists" even "in the out-house" (Mydans, 2005). This uncompromising performance secured Putin's election as President the following year. Post-Soviet super-patriotism in Russia begins with counterterrorism in the North Caucasus (Barany, 2007).

Terrorism is a critical political and intellectual challenge of our time. Geographers have sought to address it in a variety of ways, addressing the 'geographical dimensions of terrorism' and the geographical imaginations implicated in political violence more generally (Cutter, Richardson, & Wilbanks, 2003; Gregory & Pred,

E-mail address: toalg@vt.edu



Fig. 1. Beslan school no.1. Photograph by the author, August 2007.

2007). The latter work explores the imaginative geographies incited by terrorism, acts that are “located beyond the boundaries of civilization and lodged in the pathologies of those who hammer so destructively at its gates” (Gregory & Pred, 2007: 1). The civilization/barbarism frame so readily at hand when spectacular terrorism erupts is an act of conceptual spacing, a geo-graphing that all too easily posits a victimized interior and a terrorist exterior, an innocent self and an evil other. Horrific events like 9/11 or Beslan provide a prominent platform for political actors to proffer geopolitical narratives that specify enemies and attribute blame in consequential ways. Studying how this works is where critical geopolitics can make a contribution, exploring especially the ways in which blame attribution is entwined with geopolitical constructions in such narratives. Does placing blame involve some form of blaming place? Or, in tension with the potential territorial specificity this might suggest (an address where terror resides), are there homogeneity effects at work which blur places and peoples in favor of abstractions? The questions are important because indiscriminate violence is often premised upon and calls forth

indiscriminate geographies, sweeping acts of geo-graphing driven more by affective dynamics of abjection and pain projection than a responsibility to empirics (Sparke, 2007). This paper examines this question through an account of how the multiple actors involved in the Beslan attack – its terrorist mastermind, the Kremlin and various Ossetians – sought to make sense of it as a geopolitical event. As we will see, this occurred in multiple and messy ways which were shadowed by indiscriminate practices of various kinds. Before developing this account, however, some brief contextualization of the Beslan attack is required.

Historical geopolitical contextualization

The Beslan tragedy needs to be contextualized within three historical geopolitical processes. The first is the long history of ethnicized strife in the North Caucasus as the Russian state expanded into the region and centralized its power. This does not begin with the Russian Empire but the establishment of Tsarist supremacy reordered power relations among peoples in the region



Fig. 2. The gymnasium of the school with an Orthodox cross memorial and pictures of the victims on the walls. Photography by the author, August 2007.

(King, 2008). A civilized/barbarian binary propelled the indiscriminate violence that characterized the Caucasian wars (1817–1864). Within this geopolitical environment, Ossetians largely distinguished themselves from neighboring Caucasian peoples by pledging loyalty to the Tsarist state. Bound into the growing power of the Kremlin, Ossetian national identity was incubated by imperial power. The Russian revolution and subsequent civil war brought great strife with the Bolshevik Red Army forming an alliance with Chechen and Ingush fighters against the Ossetian and Cossack fighters who sided with General Denikin and the White Army. By March 1920 Vladikavkaz fell to the Red Army. Territory to the east of Vladikavkaz, part of a suburban rayon known as eastern Prigorodnyy, was seized and settled by Ingush fighters, becoming integral to the autonomous okrug of Ingushetia established in 1921. Stalinist collectivization efforts and 'anti-bandit' campaigns by the Red Army provoked considerable local resistance. In 1934 Stalin combined Ingushetia and Chechnya, raising their status to an autonomous republic the following year. World War II brought the terror of war to the region fueled by indiscriminate geographies of blame around ethnicity and class. As part of a drastic collective punishment through deportation of the Ingush and Chechens in 1944, Stalin transferred most of Ingushetia's territory to North Ossetian control (Nekrich, 1978). In 1956, de-Stalinization allowed Ingush and Chechens to return to their ancestral lands. Ingush lands were partially restored with the exception of eastern Prigorodnyy and a small slice of territory linking northern Mozdok to the rest of North Ossetia (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2008). Beslan in its local and regional context is shown in Fig. 3.

The second geopolitical process is the ethnic secessionism that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Two episodes in what might be called the terrorism of ethnic cleansing are germane to Beslan. First, Ingush activists pressing their claim to Prigorodnyy triggered rising Ossetian–Ingush tensions which boiled over in October 1992 into full-scale fighting. Ossetian forces, with some federal aid, triumphed and drove out well over 30,000 Ingush civilians from eastern Prigorodnyy. Second, under the leadership of Dzhokhar Dudayev, Chechen nationalists sought independence from the Russian Federation. This result was a nasty secessionist war that produced an estimated 80,000–100,000 fatalities,

including Russian soldiers and Chechen fighters (Hill, Lieven, & de Waal, 2005). Most of these casualties occurred during the first Chechen war, from December 1994 until the Khasav-Yurt Accord on August 31, 1996 when Russian forces agreed to withdraw from the republic and suspended consideration of its status for five years. The first Chechen war featured the indiscriminate use of violence by both sides. The most notorious terrorist attack during the first Chechen war was led by Shamil Basayev. Basayev had experience inside the Russian machine he ended up fighting. He served in the Soviet army, fought for pro-Moscow forces in Abkhazia, and even rallied to Yeltsin's side during the coup before returning to his native Chechnya. Basayev actively organized the defense of Grozny when Russian forces first attacked in December 1994. Six months later, in May 1995, 11 members of his family, including his wife, brother and two daughters, were killed in a Russian bombing raid. In a revenge attack, Basayev and a group of over 130 fighters drove to Budennovsk in Stavropol' krai and seized a local hospital, taking over 1000 people hostage. After two attempts by Russian forces to release the hostages failed, Basayev negotiated their release and his own safe passage to Chechnya live on Russian television with then-Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. The spectacle made him a hero to some Chechens and 'terrorist number one' to the *siloviki* within the Russian Federation bureaucracy.

The third process is the rise of Vladimir Putin through the military re-assertion of Russian power in the region. The second Chechen war he launched featured the indiscriminate use of aerial bombing and the merciless shelling of the residents of Grozny which fell to Russian forces after a winter siege in February 2000 (Kramer, 2004). Between 1999 and 2002, an estimated 10,000–20,000 people were killed in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Over 300,000 Chechens were driven out of the republic into squalid holding camps in Ingushetia. Russian forces and contract mercenaries (*kontraktniki*) scoured the countryside, decimating whole villages in 'mop up operations' (Sagramoso, 2007: 701). Putin described terrorists as "two-legged beasts" and made quick use of 9/11 to cast the Russian war against Chechen separatism as part of the 'global war on terror.' After reclaiming Grozny and lowland territories, the Kremlin pursued a policy of 'Chechenization' which involved the installation of former rebel warlords in positions of



Fig. 3. Beslan in its regional setting with the route taken by the terrorists from their base-camp to the school indicated.

power in Chechnya. This institutionalized a more intimately local reign of terror as a means of establishing order in the restless republic. In sum, the residents of Chechnya and Ingushetia were exposed to years of personal experience with terror, torture and death (Russell, 2007).

Russian-sponsored terror tactics – indiscriminate bombings, ethnic cleansing operations, filtration camps, death squad disappearances, torture – against ordinary Chechen families in Chechnya and Ingushetia begat the emergence of Chechen suicide terrorism against Russian civilians, with the first suicide attack recorded in June 2000 and reaching a peak in 2003 and 2004, years immediately following the most brutal Russian counterterrorism operations in Chechnya and Ingushetia. In an in-depth ‘psychological autopsy’ of thirty four of the one hundred and twelve Chechen suicide terrorists who participated in twenty eight acts of suicide terrorism from June 2000 based on interviews with their families, Speckhard and Ahkmedova reveal that in all cases suicide terrorists had experienced deep personal traumatization at the hands of Russian forces. All had personally witnessed the death and beatings of close family members or experienced torture themselves. Trauma was the primary motivation among their sample in every case, with all persons experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder and expressing a deep felt wish to avenge the deaths of their loved ones. Terror-sponsor organizations, particularly those with militant Wahhabit/Salafid ideologies, offered a place of redemption for those with deep traumas, steering them onto a path where they could fight for a political cause, avenge the loss of their loved ones, and foster “the hope of achieving some modicum of social justice through terrorism” (Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2006: 444). The militant Wahhabit ideology, they suggest, served as a type of ‘psychological first aid’ for those experiencing post-traumatic reactions.

The terrorist’s Beslan

The terrorist operation against Beslan was planned by Shamil Basayev with alleged funding from the Kuwaiti Abu-Zaid.¹ Led by Ruslan Khachubarov (the *Polkovnik* or Colonel), it was launched from a makeshift forest camp 2 km from the village of Psedakh in the Malgobek region of Ingushetia, only a few dozen kilometers from Beslan (see Fig. 1). The terrorist gang that gathered in the forest tract was united by kinship ties, personal traumas and histories of violence including terrorizing each other. Considerable public information is available about three of the estimated thirty three terrorists; some information is available about the others but the identities of all have not been definitively established (Phillips, 2007: 19).

The leader of the group was called *Polkovnik* or Colonel by the other terrorists. His name was Ruslan Khachubarov, born in November 1972 in Ingushetia to an Ingush father and Chechen mother. He and a younger brother moved to Chechnya when his parents separated. His younger brother became a Chechen fighter and was killed during the first war (Isayev, 2004). Ruslan too joined the Chechen fighters and allegedly participated in a number of terrorist attacks against Russian forces as well as a spectacular terrorist attack in Nazran in June 2004 (Shvarev, 2004). The Colonel is quoted on a number of occasions saying to hostages that “I came

here to kill” (Dunlop, 2006: 39). The second in command appears to have been Vladimir Khodov. Born in Ukraine to an ethnic Ukrainian mother, he was brought to the town of El’khotovo in North Ossetia when his mother re-married an ethnic Ossetian serving in the Soviet army. He grew up there speaking Russian and Ossetian. In 1995, his younger half-brother Boris was sentenced to eight years in prison for murder. Under the influence of Muslim prisoners, Boris converted and managed to convert Vladimir too, who visited him regularly. Boris was subsequently released and murdered after an unwelcome bride capture. Meanwhile, Vladimir was convicted of rape and, according to many accounts, agreed to become a FSB operative to avoid prison. He was subsequently involved in a number of terrorist attacks – a car bomb in Vladikavkaz and a train derailment near El’khotovo – yet remained free in his home town. Some have alleged that these acts were designed to establish his *bona fides* with Basayev. He did work his way into a circle around Basayev but it appears that, after a month among mujahedeen fighters in Ingushetia, he confesses to being a FSB agent and agreed to Basayev’s suggestion that he become a double agent.

The third figure is Nurpashi Kulayev, the only terrorist to survive the hostage-taking. He was tried for his participation in the hostage-taking and sentenced to life in prison, a sentence confirmed after appeal by the Russian Supreme Court in December 2006. His trial is an important source of information on the attack. Born and raised in the Nozhai-Yurt district of Chechnya with his older brother Khanpasha, his story discloses a terrorizing within terrorism. Khanpasha had become involved with the rebels and lost an arm after an attack by Russian planes. Arrested for his rebel activities, Khanpasha subsequently had his charges dropped and was released, a fact that raised rebel suspicion. According to Nurpashi’s account, rebel fighters came and met with Khanpasha and his friend Mairbek. Returning home, Khanpasha asked that Nurpashi and his friend Islam join him and Mairbek on a journey. The four men crowded into the back seat of a car and were driven to the Colonel’s camp. A fierce argument developed within the group about whether Khanpasha and others were working for the security services. Nurpashi and Islam were then taken from the group to an isolated spot where they were told to start digging their graves. When neither ‘confessed’ to working for the Russians as they faced their graves, they were reprieved and returned to the camp. The next day they were put in a truck to Beslan where they became terrorists (Phillips, 2007: 22–23). At Kulayev’s trial the prosecutor asked: “What nationality were the 32 persons in your group?” Kulayev responded: “Ingush, one Arab and one Ossetian and one slant-eyed person. The remainder were Ingush and Chechens. There were four or five Chechens...There were no [ethnic] Russians...Four persons spoke only in Russian” (Dunlop, 2006: 47). Dunlop alleges that neither the Russians nor Basayev have wanted to admit that most of the terrorists were Ingush, the Russians to dampen the potential of reigniting war over Prigorodnyy, and Basayev to ‘Chechenize’ a terrorist attack that did not include many Chechens (Dunlop, 2006: 45–46).

The terrorists who seized School Number 1 were not well organized. It took the active intervention of a female hostage, Larisa Mamitova, to get the Colonel to convey to the authorities with whom he wished to negotiate. No demands were articulated but Mamitova was told that their main goal was withdrawal of federal forces from Chechnya. There was also dissension among the terrorists with the two female terrorists, according to hostage accounts, objecting to an operation that targeted a school. Isolated with a group of male hostages in one classroom, the explosive belts of both female terrorists were detonated by the Colonel resulting in the death of all. And there was no single line of communication with the authorities. Two separate sets of demands were articulated which revealed tension between Ingush-specific demands,

¹ Ahmad Nasser Eid Abdullah Al-Fajri Al-Azimi, also known as Abu-Zaid Al-Kuwaiti, was a Kuwaiti Salafist jihadi who reportedly trained with al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 1998 before traveling in October 1999 to Chechnya. Russian FSB sources cite him as the financier of the Beslan raid. On February 16, 2005 he blew himself up after being surrounded by Russian Special Forces near the village of Dalakovo in Ingushetia, only about 6 kilometers from Beslan (see Fig. 3 for locations).

that could conceivable have been met, and Chechen-global demands, that related to the complete withdrawal of federal forces from Chechnya. The first was for the release of those rebels captured during an earlier terrorist raid in Nazran. The second Chechen-global demand was expressed in a letter the Colonel gives to Ruslan Aushev on the second day of the hostage-taking. From Shamil Basayev to President Putin, it offered “a sensible peace on mutually beneficial terms according to the principle of independence in return for security” (Phillips, 2007: 193). It is hard to determine whether Beslan was ever conceived as anything other than a suicide attack. Some of the terrorists were clearly ignorant of the nature of the operation and some may have fostered fantasies of a glorious escape like Basayev at Budennovsk. But it is probable that most knew that theirs was a suicide operation and that they were there, as the Colonel’s put it to some hostages, ‘to kill.’

The Beslan attack underscored longstanding divisions within the Chechen rebel movement. Though the Kremlin blamed both Aslan Maskhadov and Basayev for the attack, Ossetian authorities responding to the hostage-taking tried to use Maskhadov to bring the crisis to an end. North Ossetian President Dzasokhov phoned the Chechen exile leader Akhmed Zakayev in London twice and he managed to have Maskhadov issue a statement which condemned the attack (Nougayrede, 2004). One theory holds that federal authorities hastily began an assault on the school when they learnt that Maskhadov was on his way to Beslan to negotiate with the hostage-takers to bring it to an end. Basayev’s reaction was different, claiming responsibility for the attack soon after it took place. In interviews and statements before his assassination outside Nazran in 2006, he justified the attack by citing Russia’s ‘terrorism’ against Chechen civilians. In a DVD statement in response to questions from Britain’s Channel Four which was received in early 2005 he appears with a T-shirt emblazoned with the word ‘Anti-Terrorist’ (while cradling a six barrel grenade launcher). He explained Beslan by evoking a stark indiscriminate geography with no place for the innocent:

You must understand us correctly. We are at war. Russians approve of Putin’s policies. They pay their taxes for this war, send their soldiers to this war, their priests sprinkle holy water on their soldiers and bless their heroic duty, calling them ‘heroic defenders of the fatherland.’ And we’re just ‘terrorists.’ How can they be innocent? Russians are accomplices in this war. It’s just that they don’t all have weapons in their hands.

Basayev promised further Beslan-like operations, if only, he explained, “to show the world, again and again, the true face of the Russian regime, the true face of Putin with his satanic horns so that the world sees his true face. In order to stop the genocide, we will stop at nothing” (Channel Four News, 2005). In a video interview with Andrei Babitsky in June 2005, Basayev threw responsibility back upon the Russians for Beslan arguing that ‘the whole Russian nation’ gives silent approval to the genocide against Chechens. “Well you can ask why I did it. To stop the killing of thousands and thousands of Chechen children, Chechen women, and the elderly. Look at the facts. They have been kidnapped, taken away and murdered” (Babitsky, 2005). He justified putting children’s lives at risk by responding that he “will pull no punches to stop this genocide” [against the Chechen nation]...I figured that the more brutal I could make it, the quicker they’d get the message. I thought it would work. But it’s not sinking in yet” (Babitsky, 2005). It is possible that Basayev calculated that creating a terrorist outrage in North Ossetia might ignite a larger ethnic conflagration between Ossetians and Ingush as North Ossetian males sought revenge. His own actions certainly could be read in these terms. Basayev never fully embraced the consequences of the Beslan operation. He purported to be

shocked at the Russian response, considering it inconceivable (while at the same time holding them capable of genocide). And in a statement posted on the Chechen resistance website later in 2005 Basayev projected responsibility for Beslan directly onto the FSB by claiming that the attack was prompted by the FSB’s attempt to lure him into attacking the North Ossetian Parliament (RFE/RL, 2005).

The Kremlin’s Beslan

The Kremlin’s response to Beslan was characterized by a lack of discrimination on a number of fronts. The first was the controversial assault which killed so many hostages. The second concerned the identity of the attackers. The Kremlin assumed control of the response to the Beslan crisis relatively early in the first day from the local crisis committee established by the North Ossetian president Dzasokhov. Putin appointed Major General Valery Andreyev, head of the FSB in North Ossetia, to direct this local committee and response but command control lay with Putin, and the national leaders of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, Vladimir Pro-nichev and Vladimir Anisimov who set up offices in the southern wing of the first floor of the local rayon building in Beslan (Phillips, 2007: 123). The first and consistent response was to attempt to control information and images about the attack. Two independent reporters, Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya, were forcefully prevented from traveling to the region. The head of North Ossetian President’s Information and Analysis Office, Lev Dzugaev, consistently provided inaccurate and misleading information on the number of hostages being held. As the BBC and CNN managed to provide live coverage from the scene, Russia’s main television networks were told to broadcast as normal and discouraged from live coverage (Petrovskaya, 2004). Russian Special Forces arrived on the scene that night but the Kremlin’s special advisor on the North Caucasus Aslambek Aslakhonov did not arrive until the afternoon of the third day, in time only to hear the fateful explosion and the beginning of the assault on the school.

There is no incontrovertible public evidence that an official assault was ordered, though many have speculated that the first explosion was triggered by a sharp shooter killing a terrorist. Evidence that it was not lies in the fact that Russian Special Forces took substantial losses at the outset: not having time to don armored vests, some died shielding the children fleeing from the school. Yet the negotiation process with the terrorists was characterized by dysfunctionality as was the effort of authorities to seal off the scene. From the outset, Andreyev and others projected blame for the attack on Chechen and international terrorists rather than on the Ingush fighters many locals suspected. This was possibly a deliberate tactic on the part of the federal authorities to inhibit and deflect ethnicized readings of the event. In his first public comments on the hostage-taking, President Putin vowed that he would not allow the drama to destabilize “the already fragile inter-religious and interethnic relations in the region.” “We understand these acts are not only against private citizens of Russia but against Russia as a whole” (Putin, 2004a). An Itar-Tass story on the 3rd of September quoted representatives of secret services in the southern federal district that Shamil Basayev was the mastermind behind the Beslan hostage raid. It was also disclosed that “the mass hostage-taking was funded by one of the Wahhabism ideologists, Abu Omar al-Seif, al Qaeda’s liaison in Chechnya and foreign fund manager” (Itar-Tass, 2004a). FSB agents were quoted as stating that suicide bombers for terrorist attacks in Russia and the North Caucasus are prepared by instructors from al Qaeda and other extremist organizations. In some cases “suicide bombers are trained by Chechen instructors

but they, too, use al Qaeda methods” (Itar-Tass, 2004a). As the hostage-taking reached its tragic denouement, Andreyev told Channel One of Russian television that twenty hostage-takers had been killed and ten of them came from Arab countries. “One of them is black” he said. Excluding the possibility that the attackers were Russian citizens, he added that after the operation is over “we will be able to say confidently whose these criminals are, and from what countries and for what purpose they came here” (Interfax, 2004a).² Andreyev confirmed that ten of the hostages were Arabs later that evening, and the next day was conceding that some of the terrorists were “people of Russian origin and people from foreign countries” (Interfax, 2004g). Russian Deputy Prosecutor General Sergei Fridinsky told journalists on the 6th that it had been established that the hostage-takers included representatives of ten nationalities (Interfax, 2004d; Interfax, 2004f). Aslambek Aslakhanov, arriving on the scene, declared that an “international gang” was behind the attack (Interfax, 2004b). The Kesaev report cites his declaration at the time that “among them are eleven Arabs, two blacks, one Kazakh, one Tatar and no Chechens” (Kesaev, 2005: 35). President Putin visited the scene and its victims in the early hours of September 4. Addressing local leaders he condemned the raid as especially cruel and inhuman. Describing North Ossetia as “Russia’s outpost in the south,” he said that “[o]ne of the terrorists’ main objectives was to sow interethnic discord and explode the whole North Caucasus.” Outlining a series of measures designed to prevent Ossetian retaliation attacks against Ingushetia he said that “anyone who yields to such provocations will be looked upon as associates in the terrorist attacks and terrorist supporters” (Interfax, 2004c).

The horrific, chaotic and tragic end to the Beslan hostage-taking was a public relations disaster for the Kremlin and one of the worst crises of Putin’s presidency. To the already widespread local frustration at official misinformation was added despair over the faltering negotiations, and shock and anger at the chaotic end game and huge civilian death toll. Stories about terrorists who should have been under arrest emerged (Blinova & Trofimov, 2004). *Izvestiya* devoted its front and back pages simply to pictures of the hostage-taking’s aftermath, and published an article on the censorship of Russian television during the crisis. The Kremlin scrambled to contain the emotional fallout from the event. A public rally on behalf of Beslan was taken over by the Kremlin and transformed into a pro-Putin rally. *Izvestiya*’s editor Raf Shakirov was quickly removed from his position by the paper’s controlling company (Steele, 2004b).

In an address to the nation the evening after the attack, Putin (de)contextualized Beslan within processes and stories that were much more global than the local circumstances of the attack or the ethnonationalist motivations of the terrorists. Beslan became a metonym for themes and preoccupations already central to the Putin administration. The first theme was weakness and the fall from greatness. Beslan was emplotted within a historical arc of tragic events and terrible ordeals over the course of Russian history. It came at a time of transition following “the collapse of a vast and great state that, unfortunately, proved unable to survive in a rapidly changing world.” Despite the Soviet Union’s collapse “we were able to preserve the core of what was once the vast Soviet” that became the Russian Federation. But the changes of the 1990s left Russians

unprepared, with an economy in transition and a political system that “does not yet correspond to the state and level of our society’s development.” Putin declares that Russians do not fully grasp the complexity and dangers of the processes at work in the country and the world. In sum, Russia has not reacted adequately to the difficulties it faces: “We showed ourselves to be weak and the weak get beaten.”

This stark declaration is characteristic of the direct speech of Putin in times of crisis. There is none of the reaffirmation of national greatness through heroic response that one finds in the Bush administration’s speeches after the September 11th attacks. Instead, Putin articulates a sense of national humiliation, one cast in a basic analogical understanding of the state as a body struggling in a difficult environment. This metaphor is itself an indiscriminate geography; instead of a territorial state with different regions, peoples and interest groups, one has the classic geopolitical trope of the nation-state as organism. Nine days later Putin was more explicit in his articulation of this metaphor in an important speech to the leaders of Russian regions:

You know, practically from the moment a person is born, disease-inducing bacteria and health-threatening viruses enter his body. But if he grows up strong and healthy, his immune system suppresses these disease-causing germs and viruses. The minute his health weakens, however, they are all let loose and provoke an onslaught of life-threatening illnesses. That is what has happened here – the country, the state, became weakened and so we find ourselves now facing this onslaught. There is no sense in us now heaping particular blame on those who deliberately provoke this situation, I will speak about this separately, but these harmful elements are present inside each person’s body and within each state. What we need to do is improve the way the power system works and the country is managed. We need to create an effective economy. We need to restore the health of the entire Russian state and economic system (Putin, 2004b).

So the first way in which the Putin administration experiences Beslan is as a manifestation of national weakness, an exposure of the fall of the country from supposed greatness after the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event he later described as “a major geopolitical disaster of the [twentieth] century” (Putin 2005). Implicit in this reading is a whole agenda of renewal through the building of internal immunity and external strength.

The second theme that Putin articulated in his national address in the wake of Beslan also echoes classic geopolitical discourse in that it represents international relations as a struggle for power, resources and territory between competing states. What is surprising is how Putin evokes this to give the terrorism at Beslan meaning. In another earthy declaration Putin tells the Russian nation:

Some would like to tear from us a “juicy piece of pie.” Others help them. They help, reasoning that Russia still remains one of the world’s major nuclear powers, and as such still represents a threat to them. And so they reason that this threat should be removed. Terrorism, of course, is just an instrument to achieve these aims.

Putin’s homespun vision of the atavistic aims of Russia’s enemies prompts his audience to invent their own geopolitical conspiracies, the ‘juicy piece of pie’ being ostensibly the territory of Chechnya and potentially Ingushetia and Dagestan but more generally Russia’s vital southern border. Read somatically, it is Russia’s body that is under attack, with castration (loss of nuclear status) and dismemberment (secessionism) the pervasive fears. Putin’s declaration articulates a dubious but nevertheless serious claim of the Russian government. The United States and the United

² One possible explanation for this surprising announcement of black identity is that some of the bodies being recovered from the scene were badly burnt and blackened with soot (Blinova & Trofimov, 2004). The falsity of the ‘Arab and Negro’ identification allowed Chechen rebels sources to claim that “a rather strange turn in the propaganda thinking of the special operators of the Lubyanka, if you bear in mind that not a single hostage even hinted about any Arabs or Negroes being among the armed group” (Stoun, 2004).

Kingdom, by providing asylum for high profile Chechen activists,³ is implicitly siding with terrorists who seek to dismember the Russian Federation. This line of reasoning is frequently articulated using the trope of 'double standards': Western countries say they are 'against terrorism' but they tolerate and even aid Chechen 'terrorists.' As many have noted, this categorization sweeps up moderates and extremists into one totalizing category: terrorist. Yet Putin is simply using the same indiscriminate discourse championed by the Bush administration after 9/11, one where conceptual universals displace any responsibility to geographical specificities. Putin never utters the geographic words 'Chechnya,' 'Chechen,' 'Ingushetia,' 'Ingush' or even 'North Ossetia' and 'Ossetian' in his address. Instead one has an abstract personalized geography featuring 'us,' 'we' and 'our' (Russia) against 'them' (terrorists), aided and abetted by 'others' (the West). The terrorism at Beslan is disembedded from the second Chechen war and its multiple local and regional meanings and presented as an instrumental tactic in an international conspiracy against Russia. Like Bush after 9/11, he declares that Beslan was international warfare against the Russian state and Russian people (though, unlike 9/11, all the identified terrorists were Russian citizens): "Our country is under attack." Terrorism threatens is the very territorial integrity of Russia. Through their cruelty, they seek to "sow disintegration in our society," to "destroy and plunder Russia," to wreck havoc with its ethnic relations. Terrorism is not internal, local and ad hoc but external, global, strategic: "What we are facing is direct intervention of international terror directed against Russia. This is a total, cruel and full-scale war that again and again is taking the lives of our fellow citizens."

There is an ongoing incoherence in the Kremlin's reading of Beslan and the violence in the North Caucasus. On the one hand, that terrorism is emphatically read as external and international. On the other hand, in their accounts of how it functions, the president and administration officials inevitably concede crucial internal factors also. Putin's reliance on an organic state analogy implicitly commits him to this. Viruses and pathogens only thrive when the body is weak. The complex ethnic composition and poor socio-economic situation in the North Caucasus makes the region particularly vulnerable to terrorism. In his speech before the regional leaders of the Russian Federation in the wake of Beslan, Putin acknowledges this, stating that "the roots of terror also lie in the mass unemployment that remains in the region, in the lack of effective social policies, in the low level of education of the young generation, or even the lack of opportunity to receive education. This all provides rich soil for extremist propaganda, for a growth in terror bases, and for recruiting new followers" (Putin, 2004d). Demonstrating commitment to this interpretation (offered to an audience of domestic leaders whose relationship to the Kremlin was under revision), Putin announced the creation of a special Federal commission on the North Caucasus and the appointment of a special Presidential envoy to the Southern Federal district, Dmitry Kozak, to address persistent problems with the economy, governmental dysfunctionality and the terrorist threat. Reacting specifically to the Beslan tragedy, Putin approved a series of new federal projects: the construction of two new schools, an elaborate memorial, the development of transportation infrastructure, and a new hospital of federal significance (not realized).

The case for the international dimension to the Beslan attacks lay with the reputed Arab terrorists that took part. But the Putin

administration was soon on the defensive in the face of eyewitness and compelling local evidence that the terrorists were largely from Ingushetia, with a few also from Chechnya. This information, however, was never embraced by the Kremlin which continued to vociferously promote the international terrorism and conspiracy storyline. Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov even declared the week after the event that not a single Chechen had been found among the dead terrorists (Steele, 2004d: 90). Putin opposed a public inquiry into the attack but relented to a parliamentary inquiry as criticism of the Russian response grew. In a lengthy informal discussion with international journalists, Putin reacted angrily to the suggestion that negotiations were required with Chechen rebels: "Why don't you meet Osama Bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks, ask him what he wants and give it to him so he leaves you in peace? Why don't you do that?" he said to Jonathan Steele of *The Guardian*, with what Steele describes as "searing sarcasm." "You find it possible to set some limitations in your dealings with these bastards, so why should we talk to people who are child killers? No one has a moral right to tell us to talk to child killers" (Steele, 2004a). Amidst such affect-driven and polarizing rhetoric, there was no room for acknowledging any connection between the Beslan tragedy and Russian policies in Chechnya (Blinov, 2004). When forced to address Chechnya and specific geographical places, Putin turned to grand geopolitical conspiracies and classic geopolitical tropes. Putin represented the drive for Chechen independence as the spearhead of a strategy by Chechen Islamicists, backed by foreign fundamentalists, to undermine the whole of southern Russia and to stir up trouble among Russia's other Muslim communities. Articulating fear of a "domino effect" among Russian Muslims, he pointed out that there are Muslims along the Volga, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan adding that "Chechnya isn't Iraq. It's not far away. It's a vital part of our territory. This is all about Russia's territorial integrity" (Steele, 2004a). But concern for Russia's territorial integrity did not translate into recognition of the differences between places and the diversity of peoples in these parts of Russia. Instead, hyperbolic geopolitical fantasies override differentiated physical and human geographies.

The Putin administration responded to criticism with talk of conspiracies. Both Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov described the terrorists as mere 'puppets' of external enemies of Russia (Moscow Mayak Radio, 2004). In his unscripted interview with international journalists, Putin clarified his "juicy pieces" remark declaring that "I didn't say western countries were initiating terrorism, and I didn't say it was policy. But we've observed incidents. It's a replay of the mentality of the cold war. There are certain people who want us to be focused on internal problems and they pull strings here so that we don't raise our heads internationally" (Steele, 2004c).

While there was no acknowledgment of a connection between Russia's policies in Chechnya and Beslan, there was an asserted connection to the state of Georgia according to some Kremlin officials. Georgia, after all, allowed terrorists to use the Pankisi Gorge as a base of operations. Also Georgian television allowed a broadcast of Maskhadov (Itar-Tass, 2004c). The Kremlin reacted with prickly self-righteousness to the call by Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, then part of the rotating EU presidency, for a full accounting of the Russian response to Beslan (Interfax, 2004e). Bot had been urged to make his statement go beyond the usual condemnation and extension of sympathy by Baltic state leaders (Presse, 2004). Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov protested those who, like Akhmed Zakayev, claimed that the Beslan tragedy "is on the conscience of Russia's leadership." "These officials, without even waiting for the killed to be buried and for the end of the mourning, began to call on Russia in their condolences to explain how all this had happened," Lavrov stressed. Turning

³ The United Kingdom gave political asylum to Akhmed Zakayev in November 2003 while the United States gave what Putin described as 'a safe haven' to Ilyas Akhmadov, the Chechen 'Foreign Minister' and former aide to Shamil Basayev in July 2004 (Putin, 2004c) (Brzezinski, 2005).

blame back on the European Union he said that “the granting of asylum to people linked with terrorism” undermines the unity of the anti-terrorist coalition” (Itar-Tass, 2004d).

The third theme that characterized Putin’s response to the Beslan attack was the solution that followed from his analysis of the crisis and its causes: the need to strengthen the state. Putin’s unusual construction – “a political system that does not yet correspond to the state and level of our society’s development” – was Kremlin code for the need for already contemplated and planned constitutional revisions. The ‘vertical of power’ required strengthening. The solution to efforts to divide and dismember Russia’s territorial integrity was unity and strength. “I am certain that the unity of the country is the main condition for conquering terrorism” Putin told Russia’s assembled regional leaders as he announced a series of new laws (Putin, 2004d). The most important factor in strengthening the state was a unified system of executive power, he explained, and a unified executive power vertical. Thus, regional leaders would no longer be democratically elected but appointed by the Kremlin and ratified by local assemblies. Putin presented the policy changes as necessary in order to avoid the ‘ethnic bidding’ that accompanied democratic elections in multiethnic regions.

The Kremlin also announced a change in how the Russian parliament elected its deputies. Instead of single constituency elections, there would only be elections based on party lists. In addition to this, the threshold for eligibility in elections was increased from 5% to 7%. The third set of policy responses involved the media and civil society. Besides using informal influence to have the editor of *Izvestiya* fired for ‘overly emotional’ coverage of the Beslan horror, the Kremlin moved to force the closure of the two largest independent television channels, TV5 and NTV. In 2006 a new law on non-governmental organizations was introduced that made it extremely onerous for international human rights organizations, among others, to work in Russia. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International were both inhibited from working in the Russian Federation because of their failure to meet the terms of the new NGO law (Amnesty International, 2008). Russia’s anti-extremist law of 2003 was also broadened in July 2006 to include vague charges like ‘social hatred’ that allow government prosecutors to go after anti-government critics.

The federal parliamentary commission on the Beslan attack established on the 20th of September 2004 has been surrounded in controversy. Chaired by Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council Alexander Torshin and dominated by Yedinaya Rossiya (United Russia) members, its deliberations were viewed skeptically by many and much delayed. One independent member of the commission, Yury Savelyev, a member of the now defunct *Rodina* (Motherland) Party and a weapons expert, broke with the official explanation and published his own 700 page report in August 2006. His report found that the first explosion in the gymnasium was from a shot by a RPO-A thermobaric frame thrower, and the second from a RShG-1 rocket-propelled grenade. It concluded that the Kremlin decided to storm the building but wanted to create the impression they were acting in response to the actions of the hostage-takers. The report also suggested the possibility that as many as 60–70 terrorists were involved in the hostage-taking. The Torshin report was finally released in December 2006. It partially exonerated the FSB in Ingushetia, noting that it had achieved certain results in the suppression of terrorist acts in 2004. The report listed 23 identified terrorists, all citizens of the Russian Federation from Ingushetia (16), Chechnya (6) and North Ossetia (1). It concluded that two of the terrorists were foreign, though it was unable to definitely identify them. Eight of the terrorists were previously charged with participation in terrorist activity, and nine were wanted in connection with the Nazran attack. The report also partially validated the Putin administration’s claim that

international terrorists were behind Beslan in the person of Abu-Zaid.⁴ On the central controversial question of the unexplained explosions, Torshin’s report concludes that the terrorists started the final battle by intentionally detonating bombs among the hostages to the surprise of Russian negotiators and commanders.

Beslan has become an extremely delicate subject for the Putin administration. Putin marked the one year anniversary in 2005 by meeting with a select group of Beslan mothers. A key word search of speeches on the Russian Presidential website yields only nine mentions of Beslan in 2005. In 2006, the number is seven while in 2007 it is only mentioned once, on the anniversary, when Putin visited a school in Astrakhan. A Levada Center poll on the second anniversary of the attack showed that only five percent of Russians believe that authorities are telling the truth about what happened at Beslan (Bigg, 2006). Putin has not returned to Beslan since 4 September 2004 though in August 2008 he flew into Vladikavkaz to direct the Russian war against Georgia.

North Ossetia’s Beslan

The terrorist attack at Beslan hit North Ossetia hard and placed significant strains on its relationship with the federal center. In the initial hours after the hostage-taking, the republic’s leaders rushed to the scene and gathered on the third floor of the Pravoberezhnyy rayon administrative building. The President of the Republic was Alexander Dzasokhov, a veteran politician who was appointed to the last Politbureau by Gorbachev before the Soviet Union disintegrated. Dzasokhov subsequently served as a deputy in the Duma and as Russian Ambassador to Syria before returning to his native North Ossetia in 1998 to win election as President of the Republic and re-election in 2002. Dzasokhov assembled an ad hoc crisis committee but it was never formally constituted.

Upon hearing news of the kidnapping, relatives of the hostages also rushed to the scene. Tensions rose within the assembled crowd as officials announced hostage estimate numbers which everyone knew to be under-estimates. Fears that local and federal authorities were planning an assault, already at the forefront of everyone’s mind given the Dubrovka fiasco, were compounded. Relatives demonstrated against an assault and, later that evening, there was a tense public meeting with Dzasokhov in the Palace of Culture. Afterwards there was a large march by members of the public, including many non-residents of Beslan, to the local municipal building demanding decisive actions on the rescue of the hostages, “threatening otherwise to undertake the appropriate actions independently” (Kesaev, 2005: 6). The chairman of the North Ossetian parliament Taimuraz Mamsurov, whose two sons were hostages, met with the protestors and convinced them to calm down and leave.

From the outset, then, there were three distinct groups in North Ossetia impacted by the crisis: the local political elite who were trying to navigate between obedience to the Kremlin and responsiveness to their own constituents, the relatives of the hostages who feared an assault and developed a deep distrust of official authorities and their handling of the crisis, and the larger North Ossetian public, represented at the outset by a mobilized force of mostly male militia members who interpreted the school seizure as an attack on Ossetian society.⁵ Residents of Beslan were trying

⁴ The report notes discovered videotapes with the recording of the activity of rebel groups headed by Basaev and Abu-Zaid. In particular, one of the videotapes reportedly has Abu-Zaid instructing Ruslan Khuchbarov.

⁵ Refugees from Georgia who fled ethnicized violence in 1991 are a distinctive community in North Ossetia. Many men are organized into militias ready to fight in South Ossetia. There appears to have been an important divide between residents of Beslan, who did not want a military response, and residents beyond Beslan (including South Ossetians) who wanted a violent response.

frantically to determine who was in the school. With such a large hostage-taking in such a small town, everyone seemed to know someone who was a hostage. Observers reported little doubt among the crowd outside the school about who was responsible for the attack. “They assumed they were under attack because they were Ossetians; because they were Christians and because their regional republic had remained loyal to the Russian government. They thought that the terrorists had probably come from one of the neighboring Russian provinces, either Chechnya or Ingushetia” (Phillips, 2007: 58). The 1992 war over eastern Prigorodnyi haunted the event, with some believing that the terrorists were Ingush fighters from that region bent of revenge.

The horrific end to the hostage seizure inflicted massive pain and trauma on Beslan and North Ossetia. A bloody assault occurred despite the relatives’ pleas. Andreyev’s statements projecting blame onto ‘Arabs’ added to the anger and rage of many. On the 4th of September there were demonstrations of a few hundred people in Central Square, outside the Palace of Culture, and outside School Number 1 demanding the resignation of the President Dzasokhov and the North Ossetia’s internal affairs minister Kazbek Dzantiyev (he resigned the next day) as well as the immediate publication of all the names of the slain and any fugitive bandits (Popova, 2004b). The rallies were spontaneous but provoked considerable nervousness on the part of local officials with Dzasokhov denying that there had been any rally (Popova, 2004a). There were further demonstrations against Dzasokhov over the next few days. On the defensive, he called for an end to talk about ‘Arabs and Negroes’ (Politov, 2004). Yet at the same time the North Ossetian President was affirming Putin’s storyline about international terrorists as the cause: “As the president of the country has said, international terrorism has declared war on us. And no matter where we live, we must all think about how to protect ourselves and our children from this threat” (Borisov, 2004). So also was the North Ossetian Parliament. An appeal to President Putin on the 10th of September demanded that “the representatives of law enforcement agencies who allowed the tragedy (in Beslan) to happen be identified and punished regardless of their rank and position,” but also stated that “we fully support the president of the Russian Federation in his evaluation of the tragic events that have taken place in the country. The terrorist acts that have occurred recently in different Russian cities show that international terrorism has declared war on us. The bandits who wanted to set the Caucasus alight and spread fear and hatred for one another amongst the people have not achieved their aims” (Itar-Tass, 2004b). The very next day Dzasokhov, in an interview with the French daily *Le Monde*, denied ever projecting blame onto foreigners, the violence of 1992 haunting his words: “I have never said there were Arabs. The group arrived in our territory from Ingushetia. They took a road that had no longer been used either by residents or Russian soldiers since the 1992 conflict. It took them 20 min to arrive” (Nougayrede, 2004). Dzasokhov was deeply unpopular after Beslan and in 2005 was replaced as president by Taimuraz Mamsurov whose two sons survived the hostage-taking.

The most significant act of the North Ossetian Parliament on the 10th of September was the establishment of its own parliamentary commission to investigate the events at Beslan. The effort was an attempt to placate public anger and suspicion of an official cover up of the origins and circumstances that contributed to the high hostage death rate. Chaired by Stanislav Kesaev, deputy head of the North Ossetian People’s Assembly, the report was officially released in November 2005 at an unusually nervous press conference.⁶ It provided a detailed time line of events associated with the hostage-

taking, a summary of events preceding the hostage-taking which was highly critical of the MVD in Ingushetia and North Ossetia, especially the district office of the Pravoberezhny rayon (Kesaev, 2005). The report exonerated the republic crisis staff pointing to their efforts not to allow the use of force including offering themselves as hostages, the organization of a human shield exit strategy for the terrorists, and their pursuit of Maskhadov as a possible negotiator. It documented the different power centers reacting to the crisis and remarked that Andreyev “lost the threads of operational control dozens of times.” The report accused the federal crisis staff of knowing the approximate number of hostages from the outset but not voicing the real number, and pointed to the unexplained role of the FSB group in Beslan: “the juridical status of V. Pronichev and V. Anisimov in Beslan remains unclear, as well as the stay of N. Patrushev and R. Nurgaliyev in Ossetia.” Its text suggests but does not state that the cause of the initial two explosions came from outside, and not from terrorist ordinance. Highlighted is the fact that a tank fired point blank at the school early on after the first three explosions and the use of frame throwers after 6 pm when some hostages may still have been in the building. And it underscored the dominance of the FSB in the entire system of response to the hostage-taking, implicitly faulting it for manifest failures. Also, it exculpated the local militia men whose actions were blamed by non-locals for hostage deaths. According to the report, only due to the civilians from Beslan and other regions of Ossetia was evacuation of the injured possible. The role of “simple residents of Ossetia in the release of hostages is invaluable and must not be concealed or forgotten” (Kesaev, 2005: 34). Finally, the report pointed out that the vast majority of the terrorists were from Ingushetia. Its concludes with a symmetrical phraseology that acknowledges the Kremlin storyline while criticizing it: “Without disputing the international nature of terrorism as a reality...we consider it important to warn against an excessive globalization of the problem, and an attempt to silence the existing “Chechen problem,” both in certain actions of the federal authority in the Caucasus and the actions of extremist forces” (Kesaev, 2005: 41). Released as the federal parliamentary investigation floundered, Kesaev felt the report was well received by the families of victims.⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the report’s release the Levada Center conducted a scientific public opinion poll on ethnic relations in the North Caucasus under the direction of John O’Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and I. One issue we sought to determine was how the different national communities in the region understood and explained the reasons for the Beslan attack. The question we asked and the results we obtained, in aggregate and broken down by ethnicity, are indicated in Table 1. It should be noted that in the sample of Ossetians there were 30 Ossetian Muslims so the category ‘Muslims’ refers to non-Ossetian Muslims. There are five significant aspects to these results. The first is the strikingly low numbers of people who believe that the fight of Chechens for independence is an explanation for Beslan. Extremely low among Ossetians but somewhat higher among Muslims and ethnic Russians, this is a remarkable result considering the fact that the attack was planned by a well known Chechen terrorist, featured a number of Chechen terrorists including the only survivor, and had as its declared demand the withdrawal of federal troops from Chechnya. Similarly low numbers subscribed to a broader ethno-territorial reading of the event, with only one Ossetian and 3.5 percent of the total sample choosing this option. The second significant feature of these results is that only a small percentage of respondents interpreted the event in Islamo-territorial terms, as

⁶ Personal communication, Valeriy Dzutsev.

⁷ Interview with Stanislav Kesaev, Vladikavkaz, 1 August 2007.

Table 1

What is the main explanation for the terrorist attack in Beslan, September 2004 (answers in percentages).

Explanation	Total N = 2000	Ossetians N = 130	Non-Ossetian Muslims N = 886	Ethnic Russians N = 871
The fight of Chechen separatists for independence	6.35	3.1	6.2	7.0
The tendency of the radical supporters of Islam to assemble Islamic states in the North Caucasus	13.6	13.9	13.8	13.4
Responses to the harsh policies of the Russian military in the North Caucasus	5.8	3.9	8.0	4.1
The inability of nationalities to achieve their self-determination	3.5	0.8	3.4	3.6
The desire of Russia's enemies that Ossetian and Ingush peoples should fight, to prolong interethnic conflicts in the North Caucasus	23.5	22.3	22.6	24.5
International terrorism	23.6	36.9	24.3	20.8
Organized criminality	12.4	3.0	11.0	15.5
Other (written in)	2.8	3.0	1.6	3.6
It's difficult to say	8.4	13.1	8.1	7.6

part of a drive to establish Islamic states in the region (or, implicitly, a regional Caliphate). Interestingly, the percentage subscribing to this reading is very consistent across all ethnic groups (between 13 and 14 percent). The third significant feature of the results is very few accepted that Beslan was the result of the harsh policies of the Russian military in the North Caucasus. Basayev offered a version of this interpretation but the more compelling one is that offered by Speckhard and Ahkmedova (2006) who link Chechen suicide terrorism to extreme personal traumas brought on by Russian counterterrorism in the region, traumas molded by radical Salafid groups to fuel terrorism. As one might expect, sympathy for this view was somewhat higher among Muslims of the North Caucasus – eight percent – than among Ossetians (3.9%) and Russians (4.1%) but still very low overall. A fourth significant feature is that two explanations for Beslan were equally popular among our sample of residents in the North Caucasus: the desire of the terrorists to ignite the Ingush–Ossetian conflict (23.5%) and international terrorism (23.6%). Both these explanatory storylines were championed by the Kremlin and official media outlets so it is hardly surprising that both were popular. But there are some surprises in their relative strength among the different groups. Almost thirty seven percent of Ossetians stated that international terrorism was the main explanation for Beslan, a surprising result given the alternative local ethnicized reading of the event available. One explanation is that Ossetians viewed the sensitive question as an opportunity to performatively assert loyalty to the most politically correct Kremlin storyline. Interestingly, ethnic Russians tilt the other way in their choice of explanations, choosing the local contextual interpretation over the international one, though the gap is not significant (less than four percent). Muslims tilt more towards the international terrorism explanation though by less than two percent (24.3% and 22.6%). Finally, some respondents found ‘organized criminality’ a satisfactory explanation, 12.4% in total though the figure was low among Ossetians (only 3%) and much higher among Russians (15.5% which is higher than the number of Russians choosing the Islamo-territorial explanation). Various other explanations and ‘do not know/difficult to say’ responses round out the numbers. Public opinion polling data is ultimately a crude method for understanding how a population, and national groups within it, makes sense of traumatic events like Beslan. Elite interviews in North Ossetia in August 2007 revealed a range of sentiment. Most political

figures were balanced and cited the event’s multiple geographies: its local, regional and international dimensions. But a few reduced the event to an underlying and longstanding historical antagonism between Ossetians and Ingush. Encapsulating this vision one prominent manager in Vladikavkaz told us: “we will never forgive the Ingush for what they did to us at Beslan.”

The process of sense making has been most painful for the families of victims (Politkovskaya, 2007). The Beslan Mothers Committee has been an institutional vehicle for this for many relatives but it has an unhappy history. Besides support work, the group has sought to draw attention to the excessive force used by the authorities in response to the hostage-taking. A few became vocal critics of the Kremlin. In September 2005, some members of Mothers of Beslan, including its chairwoman Susanna Dudiyeva, became involved with a self-proclaimed healer and miracle-maker who promised he could resurrect their dead children. The charlatan was subsequently indicted for fraud while the incident split the group. Those breaking away formed Golos Beslana (Voices of Beslan). Chaired by the sisters Ella Kesayeva and Emma Tagayeva, they have doggedly sought an international investigation of the Beslan attack and called on the European Union and European Parliament to establish one. They have made their case to the UN Human Rights Commissioner Louise Arbour, held a rally in Moscow, and staged a hunger strike to draw attention to their demands. In 2007 they filed a case against Russia in the European Court of Human Rights for failing to investigate the massacre properly. And, in one of their most controversial stagings that year, they called a press conference at the site of School Number 1 and held up a placard with the Kremlin campaign slogan ‘Putin’s Way’ pointing towards the school. This highly politicized work engendered a further split within this group, and a fight over its offices, leadership and legitimacy. In response to their activism, the core Kesayeva-led group was charged with promoting extremism and other misdeeds (Belton, 2008). The irony was not lost on Kesayeva: “How can people who suffered from a terrorist act become extremists themselves? We’re the ones looking for the truth, looking for a better life, for a country where laws are followed and where children don’t die in terrorist acts. And we’re the ones accused of extremism” (Rodriguez, 2008).

Conclusion

Morally self-righteous understandings of terrorism have long been a feature of world politics. In an interconnected global risk society, terrorist spectacles can command a world audience, generating a superficial notion of ‘global terrorism’ as acts of extreme violence with the capacity to shock human beings across the world (the affective effect tied to circulating spectacular visualizations). The ur-event of 9/11 emboldened the Bush administration to launch a ‘global war on terror’ (GWOT) founded on an indiscriminate geopolitics that distinguished only between those with the United States and the civilized world and those ‘with the terrorists’ (Jackson, 2005). This crude discourse created opportunities for other state leaders to re-frame their interests and security concerns within the abstract universals of the GWOT. The Putin administration used 9/11 to re-brand and re-legitimate its ongoing dirty war against Chechen separatism and violence in the North Caucasus (O’Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2004). The horrific events at Beslan in September 2004 provided a renewed occasion for the Putin administration to legitimate its counterterrorist policies to the international community.

However, there are serious tensions and contradictions in the Kremlin’s discourse about ‘international terrorism.’ The first concerns its analysis of the sources of the Beslan tragedy. Relentlessly externalizing these sources while marginalizing its own

counterterrorist violence in Chechnya and Ingushetia, it sought to project the event as equivalent to other episodes in the global war on terror. Yet, even its own analysis concedes that Russia's weaknesses and failures contributed to this event. These weaknesses run deeper than the Kremlin acknowledges for its own counterterrorist policies perpetuate historical and contemporary cycles of violence in the region. The second concerns its relationship to the international community of major powers. On the one hand, it insists on a universal war against terrorism and makes common cause with the Bush administration's GWOT. Putin frequently expressed admiration for Bush as a counterterrorist leader. But, at the same time, Putin administration discourse also hints at the operation of an international conspiracy of states using terrorism as an instrument to weaken Russia. Russia's allies against terrorism, it turns out, are also implicitly its enemies because of their 'double standards' and dark dealings.

Beslan has become a problematic memory for the Putin administration, a reminder to some not of Russia as a victim of international terrorism but of the Russian state as an inept responder to its own domestic sources of terrorism and an opportunistic actor using its own failures to justify further state centralization and super-presidentialism. The victim advocacy organizations, the Beslan Mothers Committee and Beslan Voices have become troublesome groups with an international audience and have devalued any benefit Putin may have initially had from owning Beslan as a wound from international terrorism. Among many right wing groups preoccupied with 'Islamic terrorism' as a transcendent threat, Beslan is an ambivalent event, one sometimes presented as an example of *global jihadism*, thus making common cause with Kremlin storylines, but one also presented as an instance of Russian autocracy. Placing blame for many is simply a matter of emplacing the event within already written storylines; an example of the international conspiracy against Russia (Russian statists) or the epitome of Ingush perfidy (Ossetian nationalists). In discussing suicide terrorism Nigel Thrift suggests a need to develop a politics of compassion free from an abstract contract or moral certainty, adding: "It is necessary to have the courage of one's own ambivalence" (Thrift, 2007). This is perhaps the most appropriate response towards Beslan, a refusal to give into scale-vaulting global moralizing and a vigilance against the indiscriminate blaming which too often launches new terrorisms in the name of civilization.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my field research colleagues, Dr John O'Loughlin and Dr Vladimir Kolossov. We all owe a deep debt of gratitude to Arthur Tsutsiev and his colleagues for their hospitality during our visit to North Ossetia in August 2007. Thanks also to Valeriy Dzutsev and Drew Foxall for insight and comments and to Nancy Thorwardson, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado for creating the maps. This research was supported by a grant from the Human and Social Dynamics Initiative of the US National Science Foundation, grant number 0433927.

References

- Amnesty International. (February, 2008). *Freedom limited: The right to freedom of expression in Russia*. Amnesty International. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR46/008/2008>.
- Babitsky, A. (2005). Reign of terror: interview with Shamil Basayev. *Nightline Transcripts*.
- Barany, Z. (2007). Superpresidentialism and the military: the Russian variant. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38(1), 14–38.
- Belton, C. (14 January, 2008). Russia puts Beslan activists on trial. *Financial Times*.
- Bigg, C. (1 September, 2006). Russia: mourners mark anniversary of Beslan siege. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.
- Blinov, A. (8 September, 2004). Putin sees no connection between Chechnya and Beslan. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.
- Blinova, Y., & Trofimov, A. (8 September, 2004). Beslan hostage takers may have included arrested terrorist, Basayev link likely. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.
- Borisov, T. (10 September, 2004). Distress signals. Aleksandr Dzasokhov, President of North Ossetia, answers *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* correspondent's questions. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.
- Brzezinski, M. (20 March, 2005). Suralpolitik. *Washington Post*.
- Channel Four News. (2005). Shamil Basayev – Chechnya. Channel Four. United Kingdom, journeymanpictures.com. *Channel Four News*.
- Cutter, S. L., Richardson, D. B., & Wilbanks, T. J. (2003). *The geographical dimensions of terrorism*. New York: Routledge.
- Dunlop, J. (2006). *The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan hostage crises: A critique of Russian counter-terrorism*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag.
- Gregory, D., & Pred, A. R. (2007). *Violent geographies: Fear, terror, and political violence*. New York: Routledge. p. 1.
- Hill, F., Lieven, A., & de Waal, T. (February, 2005). A spreading danger: Time for a new policy towards Chechnya. Policy Brief No. 35. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=16569.
- Interfax. (3 September, 2004a). FSB official outlines ongoing operations in Beslan siege situation. *Interfax*.
- Interfax. (3 September, 2004b). Official says nine gunmen killed in school siege were Arab mercenaries. *Interfax*.
- Interfax. (4 September, 2004c). Putin calls Beslan terrorist act 'cruel and inhuman'. *Interfax*.
- Interfax. (6 September, 2004d). Russia: investigation confirms Beslan terrorist gang included 'many foreigners'. *Interfax*.
- Interfax. (4 September, 2004e). Russian foreign minister reacts angrily to Bot's call for explanation of Beslan events. *Interfax*.
- Interfax. (6 September, 2004f). Russian official: no evidence that police aided Beslan hostage-takers. *Interfax*.
- Interfax. (4 September, 2004g). Russian security official: 'over 30 terrorists' involved in Beslan school seizure. *Interfax*.
- Isayev, R. (24 September, 2004). Nobody is born a terrorist. *Prague Watchdog*.
- Itar-Tass. (3 September, 2004a). FSB says Basayev behind Beslan hostage raid. *Itar-Tass*.
- Itar-Tass. (10 September, 2004b). North Ossetia demands officials who allowed Beslan tragedy be punished. *Itar-Tass*.
- Itar-Tass. (10 September, 2004c). Russian diplomat links Beslan with Georgia–Ossetian conflict. *Itar-Tass*.
- Itar-Tass. (9 September, 2004d). Russian Foreign Minister says calls to explain Beslan tragedy 'sheer propaganda'. *Itar-Tass*.
- Jackson, R. (2005). *Writing the war on terror*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kesaev, S. (2005). *Report of the Deputy Commission, established during the session of the Parliament of the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania on September 10, 2004 to consider and clarify the circumstances related to the tragic events in Beslan in September 1–3, 2004*. Viadikavkaz.
- King, C. (2008). *The ghost of freedom: A history of the Caucasus*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, M. (2004). The perils of counterinsurgency: Russia's war in Chechnya. *International Security*, 29(Winter), 5–63.
- Lucas, E. (2008). *The new cold war*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 23.
- Moscow Mayak Radio. (2004). Russian foreign minister calls Beslan terrorists 'puppets'. Moscow.
- Mydans, S. (30 October, 2005). Salty, spicy and seldom minced. *New York Times*.
- Nekrich, A. (1978). *The punished peoples*. New York: Norton.
- Nougayrede, N. (11 September, 2004). Interview with North Ossetian President Alexander Dzasokhov. *Le Monde*.
- O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, G., & Kolossov, V. (2004). "A 'risky westward turn'?" Putin's 9–11 script and ordinary Russians. *Europe Asia Studies*, 56(1), 3–34.
- O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, G., & Kolossov, V. (2008). The localized geopolitics of displacement and return in eastern Prigorodnyy rayon, North Ossetia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49(6), 635–669.
- Petrovskaya, Y. (6 September, 2004). Western TV channels broadcast for longer than Russian channels. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.
- Phillips, T. (2007). *Beslan: The tragedy of School Number 1*. London: Granta. p. 19, 22–23, 58, 123, 193.
- Politkovskaya, A. (19 March 2007, 2007). Beslan is quietly going out of its mind. *The Guardian*.
- Politov, Y. (10 September, 2004). There will be no dismissals in Moscow, only in Viadikavkaz. *Izvestiya*.
- Popova, N. (6 September, 2004a). North Ossetian government minimizes Beslan rallies, denies cover-up. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.
- Popova, N. (6 September, 2004b). There will be no cover-up: contradictory reports from Beslan on unsanctioned rallies. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.
- Presse, A. F. (6 September, 2004). Dutch foreign minister says remarks on Beslan 'misinterpreted'. *Agence France Presse*.
- Putin, V. (2 September, 2004a). Beginning of the meeting with King of Jordan Abdullah II. President of Russia: Official Web Portal. www.kremlin.ru.
- Putin, V. (13 September, 2004b). Concluding remarks at the enlarged meeting with the government and heads of the regions. President of Russia Official Web Portal. www.kremlin.ru.
- Putin, V. (3 December, 2004c). Interview to the *The Hindu* Indian newspaper. President of Russia: Official Web Portal. www.kremlin.ru.

- Putin, V. (13 September, 2004d). Speech at the enlarged government meeting with the government and heads of the regions. President of Russia: Official Web Portal. www.kremlin.ru.
- Putin, V. (25 April, 2005). Annual address to the federal assembly of the Russian Federation. President of Russia: Official Web Portal. www.kremlin.ru
- RFE/RL. (31 August, 2005). Basaev says Beslan raid prompted by FSB sting. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.
- Rodriguez, A. (18 January, 2008). Beslan moms blame Putin, face charges. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Russell, J. (2007). *Chechnya: Russia's 'War on Terror'*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Sagramoso, D. (2007). Violence in the Russian North Caucasus. *International Affairs*, 83(4), 681–705.
- Shvarev, A. (10 September, 2004). The real 'Colonel': ringleader of terrorists who seized school in Beslan was Ruslan Khuchbarov. *Vremya Novosti*.
- Sparke, M. (2007). Geographical fears, geoeconomic hopes, and the responsibilities of geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97(2), 338–349.
- Speckhard, A., & Ahkmedova, K. (2006). The making of a martyr: Chechen suicide terrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29, 429–492.
- Steele, J. (7 September, 2004a). Angry Putin rejects public Beslan inquiry. *The Guardian*.
- Steele, J. (7 September, 2004b). Beslan massacre: journalists pay price for criticising government. *The Guardian*.
- Steele, J. (2004c). Candid Putin offers praise and blame. *The Guardian*. 8 September.
- Steele, J. (8 September, 2004d). Minister unwilling to blame Chechens. *The Guardian*.
- Stoun, M. (2004). Eight percent of the hostages in Beslan were killed or injured. *Kavkaz-Tsentr News Agency*.
- Thrift, N. (2007). Immaculate warfare? The spatial politics of extreme violence. In D. Gregory, & A. Pred (Eds.), *Violent geographies: Fear, terror, and political violence* (pp. 273–294). New York: Routledge.