Chechen Terror in Moscow: The Dubrovka Theater

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Abstract

In 2002, in the middle of an evening performance at a Moscow theater, 50 Chechen terrorists equipped with firearms and large quantities of explosives seized the venue with over 900 people inside. The Chechens threatened to kill everyone inside unless Russia ended its occupation of Chechnya following the second war. Although, the Chechen militants agreed to release some of the hostages during the first couple of days, negotiations with the Russian authorities eventually stalled. Just before dawn on the third day, Russian special police units resorted to using an incapacitating gas to end the crisis. All of the Chechen militants were killed, and 130 hostages died, most from effects of the gas. This paper summarizes and discusses the factors that lead up to the event and the controversy that ensued as a result of how the operation was handled by Russian authorities.
Introduction

On October 23, 2002, two vans carrying a group of Chechen terrorists pulled up to the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow at 9:00 p.m. In the theater were approximately 900 people watching a performance of the popular “Nord-Ost,” a Russian musical about the Red Army during World War II. Although the theater was not the original, desired target, the Chechens spent months of meticulous planning that set the stage of what would become a world-wide media event that lasted three days and ended badly for the terrorists and a 130 of the hostages. The crisis resulted in Russian domestic and world-wide debate on the appropriateness of President Putin’s response which resulted in the deaths of so many hostages. Could there have been a different ending? Could the negotiations been handled differently? What about the eventual tactical assault and use of gas? Was the Dubrovka a blueprint for future attacks by the Chechen terrorists? To answer these questions, one must first explore the background and issues that led up to that eventful night in Moscow, beginning in the Chechen homeland.

The Northern Caucasus

Running along the Northern Caucasus region of Russia lie the republics of Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. These predominately Muslim republics are located on Russia’s southern border between the Black and Caspian Seas. Set against the Caucasus Mountains, these regions are considered the crown jewel of Russia because of the magnificent scenery, natural wonders, abundant natural resources, rich soil, and vast amounts of oil (Wertsch, 2013). Toward the Black Sea, the climate becomes subtropical and turns arid when moving eastward.
Although, it does not show on the above map, the sheer geographical distance from Moscow, over a thirty-hour train ride, creates a schism in the minds of many inhabitants in these republics who do not feel any connection to the Russian culture, language, heritage, government, or religion. Over a period of time, these republics have become more religiously conservative and more closely resemble a Middle Eastern Muslim country rather than any other republic or part of Russia (Kuchins, 2011).

Adding to the complexity of the geography is the Greater and Lesser Caucasus Mountains, a formidable chain separating Europe from Asia. These mountain ranges start in the vicinity of Sochi near the shore of the Black Sea and run parallel to the southern providences, while nearly reaching the Caspian Sea. Similar to the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan which proved to be too much for Russia to overcome after ten years of fighting, the forested areas of the Caucasus also provide a home and refuge for Chechen militants, and a place to engage the enemy in guerilla warfare (Burtin, 2009).

**Chechnyan Wars**

Despite compelling scenes and natural beauty, the area is not a tourist destination. The region has been unstable since the start of the Russian conquest in the 19th century. In more recent times when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chechnya was the first province in the southern region to declare independence from Russia. The president of Russia at the time, Boris Yeltsin, sent troops to Chechnya to restore order and crush independence aspirations. Yeltsin’s Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, promised to crush the Chechen separatist rebels “in a couple of hours with a single regiment of paratroopers” (Cohen, 2012). Instead, the war stretched on for more than two years, with thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians killed which ended with the Kremlin forced to sign a peace treaty.

During the war, foreign Wahhabi fighters led by Saudi Emir Khattab, moved into Chechnya and stayed after the war. Bodirsky (2014) explains that this established the area as a hub for Islamic radicalization and also allowed the militants to become the political leaders of the area. As a result, the character of the Russian–Chechen conflict changed dramatically, with radical Sunni Islamism becoming a significant motivating factor in the Chechen insurgency. Chechen ideology experienced a shift from ethnocentrism nationalism to radical Islamism. This set the stage for the beginning of an Islamic insurgency that wreaked havoc across Russia.

In August 1999, Chechen fighters crossed into the Russian Republic of Dagestan to support a declaration by an Islamic body based there advocating an independent Islamic state in parts of Dagestan and Chechnya. This body called on all Muslims to take up arms against Russia in a holy war. The new Prime Minister under President Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, sent in troops again. During this second conflict, the Chechens received outside assistance from Mujahidin guerilla fighters from other Islamic counties. Much of this aid came from men who had fought the Russians in Afghanistan and needed little motivation to join the fray (Gilligan, 2010).

In what is known as the Second Chechen War, which was more of a counterinsurgency than a war, the Russians prevailed. Mr. Putin, a former KBG officer, proudly announced that he would “rub out the Chechen insurgents in shithouses” (“Terrorism in Russia,” 2014). When the rubbing out ended in 2004, the operation was described as being “notably more violent, protracted, and extreme in terms of Russian violence and Chechen retaliation.” The media broadcast indiscriminate shelling of villages to the world. Janeczko (2012) tells us when the Chechen fighters employed the tactic of wearing civilian clothes; the Russian military responded...
by considering all Chechen civilians as militants and were treated as the enemy. Martin (2013) notes that “approximately 100,000 Russians and Chechens died during this second invasion” (p. 138).

**An Eye for an Eye**

Adding to the enormity and complexity of the problem are the cultural expectations of Islamic Chechens. According to Chechen tradition, the family has a responsibility to locate and kill the person, or even a close member of the family, responsible for killing the family member (Ford, 1995). However, this cultural requirement has taken a new twist as the Chechen women who have lost a husband, son, or father by the Russian military have extended the revenge concept to include killing any Russian military and non-Muslim civilians. The past “eye for an eye” revenge code has been replaced with avenging the killing of loved ones by planning martyr missions that maximize the number of possible deaths of anyone viewed as the enemy. According to Speckhard and Akhmedova (2006), the rationale behind the change from the traditional creed has been attributed to the people of Chechnya being subjected to “never ending war, excruciating trauma, and post traumatic stress syndrome” (p. 67).

As an example of the trauma, during the wars, Russian soldiers would demand payment for the return of dead children and family members. Owen Matthews (2004), a war correspondent for the Daily Mail (London), interviewed one grieving mother whose 15-year-old son had been killed by Russian troops who demanded $500 to return his corpse. Her desire was to kill any Russian, especially their children to let them know what it is like.

**The Debrovka Theater**

On a Wednesday night in October it all came to a head at the Debrovka Theater in Moscow, located in a former Soviet ball bearing factory only three blocks from the Kremlin. Mukhina (2005) recalls an array of “modern” war tactics unfolded when heavily armed men and women wearing scarves and chadors, carrying Makarov rifles, and holding detonators held approximately 912 (the number varies) people hostage in an effort to gain attention for past abuses and end the Russian occupation of Chechnya.

Leung (2003) describes when masked gunmen burst on stage, the audience at first thought that it was all part of the show. Led by Movsar Barayev, the nephew of a Chechen rebel leader, announced that if the Russian government would not meet their demands, they would blow up the theater. Dedicating the operation on behalf of the Chechen people in a prerecorded videotape delivered to the Moscow office of Al-Jazeera, Barayev announced, “Each one of us is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of God and the independence of Chechnya. I swear by God that we are more keen on dying than you are on living” (Dolnik & Pilch, 2003, p. 581). The picture at left shows the Chechens recording themselves taking control of the theater. As will be seen later, their fascination with documenting the event will, in part, contribute to being caught off guard when the rescue operation commenced three days later.

The twenty-one men and nineteen women, calling themselves the Riyadus-Salikhin Suicide Battalion (Dolnik, 2007) were committed to martyrdom. Skaine (2013) concurred, but
added that not only was it intended to be a suicide mission, but also an operation “that would raise funds from Middle East donors, get wide news coverage, undermine Russian society’s sense of security, and to obtain a cease-fire” (p. 177).

The Chechen women, dressed in long, flowing black chadors, wearing explosive belts tied with detonator cord, were tasked with guarding the hostages. Since the crisis was being video-taped and beamed to the outside world (despite government efforts to prevent transmission) the Russian media began calling the women Black Widows because it was believed that they had lost husbands during the two wars (Nivat, 2005).

**Preparation and Planning**

As mentioned earlier, the theater was not the desired target. Truman (2010) says that Barayev actually wanted to hijack the Kurchatov Institute, one of Russia’s most important nuclear facilities. With its twenty-six nuclear reactors and enough highly enriched uranium to create thousands of nuclear weapons, the Kurchatov would have made a spectacular (and dangerous) terror event. Deciding it would be beyond their capability to pull it off, Barayev decided on the Dubrovka.

Months of thorough planning preceded the theater take-over. According to Truman (2010), “the Chechens took construction jobs at a nightclub close to the theater, smuggled weapons and explosives which they hid in the theater, and even attended performances so they could study audience placement and the entrance/exit points” (p. 96). After entering the theater in plain clothes, the group changed into military fatigues and covered their faces, then commandeered the stage and entire theater. The terrorists then declared that they would blow up the theater if Russian forces attempted a rescue mission. Everyone settled in for what might be a long hostage standoff.

**Negotiations**

On the second day of the crisis, the Chechens allowed some members of the Russian Parliament to enter the building to negotiate the release of hostages. Dolnik and Fitzgerald (2008) report that thirty hostages are released including twenty children under twelve years of age as well as citizens from Azerbaijan and Georgia. All children that were twelve years and older were held captive, the terrorists claiming that in Chechnya, children that age are soldiers. Throughout the ordeal, hostages were allowed to use their cell phones to contact authorities, relatives, friends, foreign embassies, and the media.

As far as anyone knew, there was no sign of a Russian counterattack or any word from President Putin. Conditions inside the auditorium quickly deteriorated. There was little food and water and since theater toilets were unguarded, to relieve themselves the hostages had to climb down into the orchestra pit, men on one side, women on the other.

Throughout the crisis, Russian media kept the citizens updated on progress (which infuriated Putin). Surprisingly, public opinion was mixed. Many Russians sided with the plight of the Chechens who felt the past use of Putin’s “iron fist” in Chechnya was responsible for the situation. Prior to this, Russian citizens had been falsely told by the Russian government that everything was settled in Chechnya and that problems did not exist. Russians demonstrated outside the theater urging the government to seriously negotiate with the Chechens.

For the next two days, a number of government proposals were offered the terrorists. These included a promise not to storm the theater as long as hostages were treated well, and a “green path” to any third country for the group if all hostages were released. Since this was a
suicide mission, the terrorists were not interested in safe passage to anywhere. The terrorists continually repeated their demands that if the Russian army was not out of Chechnya within a week, the theater would be blown up, killing everyone inside.

**Tactical Response**

The Russian government’s first, and what seemed to be the only, tactical consideration was to neutralize, immobilize, or paralyze the Black Widows who were in control of the explosives. If this could be accomplished, it was believed that a force could get in and deal with the heavily armed male terrorists.

Fifty-six hours after the initial take-over, a plan was hatched where the Spetsnaz, Russia’s elite counterterrorism force, would disperse a gas, a powerful sleep agent, designed to incapacitate everyone in the theatre (Dolnik & Pilch, 2003). When the gas was pumped in through the air conditioning system, it affected people differently depending on their age, physical stature, and condition, but generally, people began to drop like flies, including the hostages. Apparently, all of the female terrorists passed out in the theater prior to any detonation command being given which saved a catastrophe.

The assault caught most of the Chechens by surprise. Many were asleep, and the rest, including Barayev, were in a sound and lighting room off the main auditorium editing a videotape of the raid taken by theater’s security cameras. As the gas started seeping through the air conditioning ducts, a detonation order to the women was probably the last thing on Barayev’s mind. Male terrorists, who survived the gas, confused and greatly outnumbered, were left to shoot it out with the Spetsnaz. Those who were asleep or incapacitated were shot in the head, pictured at right.

When the dust settled, one hundred thirty hostages died from the gas and lack of available medical care, and all of the Chechens were dead. Unconscious hostages were carried out onto the sidewalk and laid face up in the rain, while others were placed in city busses to be transported to hospitals or the morgue. According to Krechetnikov (2012), many of the hostages choked on their own vomit or swallowed their tongues. Pictured at right are slain Black Widows with bombs still strapped to their chadors.
Discussion

The group that seized the hostages at the Dubrovka Theatre was a particularly extreme and violent one with a known history. Throughout the ordeal, they rejected Russian offers of safe passage in exchange for releasing the hostages. They repeatedly told authorities of their willingness to start shooting hostages if the Russians attacked the theater or failed to begin withdrawing from Chechnya. Since withdrawal was clearly an impossible demand that the Russian government would never meet, and with the terrorists making it clear that they were on a "martyrdom" mission and were willing to kill both hostages and themselves, the government was facing a "no-win" situation, and was probably justified to act as they did. It would have been difficult to envision any response that could have ended this takeover without resulting in significant numbers of casualties.

The essence of this type of hostage event is that any large gathering place is a potential target, especially when as well planned this one, leaving operational and tactical countermeasures without many good options. The added dynamic of almost certain death placed a unique strain on the negotiating process to reach a resolution. Taking that into account, Dolnik and Fitzgerald (2008) explain that,

In combination with the aforementioned greater readiness to die in the incident, and the overall decline in political sensitivity associated with killing innocents, this situation has essentially converted the barricade hostage scenario into a potential 'win-win' situation for the terrorist. If the hostage takers achieve their demands they win. If the government troops storm the location and the terrorists are killed in the shootout (along with many hostages) then the outcome of dying a martyr's death is also perceived as a victory. (p. 24)

Although the gas plan was ingenious and was probably in place long before the crisis unfolded, it did result in unnecessary hostage deaths and a lingering controversy. Medical support personnel were not informed about the type or the effects of the gas, and there were not enough doctors to administer antidotes, if any existed.

The government never said, but Krechetnikov (2012) and others assumed it was a compound based on fentanyl, an opioid that can be hundreds of times more potent than morphine, which can cause a fatal heroin-like overdose. Dolnik and Pilch (2003), and other observers, believe the failure of the commanders to notify medical responders of the gas use beforehand and to make necessary arrangements for consequence management soured an otherwise successful rescue.

One implication on the use of gas, now that the genie was out of the bottle, will future terrorists plan for this eventuality? Gas masks would have clearly foiled, or made this operation more deadly. The assault would have resulted in significantly more casualties, with many hostages being shot had so many of the terrorists not been incapacitated.

When reading through the many accounts of this event, it is unclear what the end game was for the Chechens. Had the government acceded to their demand of withdrawing from Chechnya, would they have actually released the hostages? This was an announced suicide mission. They were planning on dying in the theater. Would they have released the hostages and then fought it out with the Spetsnaz? Was this the outcome they envisioned, or did they already know that Putin would not budge on the withdrawal demand?
Throughout the standoff, the Chechens received world-wide attention, much of it very sympathetic to their cause. This was clearly one of the objectives, putting the issue of Chechnya back on the forefront of international debate. It was achieved. This favorable publicity could have quickly vanished had they slaughtered the hostages, especially the women and children. As it turned out, Putin got the blame.

American reaction to the event was harder to gauge, quite different from other parts of the world. Most likely, most Americans were not fully aware of the history and circumstances that led to the hostage-taking. The fact that this happened soon after our 9/11, it is doubtful that there was much sympathy for a bunch of terrorists forcing people to go to the bathroom in an orchestra pit. A news report for CBS, filed by Chan (2002), revealed that the White House neither endorsed nor criticized Russia's use of gas to end the siege. Press Secretary at the time, Ari Fleischer made it clear that the U.S. held the Chechens responsible for everything that transpired.

Forcing the Russian government to kill its own citizens was another consequence, which to this day, generates considerable outrage in how the rescue operation was handled. Relatives of the dead hostages blame the government for not alerting medical responders of the type of gas used which resulted in all but two of the deaths. Many died after being stacked into buses with corpses where they suffocated. In fact, the government has never verified the content of the gas. According to Bigg and Balmforth (2012), the Kremlin claims that the gas was not directly responsible for the hostages' deaths, which they blamed on various illnesses, food and water deprivation, psychological stress, and a lack of fresh air from the ordeal. Pictured at right is a make-shift memorial reminiscent of the many that were present across the street from the downed twin towers shortly after 9/11. Source: Reuters

Interestingly, not long after Dubrovka, the U.S. National Research Council (An Assessment, 2003) released a report in which it recommended that the Department of Navy should move toward integrating non-lethal weapons designed to incapacitate people or material. Among those non-lethal weapons included the development of calmative agents.

The Dubrovka Theater is just one in a long line of Chechen deadly acts of terrorism, including mass hostage-takings and suicide bombings. These terrorist attacks have greatly reduced the prospect of a lasting political settlement. Although, some of the problems that have dogged Russian forces in Chechnya are self-inflicted and unique to that particular conflict, prolonged occupation and a continued low level insurgency illustrates the difficulty of Russian counterinsurgency operations going forward.

Looking back on the siege and evaluating the Russian moves and motives, one gets the impression that Putin was more interested in sending a message to the Chechens rather than trying to get everyone out alive. Up until the point of the assault, no bomb had exploded and no hostages had been killed. Putin brought events to a deadly climax. If there was a message for the Chechens, it must have not gotten through to them. Less than two years later was Beslan, déjà vu all over again.


