



Putin: Prophet or Provocateur?

In retrospect, the scenario seems chillingly prophetic. Imagine “ordinary New Yorkers or Washingtonians, asleep in their homes,” wrote the author of a November 14, 1999 *New York Times* essay. “Then, in a flash, hundreds perish in explosions at the Watergate, or at an apartment complex on Manhattan’s West Side. Thousands are injured, some horribly disfigured. Panic engulfs a neighborhood, then a nation.”

“Russians do not have to imagine such a calamity’ continued the author, Russian Prime Minister (and future President) Vladimir Putin. “More than 300 of our citizens in Moscow and elsewhere suffered that fate earlier this year when bombs detonated by terrorists demolished five apartment blocks.” Putin’s purpose in penning the op-ed column was to defend Moscow’s invasion of Chechnya, triggered by the apartment bombings.

“No government can stand idly by when terrorism strikes,” wrote Putin. “Terrorism today knows no boundaries. Its purveyors collaborate with each other over vast distances. We know that a great deal of the violence emanating from Chechnya is financed from abroad. The same terrorists who were associated with the [July 1998] bombing of American embassies [in Kenya and Tanzania] have a foothold in the Caucasus. We know that Shamil Basayev, the so-called Chechen warlord, gets assistance on the ground from an itinerant guerrilla leader with a dossier similar to that of Osama bin Laden. And one of your television networks recently reported that — according to United States intelligence sources — bin Laden himself is helping to finance the guerillas.”

During an April 2000 visit to England, Putin reiterated his warning: “The West must wake up — war with Islam is coming.” In light of current U.S.-Russian collaboration in a global “war on terrorism,” Putin’s words seem nearly prophetic. At a summit meeting with European Union leaders following the Black Tuesday attack, Putin reiterated the theme that Russia and the West share a common enemy. He drew a specific parallel between that atrocity and the September 1999 bombings in Russia, insisting that Moscow possesses “objective proof” that bin Laden-connected Chechen radicals were responsible for the terrorist assaults.

But even though Moscow has charged six Chechens — five of them in absentia — with the bombings, the proof referred to by Putin has yet to materialize. In fact, there is far better evidence linking Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB), the former KGB, to the bombings, which occurred shortly after former FSB chief Putin was appointed Russian prime minister.

An Aborted Plot

The BBC reported on March 8, 2000 that, according to veteran human rights activists in Russia, “Vladimir Putin is a dangerous authoritarian, handpicked by a cabal of Kremlin insiders, and levered into power by a breathtakingly ruthless plot. That plot allegedly began last summer with the apartment bombings in Moscow and other cities. The theory goes that Russian security forces were responsible for the terrorist campaign, which was immediately blamed on Chechen rebels. The violence enabled Mr. Putin — newly appointed as Prime Minister — to launch a military invasion of Chechnya, an action which turned him, virtually overnight, into Russia’s most popular politician.”

This theory is supported by compelling evidence of FSB involvement in an abortive bombing in Ryazan, a city 100 miles southeast of Moscow. On September 22, 1999, days after four bombs had detonated at targets across Moscow, Ryazan residents reported that several suspicious-looking figures — all of them



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Russian, not Chechen — were loitering around a 13-story apartment building. After rushing to the scene, police found three large sugar sacks. A bomb squad officer found that the sacks actually contained hexagen, a powerful explosive also used in the Moscow bombs.

Police arrested two of the mysterious strangers, who immediately produced FSB credentials. Within hours of learning of the arrests, FSB authorities intervened to free the suspects, claiming that they had been involved in a “training exercise.” “This was not a bomb,” insisted FSB director Nikolai Patrushev. “The exercise may not have been carried out well, but it was only a test, and the so-called explosive was only sacks of sugar.”

One problem with the FSB’s cover story was that the detonator, which remained with local police, was genuine. Pavel Voloshin, an investigative reporter for the *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper, turned up additional evidence by interviewing paratroopers assigned to guard the “sugar” sacks at a nearby military base. According to Voloshin, one soldier “took a sample to a military commander schooled in explosives who said it was definitely hexagen.”

By this time, the FSB had demolished the bombed-out apartment buildings in Moscow, leaving the carefully protected sugar sacks as the only surviving physical evidence linked to the apartment bombings. This intensified the suspicions of some Russian observers.

“On Saturday [September 18], the bombed-out shell of the apartment block on Ulitsa Guryanova was destroyed in a controlled implosion, reducing to rubble the remains of the building and irreparably burying beneath it any remaining traces of evidence — just ten days after the explosion,” noted an editorial in the September 21, 1999 *Moscow Times*. “Workers at Kashirskoye Shosse [another bombed apartment building], meanwhile, began clearing the rubble from the site as early as September 13 — the day of the bombing.... The Moscow cases may be simply solved, but if they’re not, untold traces of chemical residue, fingerprints, technical fragments, or hair and DNA samples that were present at the sites are now irrevocably lost.”

“Is this ignorance?” continued the editorial. “In the capital city of a country where the current Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, was once its top security official, the assumption sells the FSB short. The Federal Security Service has the equipment, know-how and political clout required to perform a proper investigation.” Blaming shadowy Chechen separatists “has proved both viable and convenient for federal authorities.... Are they playing it safe and making sure no other options turn up?”

Critical Confessions

In early 2000, the case for FSB involvement in the bombings was strengthened when former Russian Prime Minister (and career KGB official) Sergei Stepashin disclosed that the invasion of Chechnya had been planned six months before the terrorist attack. According to the January 29, 2000 *London Independent*, Stepashin admitted that plans for the invasion “had been worked out in March,” and that the campaign “had to happen even if there were no explosions in Moscow.” This was a significant admission against interest on the part of Stepashin, who “played a central role in organizing the military build-up before the invasion,” noted the British paper.*

Prominent Russian academic Boris Kagarlitsky contributed another critical piece of the puzzle when he published an essay in *Novaya Gazeta* claiming that “the bombings in Moscow and elsewhere were arranged by the GRU” — Russia’s notorious military intelligence service. According to Kagarlitsky, the bombs were planted by a GRU-controlled terrorist cell run by Shirvani Basayev, brother of the chief Chechen “warlord,” Shamil Basayev. Some plot details were leaked through the June 6, 1999 edition of



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the Swedish daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, which reported that Kremlin insiders were considering “terror bombings in Moscow which would be blamed on the Chechens.”

Washington and Moscow both maintain that Osama bin Laden assisted Shamil Basayev. However, it’s also clear that the Kremlin supports the Chechen separatist. In July 1999, according to Kagarlitsky, a meeting took place in France attended by Kremlin official Alexander Voloshin, GRU official Anton Surikov, and Shamil Basayev. This cabal reportedly choreographed a “crisis” in which Chechen troops would attack the province of Dagestan, and Russia would respond by invading Chechnya.

“Both sides had interests in common,” writes Moscow correspondent Patrick Cockburn. “Mr. Basayev’s political fortunes had ebbed in Chechnya and might be restored by a small war. The Kremlin was also in need of an outside enemy.” This was not the first time that the Basayev brothers had collaborated with the GRU: In the early 1990s, Shamil and Shirvani led a GRU-supported battalion of “volunteers” in suppressing an independence movement in the breakaway province of Abkhazia.

The Chechen attack on Dagestan occurred on August 8, 1999. Vladimir Putin was appointed prime minister one day later, specially commissioned to deal with the Chechen threat. At the same time, however, Russian army helicopter gunships were providing cover for Chechen troops in Dagestan. On September 4th, the terrorist campaign began when a bomb tore apart a military housing complex in Dagestan. Two weeks and three additional bombings later, the Kremlin had launched its long-planned Chechen campaign, eventually thrusting Putin to the presidency.

The “Godfather’s” Accusations

In early March of this year, former Russian media mogul Boris Berezovsky held a press conference at London’s Royal United Services Institute, unveiling what he said was “proof” that the Russian security organs were responsible for the 1999 terrorist bombings. During the briefing, which also featured comments from explosives experts and a survivor of one of the attacks, Berezovsky played an excerpt from “The Assassination of Russia,” a French documentary accusing the FSB of staging the bombings.

“The FSB thought that Putin would not be able to come to power through lawful democratic means,” stated Berezovsky. “I am not saying that Putin ordered the attacks ... but what I am saying is that he knew such things were taking place.”

Granted, Berezovsky is hardly the most reputable witness. Known as the “Godfather of the Kremlin” for his abundant connections to Russian organized crime, Berezovsky once controlled a vast financial empire including television channels, automobile plants, oil interests, and airlines. Russian expatriate writer Andrei Navrozov, who covers European affairs for *Chronicles* magazine, describes Berezovsky as one of the “oligarchs” used by Russia’s “ex”-Communist rulers to carry out “a pantomime of free enterprise attractive to Western investment....” His fortunes steeply declined in 1999, and he presently lives in British exile to avoid arrest and prosecution on corruption charges.

Berezovsky’s underworld connections include numerous ties to Chechen terrorists and gangsters. In October 1996, shortly after a cease-fire ended the first Chechen war, Berezovsky was appointed deputy secretary of Yeltsin’s presidential security council and assigned to deal with Chechen affairs. As Russia correspondent Paul Klebnikov points out in his book *The Godfather of the Kremlin*, Chechen terrorist leader Salman Raduyev reacted with approval to Berezovsky’s appointment. Raduyev, Klebnikov writes, was “a warlord responsible for [a] bloody hostage-taking raid ... several kidnappings, and two terrorist bombings in Russia....”

Despite the 1996 cease-fire, Chechen terrorists continued to take hostages, often killing or



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dismembering them on video — in much the same way that Pakistani terrorists murdered *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. (One particularly vicious case involved 12-year-old Alla Geifman, the daughter of an oil magnate, who was held by Chechen terrorists for seven months; after cutting off two of her fingers and sending them to her family, the gangsters received a \$5 million ransom.) While most Russians avoided Chechnya, Berezovsky “traveled often to Chechnya, and without bodyguards,” observes Klebnikov. Many of those trips were made to pay ransom. According to Chechen President Aslan Makhadov, Berezovsky was using those payments to finance Chechnya’s terrorist underworld.

“This was part of [Russian] government policy,” declared Makhadov. “High government officials would arrive from Moscow with big sums of money. These kidnappings were encouraged. They paid ransoms, maintained contact with them [the terrorists], and ultimately attained their aim of discrediting the whole Chechen people.” Acting through Berezovsky, “the Kremlin had been undermining the moderates, supporting the [Chechen] extremists financially and politically, and consequently, sowing the seeds of conflict,” comments Klebnikov.

Whatever his motives, Berezovsky is a former Kremlin insider deeply involved in the Yeltsin government’s duplicitous dealings in Chechnya. *Chronicles* correspondent Andrei Navrozov compares Berezovsky to Leon Trotsky, a founder of the Soviet regime who fell out with Josef Stalin and fled into exile, only to be murdered in Mexico on the dictator’s orders. It was thwarted ambition, rather than a moral reformation, that led Trotsky — a murderous conspirator with the blood of millions on his hands — to become Stalin’s enemy. Similar motives are probably behind Berezovsky’s accusations against Putin — but those accusations should be examined on their merits.

Wedded to the KGB?

“Producing conclusive evidence that Putin’s agents were behind the Moscow bombings would be tantamount to proving Putin’s complicity in the September 11 operation, which all too easily centered on the shadowy Osama bin Laden, who, like many of the mujahadeen commanders allegedly fighting the Russians during the Soviet occupation ... may have been a Soviet double agent from the beginning,” writes Navrozov. Bin Laden himself dangled a tantalizing hint that he answered to someone else in carrying out the attack. In a notorious videotape released last December, bin Laden tells supporters gathered in Kandahar, Afghanistan: “We had notification since the previous Thursday that the event would take place [on September 11].” The obvious question is: Notification from whom? Yet the media, which reported the tape widely as evidence of bin Laden’s guilt, failed to ask this particular question.

Navrozov warns that in the wake of September 11th, Russia’s ruling clique of “immensely sophisticated and cunning leaders have lured their only credible opponent into an all-but-irreversible policy of lackadaisical fraternization [and] market interdependence....” In a statement immediately following the attacks, NATO Secretary-General George Robertson seemed to embody the very attitude condemned by Navrozov: “Today the threats to the Russian people are very similar, if not exactly the same, as the threats to the people in the NATO countries and the West.... The international terrorists have gone global. So why should we be dealing with things as individual nations?”

Robertson is a veteran Marxist agitator like his predecessor Javier Solana, and his eagerness to embrace Russia in the name of “collective security” is no surprise. But similar comments from syndicated columnist Don Feder — whose anti-Communist credentials are impeccable — are indeed surprising, and they illustrate how remarkably successful the Kremlin’s propaganda efforts have been. Deriding “Cold Warriors suffering frostbite of the brain” who take issue with Putin’s background, Feder



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insists that the career KGB officer and product of the Komsomol (Communist Youth League) is actually a Christian patriot “who wears a cross and has an icon corner in his home [and] understands that the fate of Orthodox Russia is entwined with the Judeo-Christian West.”

“Russia has 300 million Moslems to its south and 20 million within the federation’s borders,” wrote Feder in a December 2001 column. “It’s fought two wars with Islamic insurgents in Chechnya. A year before bin Laden’s boys flew two planes into the World Trade Center, bombs were exploding in Red Square, courtesy of the same Al-Qaeda network.” America and Russia, as victims of al-Qaeda terrorists, are now joined in “a marriage arranged by the forces of history,” concludes Feder.

But it was Putin and his KGB comrades, not some disembodied force of history, who arranged the al-Qaeda attacks in Russia. This suggests that when Putin warned in April 2000 of a coming “war with Islam” he spoke not as a prophet, but as a provocateur.

** A source connected to Stepashin told The New American that the former Russian prime minister — for what it’s worth — denies FSB involvement in the apartment bombings, insisting that they were carried out by Chechen terrorists connected to the Kosovo Liberation Army in Serbia.*



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