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Deterring Terrorism: Russian Views

By

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Combating terrorism is a high national priority for contemporary Russia. Vigilante groups are being formed in areas susceptible to terrorist activities. In regions adjacent to the Chechen hot-bed of terrorism, paramilitary formations are being organized among local populations, e.g. Cossacks in southern Russia.

Speaking at the Collegiate of the Federal Security Service on January 17, 2004, President Vladimir Putin called the struggle against terrorism “a key task of Russian special services”. “In the neutralization and liquidation of the terrorist network special services should act toughly and systematically. Any provocation of the terrorists should be opposed by adequate tactics of the security bodies,” said Putin.¹

Toughness is clearly of paramount importance for the authorities and the revolting nature of attacks against civilian targets means there is ready support for a hard, uncompromising response. Take, for example, this comment from Levon Chakhmakhchan, Chairman of the “Russian Party of Workers’ Self-Rule”:

Bloody terrorist acts in Yessentuki [southern Russia] and Moscow [in late 2003], and strikes by militants against Dagestan villages [in January 2004] raised the topicality of intensifying the struggle against extremism... In a tough dialog with the ‘unrelenting’ only one language is possible – that of canons and machineguns.²

In effect, the authorities, in the words of Aleksei Makarkin, head of the analytic department at the popular “*Sovershenno Sekretno*” [“*Top Secret*”] weekly “do not have a choice” in dealing with the terrorist threat except to use the harshest military means available. To prove the point, Makarkin describes the operation to save hundreds of hostages taken by Chechens in the theatrical center at Dubrovka in Moscow. The use of an unspecified debilitating gas to neutralize explosive-loaded terrorists was apparently sanctioned by Vladimir Putin himself. According to Makarkin, the Russian President had literally no alternative to the use of counterforce since “society would have laid the entire responsibility for possible concessions [to the terrorists] and their consequences [i.e. massive loss of innocent lives] on him alone.”³ Makarkin believes it was Russian society that “asked for a tough version [of an antiterrorist operation], and got it.”⁴

However, the Russian leadership was conscious, not only of the potential for negative public reaction to any concession to the terrorists, but also that a harsh and swift response might have the effect of deterring similar acts in the future.

¹ Vladimir Mokhov, “Toughly and Systematically,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 17 January, 2004.

² Levon Chakhmakhchan, “Chechnya: Time for Struggle, Time for Creativity,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 21 January, 2004, <http://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-01-21/2_chechnia.html>

³ Aleksei Makarkin, *Sovershenno Sekretno*, No 11, November 2002. <<http://www.sovsekretno.ru/2002/11/2.html>>

⁴ Ibid.

But can terrorism be deterred? This question is hotly debated in Russia and many Russian experts are pessimistic. Typical among them is this statement by Valentin Fedorov, Deputy Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences:

Terrorism cannot be eradicated in principle. It will subside and then flare up anew, i.e. it will be developing along a sinusoid. It will change its area of operation. Mobility is one of its characteristic features. It will modify its forms, manifestations and choose different targets as its victims... From the economic point of view, the war against the Islamic international terrorism is tantamount to pouring money into a bottomless barrel.⁵

Indeed, the toughness of the leadership demonstrated at Dubrovka, the ruthlessness of the special forces [all fifty assailants were killed during the antiterrorist operation or summarily executed after it], and even the willingness to risk the lives of hostages [dozens of whom eventually died mostly in the aftermath of the gas attack], have failed to prevent further acts of terror in Moscow and other cities.

Lack of desirable contemporary results in deterring terrorism raises interest in past experiences. Czarist Russia went through periods of intense terrorist activity and related government efforts to deal with the problem. Colonel Nikolai Litvinov, deputy head of the Voronezh Institute of the Interior Ministry and head of the regional public foundation “Scientific Research Center ‘Anti-terror’” has authored several books on terrorism. One of them entitled “Terrorist Organizations: Formation and Activities” was allegedly discovered at a Ben-Laiden’s hideout in Afghanistan. Litvinov specializes on the history of terrorist organizations in Russia and attempts to fight and prevent terrorism of the past. His conclusion is that “terror is the doings of intellectuals who are always half a step ahead of special services.”⁶

According to Litvinov many twists and turns in Russian history of the late-19th and early-20th centuries were shaped by acts of terror. He concludes that:

terrorism is the fastest and effective criminal way of ruling the society, the state and the economy... You can wait forever for the collapse of a monarchy, or you may spend only a few years on the creation of a revolutionary-terrorist movement and cause that monarchy’s downfall... If Stolypin⁷ had not died, there would have been no famous events – beginning with the [Bolshevik] October takeover of 1917. Such is the cost of a single man’s life and the effectiveness of a single terrorist act.⁸

Litvinov notes that for years, the Czarist regime was unable to find effective antiterrorist methods. By 1905-07, terror reigned in Russia with numerous terrorist acts happening on

⁵ Valentin Fedorov, “Configuration of Forces,” *Literaturanaya Gazeta*, 25-31 December 2002. <http://www.lgz.ru/archives/html_arch/1g522002/Polosy/art2_4.htm>

⁶ Rauf Akhmedov, “The State Does Not See the Terrorist Problem,” Interview with Colonel Nikolai Litvinov, <<http://www.ir.spb.ru/lit113.htm>>

⁷ Petr Stolypin (1862-1911), Prime-Minister of Russia in 1906-11 promoted important reforms in the Empire. Stolypin was champion of massive use of force against radicals and terrorists. He introduced military court marshals during peacetime. Stolypin was murdered by a terrorist.

⁸ Akhmedov, op. cit.

a daily basis throughout the Empire. One of the apparent reasons was the inability of the law enforcement agencies to infiltrate terrorist/revolutionary organizations. In effect, top gendarme officials resented infiltration as a method of fighting terrorists. Some of them would say: “How can we work with those who betray their own comrades? This is demeaning.”⁹ Naturally, their terrorist opponents never had similar “pangs of conscience”.

A major shift occurred with the creation of “security departments” (“okhrannye otdeleniya”) under Georgii Sudeikin and Sergei Zubatov. These special police bodies widely resorted to undercover intelligence, recruitment of agents among and infiltration of criminal terrorist groups, heavy-handed treatment of suspects, etc. During the Soviet period, “Okhranka” (“Security Force”) and its leaders, particularly Zubatov (whose name was used to define the period during which the “security departments” gained most successes over the revolutionary extremists as “Zubatovshina”) was thoroughly discredited by official propaganda. However, notes Litvinov, “the positive experience [in the antiterrorist struggle] had never been studied.”¹⁰

Another “fecund” period for study is the Bolshevik period. Followers of the communist line interpret all social phenomena—including terrorism—as “bi-products of the class struggle”. They believe that terrorism is endemic to societies divided by classes and power groups and may only be eradicated by eliminating such divisions:

It is useless to fight terrorism with the help of empty appeals and tearful incantations... terrorism cannot be eradicated until it has a social base and is committed for the advantage of certain political forces... Can large-scale terrorist acts be prevented? Life itself gave an answer to this question. If the state... eliminates the antagonism of the classes... there will be no political forces that could use terrorist methods against innocent citizens. Intimidation should be used against the guilty. Under capitalism, no effective measures of deterrence against the fanatical kamikaze or ultra-radical individuals may be found. The richest U.S. with its super-powerful repressive apparatus and superb special services cannot protect itself against explosions... Russia is just beginning to experience all the beauty of stratification into the rich and the poor (leftist radicalism) and the consequences of the clash between bourgeois clans (rightist terrorism). Capitalism is the war of all against all.¹¹

Of particular interest to proponents of “terrorism as a class struggle” is the period of “Red Terror” (“Krasnyi terror”) unleashed by the Bolsheviks soon after the capture of power in Russia. In effect, Soviet historiography claims that “Red terror” was a deterrence tool against the so-called “White terror” – resistance to the Bolshevik takeover by the “White Guard” (“Belaya Gvardiya”).

Bolsheviks defined “Red Terror” as an example of class struggle. The “All-Russian Emergency Commission” [“Vserossiiskaya Chrezvychainaya Kommissiya”—VChK] headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky became the main tool of “Red Terror” (it further evolved

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Igor Gubkin, “You Wanted This,” *Duel.ru*, 17 September 1999, <http://www.duel.ru/199939/?39_1_2>

into the “Committee of State Security” – “Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti”, the KGB). According to one of the VChK leaders M.Latsis:

We are destroying the class of bourgeoisie. Therefore there is no need to prove whether a particular individual spoke or acted against the Soviet power. The first question we have to address to the arrested is which class he belongs to, what his roots are and his education and specialty. The answers should define the fate of the arrested. This is the quintessence of the red terror.¹²

Though the policy of “Red Terror” was essentially a modification of genocide, it is little different from some “final-solution” approaches to modern terror recommended by Russia’s “extreme left”. According to unapologetic Stalinist Igor Gubkin:

In Chechnya... the federal government in Moscow has three variants: the first one – to do nothing... In this case, Chechnya will de-facto declare independence, and de-jure will enjoy all the advantages of the component part of the RF. Chechen bandits will run amuck all over the country...The second variant is the so-called ‘Stalin-type variant’: to introduce a land and a tank army into Chechnya supported by 3-4 air divisions and a dozen brigades of special Interior Ministry troops – such a force will leave the separatists no chance for resistance – and deport the entire local population... to Siberia where they will live in hamlets 300-400 km away from each other. The militants will be summarily executed, and the entire property of the Chechen people will have to be confiscated... The third version foresees ‘the final solution of the Chechen question’: all Russian cities will be cleansed of the ethnic Chechen diasporas; a [Chechen] ghetto will be set up in the agricultural regions beyond the Arctic Circle... all Chechen women are subjected to sterilization and all Chechen men aged 14-65 will be building the Novosibirsk-Vladivostok highway... Not a single sensible liberally-oriented citizen would believe that the democratic, civilized and law-abiding state of Russia can choose the third variant. Tons of manure had been pored over the head of the Father of Nations (i.e. Josef Stalin) for his having infringed on the rights and freedoms of the small but proud people of Chechnya. Now they try to keep silent after having experienced reality. If a referendum was held today, comrade Stalin’s methods would have been recognized as excessively humane.¹³

More recent examples of the tactic of “terror-against-terror” are being brought to light, e.g. the incident in Lebanon in September 1985 that involved kidnapping of a Soviet diplomat by the Hizbollah organization. Allegedly, “The KGB responded by kidnapping a relative of a high ranking Hizballah official, killed him, cut his testicles off, stuffed his testicles into his mouth, and sent his body home to his relatives. Within no time, the

¹² S.V. Rybakov, “History of Russia,” Lecture Course, Yekaterinburg, 1995, Lecture 16, Paragraph 2.4 Civil War, <http://www.samgaps.ru/lec16_24.htm>

¹³ Gubkin, op. cit.

kidnapped Soviet was released and unharmed. Moscow spoke the language of the terrorists”.¹⁴

International experience, for example, Israel’s, is also often brought up to justify the desirability of maximal use of force in attempting to deter terrorists. Anti-terror expert Sergei Curkin stresses:

The international experience demonstrates that terrorists are afraid only of tough retaliatory and preferably preemptive measures... State policy of fighting terrorism should be based on the premise that any villain who decided to make the lives of people an instrument of attaining political and selfish goals should be eliminated without any compassion and term of limitation.¹⁵

However, even the most ardent champions of the use of force against terrorism often argue that other related efforts are needed. According to Levon Chakhmakhchan:

Can force alone be the solid foundation for achieving peace? The Chechen social and economic infrastructure has been completely destroyed and is inactive; there is no place for people to work... It is impossible to forever go along the vicious circle, when force breeds counterforce, and cruelty breeds violence.¹⁶

Alternatives to the use of blunt force are being promoted by varied groups, organizations and individuals—many from the liberal-moderate end of the Russian political spectrum. Proportionality of response to terror is identified as an important moral and practical issue. In the opinion of Igor Oleinik, Director of the Institute of the Strategy of Development and National Security efforts at deterring terrorism “should be comprehensive, commensurate, purposeful and long-term. Otherwise we will not only rid ourselves of the threat of terrorist acts... but would leave this problem as an inheritance to our children and grandchildren... Today, “total destruction” of the enemy troops could be extremely dangerous since it may lead the conflict to even more acute and uncivilized forms, e.g. a wave of terrorism against nuclear and chemical installations...”¹⁷

On the eve of the “second Chechen War” that began in 1999, Oleinik, conscious of the fact that “the number of enemies may grow significantly” if the response to terrorist incursions into Russian hinterland is disproportionate to the original threat coming from Chechnya, proposed “rational strategy for the federal side that could take the form of temporarily declaring a roughly 10 km zone along the Chechen border where any groups of armed men... will be destroyed by artillery fire.” Oleinik also maintained that “military operations of the federal troops inside the Chechen territory should come only in response to military-terrorist actions of the militants in Russian territory. This response should be precise in time and place, however fairly convincing in terms of the force

¹⁴ Greg Ofiesh, “The Language of Terror,” *SpinFreeNews.com*, 30 October 2002.

¹⁵ Sergei Churkin, “Issues of State Strategy and Operational Command in the Struggle Against Terrorism,” <<http://www.guardanterror.ru/index.php?st=64&rub=23>>

¹⁶ Chakhmakhchan, op. cit.

¹⁷ Igor Oleinik, “Terror against Terror,” *Novaya Gazeta*, 4 October 1999, <<http://www.nns.ru/press-file/dagestan/expert/dag158.html>>

applied – all systems of collective security are based on the principle of the balance of fear.”¹⁸

Recent official statements and policies progressively combine “toughness” with other elements. For example, Moscow has been emphasizing the need to internationalize efforts at combating terrorism. According to Vladimir Putin, “Global antiterrorist strategy today is not only the joint efforts of the international community and their effective coordination. It is also the development of the legal basis for the struggle against terrorism, and liquidation of its organizational structures and the financial foundation.”¹⁹

Inside Chechnya, much emphasis is being placed on Chechen self-rule and development of indigenous resistance to the tide of terrorism. Efforts are under way to de-legitimize the Chechen resistance internationally, and at the same time assert the legitimacy of the new leaders in Grozny loyal to Moscow. A recent agreement with Saudi Arabia on channeling financial aid for the reconstruction of Chechnya is seen as an important step in this direction. The agreement is noteworthy also because Moscow has so far consistently opposed the ideology of Wahhabism that allegedly fuels the Chechen resistance.

However, a return to the use of terror-against-terror is highly probable if major terrorist activity continues. Already, after the terrorist act in the Moscow metro on February 6, 2004, the Speaker of the State Duma, former Minister of the Interior Boris Gryzlov promised that “the Duma deputies will in the next few days revise all laws that have articles on international terrorism and terrorists including criminal codes with a view to make punishments for these crimes even tougher.”²⁰

Outside efforts to ostracize Moscow for the way it deals with terrorism may precipitate this process. Internal evolution of the Russian society and political system is also important: if the tendency towards authoritarianism continues, the temptation to forcefully resolve all problems, including that of terrorism, will grow.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Vladimir Putin: No Long-Term Successes in Combating Terrorism Are Possible Without Liquidation of Its Financial Base,” *Strana.ru*, March 18, 2002, <<http://www.strana.ru/news/121538.html>>

²⁰ “Chronicle of the Explosion in the Moscow Metro,” *VipLenta.ru*, 6 February 2004, <<http://vip.lenta.ru/fullstory/2004/02/06/blast/>>