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The Social and Political Role of War Veterans

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John B. Dunlop, The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises. A Critique of Russian Counter-Terrorism. With a foreword by Donald N. Jensen. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006, 166 pages.

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- 1 An author of numerous books on Russia and Chechnya, John Dunlop dedicates this study to examining the management by Russian authorities of the two main hostage crises since the beginning of the second war in Chechnya in 1999.
- 2 The first part analyses the Beslan hostage-taking in September 2004, in which more than 1000 persons, mainly children, were detained in a school in a small in North Ossetian town. Officially, 317 hostages were killed in this terrorist act for which Bassaev claimed responsibility.
- 3 Dunlop provides a very detailed account of the events, based on official data (reports by Russian and North Ossetian Parliamentary commissions, Procuracy findings, minutes of the trial of the only hostage-taker arrested) as well as on NGO and press reports. He recalls what is known of the preparation of the raid by the terrorists and raises some embarrassing questions for Russian authorities: why did they not protect all buildings when they had received information of a possible terrorist attack; why had some of the terrorists been released from prison just before the event?
- 4 Focusing on the way the FSB took the lead, Dunlop reconstructs the different stages of the crisis, from the attempts of different personalities (such as former Ingush President Auev) to act as negotiators to the storm of the school by Russian Special Forces. He recalls how Russian authorities tried to manufacture a symbolic link between terrorists and Al Qaida and shows that from the beginning the Russian leadership did not want to negotiate, blocking the terrorists' cell phones and preventing some potential negotiators such as A. Aslakhanov (a pro-Russian Chechen serving as Presidential Advisor) and most of all journalists A. Politkovskaya and A. Babitsky to come to Beslan. Russian authorities also did everything to prepare Russian public opinion for the storming of the building, saying that the hostage-takers had no demands, lying about the fact that the two videotapes on which they had recorded their demands were empty, and grossly underestimating the number of hostages so as to cover casualties in case of the storm.
- 5 All this sheds a different light on the question of responsibility in the beginning of the assault: the official version states that the storm began after a terrorist detonated his bomb. According to Dunlop, it is more likely that a Russian sniper killed the man who had his foot on the detonator. Tanks started to shoot at the school even though many hostages were still inside. The explosion and burning of the roof, that caused the death of hostages, is most likely due to the use of Shmel flame-throwers (whose effects are in fact very similar to a fuel-air bomb). After the publication of the book, an independent report released by Yuri Savelyev, a State Duma deputy and explosives expert, came to similar conclusions (see Chechnya Weekly, June 1, 2006).
- 6 This very detailed and documented account of the events by Dunlop nevertheless raises a problem: that of the sources available and of their interpretation. Neither official documents nor press reports are totally reliable, and the exclusive use of one or the other to prove an assertion is not always sufficient, all the more since some press reports are based on "off the

record" declarations by members of the Russian secret service that can be neither validated nor invalidated. These problems are particularly acute in the second part of the book, dedicated to the October 2002 Moscow Dubrovka Theater hostage crises, and which is based almost exclusively on press reports and confidential information.

7 In the second part Dunlop does not reconstruct the events that led to the death of 125 hostages from the gas used during the assault by Russian forces, but he gives his interpretation of the succession of events that led to this raid. For him, the Dubrovka hostage-taking was an "unusual kind of joint venture" involving elements of Russian special services and radical Chechen leaders such as Movladi Udugov and Shamyil Bassaev (who finally also claimed responsibility for this act). Neither of them wanted a negotiated settlement of the war in Chechnya at a time when a renewal of negotiations seemed possible; they also had the same interest in defaming Chechen president Maskhadov by making him responsible for the crisis. Dunlop even suggests that President Putin may have been aware of the operation, though he does not develop this assumption further.

8 According to Dunlop, the hostage-taking episode was in its original conception to be preceded and accompanied by terror bombings. Apart from an explosion on 19/10 in Moscow, the other planned attacks failed: in his opinion some of the terrorists intentionally sabotaged the bombs because they were aware that a massive death of Russian civilians would lead Russian opinion to support harsh military actions in Chechnya, including extermination. But as the hostage-taking by itself could have the same consequences, this reason given by Dunlop does not seem very convincing. The second reason would have been that the Moscow Police (MUR) had gotten on the trail of the terrorists sooner than expected – and forced them to accelerate the events.

9 The second part, which reconstructs the strategy of the hostage-takers and of their links with Russian Special Services, shows most of all the difficulty of working on this kind of subject where sources are scarce and where information cannot be cross-checked. Dunlop's attempt to draw his "joint-venture" theory relies on the idea that both Russian authorities and Chechen radicals could have a common interest in pursuing the war, a fact that unfortunately does not constitute a proof in itself.

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