

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## **Children and Terror: A Response to the Beslan Tragedy**

**O**n September 1, 2004, armed men occupied a school in the town of Beslan in the Russian republic of North Ossetia. The incident came to a tragic end three days later when at least 338 people died in exchange of fire between federal forces and the hostage-takers. Although the hostage crisis in Beslan was only one of several recent incidents linked to Chechen related terrorism, one aspect tragically sets the school siege apart from the other incidents: about half of the dead were children. Children and Terror was the topic of the first discussion of the Harriman Institute's "Children After Communism" series, which took place on September 8<sup>th</sup>.

The conflict between Chechnya and Moscow about the status of the mountainous republic in southern Russia has continued for more than two centuries. During the 1990s Russian authorities launched two wars, one in 1994 and one in 1999, against Chechnya because of the republic's aspirations to independence. By the time of the second war, however, it is possible that the nature of the conflict had changed. According to Professor Nina Khrushcheva (New School University), by the late 1990s, the conflict had become more international in character.

Another development in the 1990s was the emergence of Chechen-related terrorism outside of Chechnya, the best known of which is perhaps the Dubrovka incident in 2002, in which more than 800 people were held hostage in the Dubrovka theater in Moscow. According to ABC News journalist Bill Blakemore, who covered the Dubrovka hostage crisis from Moscow, this incident is crucial to understanding the more recent events in Beslan. "We expected 800 victims," said Blakemore describing a very pessimistic mood among relatives and journalists in Moscow. When Russian special forces stormed the theater after having pumped an anesthetic gas into the theater, people at the scene felt that the operation had been "successful, daring, and courageous," even though more than 160 people died, according to Blakemore. Even at funerals of people who died from inhaling the gas, relatives did not criticize the Russian security forces. "They were heart-broken, but they knew it had to be done," said Blakemore, who noted that the perceived success of the rescue operation at Dubrovka made it likely that the Russian security forces would attempt something similar in Beslan.

The possibility of a Dubrovka-style storming of the school in Beslan was apparently also on the mind of people in Beslan, according to moderator of the discussion and Director of the Harriman Institute, Catharine Nepomnyashchy, who recounted TV-coverage of people being just as afraid of Russian security forces as of the terrorists.

Russian authorities also learned another lesson from the Dubrovka incident, however, according to Khrushcheva. "Dubrovka was a testing ground," said Khrushcheva. "Putin is still a KGB officer and after Dubrovka, he got cold feet." Mindful of the severe criticism from Western media and politicians in the aftermath of the Dubrovka incident, the authorities apparently attempted to better control access to information in Beslan by preventing several Russian and foreign journalists from covering the school siege. "Experts of crisis intervention say that the more coverage, the greater the likelihood of a good outcome," said Blakemore. "I am sad to see such a setback in Russia."

The Beslan incident differed from other terrorist acts, however, in one important aspect. While the terrorists attacking the US on September 11<sup>th</sup> targeted symbolic financial institutions, the hostage-takers in Beslan targeted people, and specifically, children. "The whole next generation was targeted," said Khrushcheva. "The message was that more than 20 million kids could be wiped out." Parents throughout the country very quickly understood this message and responded by pulling their kids out of school as soon as they heard about the hostage crisis.

Not only did the children of Beslan suffer in this conflict, however. Zeinap Bedieva, a graduate student at Rutgers University, recounted her personal experience from Grozny during the so-called first Chechen war, during which she held classes in the street. "It is terrible that this [incident at Beslan] is what is necessary

for the international public to pay attention to the issue," said Bedieva. "Children are dying every day in Chechnya."

According to Bedieva, who plans to work on educational projects in Chechnya and Ingushetia when she graduates, the situation in the northern Caucasus is very explosive; people are grief-stricken and want revenge. One of the key elements in solving the conflict, however, is through the education of children. "Nothing can work well until we are able to provide education," she said. "Somehow we have to find a way to stop this war."

*Reported by Ole Solvang  
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