

Terror in Russia: Nothing comes from nothing

Written by Eric Walberg

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The worst terrorist attack to hit Russia in five years, the bombing of the Nevsky Express train last week, was almost certainly by Islamist extremists, and security forces are just not prepared for these less spectacular acts of terrorism, Russian security experts say.

The cause of the crash was identified as a homemade bomb that exploded on the tracks between Moscow and St Petersburg, killing 26, wounding scores and raising fears of a new era of terrorism in Russia.

At the attack site, 320km northwest of Moscow, investigators found remnants of the bomb, equivalent to 15 pounds of TNT, that left a crater 1.5m deep. The bomb was apparently planted on the tracks and detonated while the second half of the train was passing. A second, less powerful explosive went off later at the site of the crash.

Russia suffered a wave of attacks in the early part of the decade as Muslim separatists from Chechnya struck trains and public places in Moscow and elsewhere, but there have been no such deadly assaults in recent years.

However, another Nevsky Express train was derailed in 2007 by an explosion, wounding more than two dozen people. Two men from Ingushetia were arrested, and just last month confessed to involvement in that blast. But the main suspect, a former Russian soldier-turned-Islamic-extremist, Pavel Kosolapov, remains at large. This previous blast and the sophistication of the present bombing, which involved two explosions, point to Islamists as the perpetrators. Aleksandr Bobreshov, a senior official of the state railway company, noted, "the second explosion, which occurred some time later, is the so-called double-blast method, carried out by North Caucasus sabotage groups."

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Police issued a sketch of a middle aged “stocky, red-haired man” seen in the vicinity of Friday’s blast, who may be Kosolapov. Kosolapov is believed to have been a close associate of Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev, killed by Russian security forces in 2006, who was the mastermind of several large-scale terrorist attacks, including the tragic 2004 Beslan school siege, which left 330 people dead, mostly children.

The 1990s were a violent and unstable period in Russia, though the only large-scale terrorist attack was during the 1994-96 First Chechen War -- the 1995 Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis, which resulted in 200 deaths. It was Basayev’s first major “success” in as much as it led to peace talks with the Yeltsin’s government and resulted in the establishment of a quasi-independent Chechnya.

The next major terrorist acts were the five bombings of mostly Moscow apartment buildings that killed nearly 300 people in September 1999. None of the Chechen field commanders, including Basayev, accepted responsibility for the bombings and Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov denied involvement of his government. However, they coincided with border skirmishes between Chechnya and Dagestan, and evidence that Al-Qaeda and Wahabism were increasingly active in Chechnya. A ground offensive was launched from Dagestan by Russian troops in October which now marks the beginning of what is called the Second Chechen War, on which Vladimir Putin staked his presidency after he was appointed president by Boris Yeltsin in December 1999.

There followed a decade of gruesome war in Chechnya, with tens of thousands dying. There were also several spectacular terrorist attacks which this time Chechen rebels led by Basayev did take responsibility for. Russia’s security forces had to deal with the 2002 siege of a Moscow theatre which resulted in up to 200 deaths and the 2004 Beslan school assault. But Russia suffered no major attack after that, as the Chechen war ground to its supposed end.

Andrei Soldatov, editor of Agentura.ru, criticises Russian counter-terrorist efforts since Beslan, comparing officials to generals preparing for the last war, focussed on averting big attacks like Beslan, instead of preparing for smaller-scale strikes such as the bombings of the Nevsky Express, despite the 2007 warning blast. “We see new modus operandi taking shape, in which tiny cells of terrorists of three to five people plan and execute acts of sabotage,” he says. “But our security forces have militarised this problem, and are not set up to deal with small threats like that.”

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Confirming his point, yet another bomb went off Monday in the southern republic of Dagestan, hitting a train travelling from the Siberian city of Tyumen to Baku in Azerbaijan. No one was injured in that blast, but analysts argue it was also by terrorists, who have never stopped operating in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya, and warn that more ambitious attacks on Russia will no doubt follow. The northern Caucasus is witnessing a growth of forces that are no longer interested in local nationalism, or separatism, but “see themselves as being at war with Russia. Until lately, the most adventurous Russian Islamists tended to head for Afghanistan, or somewhere else, to wage jihad. Now there are signs that they are going to the Caucasus area, and this bodes very ill,” says Soldatov.

The Kremlin declared “mission accomplished” in Chechnya on 16 April 2009 after a decade and a half of military campaigning, pulling most of its forces out of the tiny republic, and leaving it under the control of local strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. Kremlin leaders argue that the harsh pacification of Chechnya, political crackdown and smarter security operations explain the fact that there has been no major terrorist attack on the Russian heartland since Beslan.

But it remains a fact that the terrorist tragedies in Russia during the past decade coincide with the brutal Second Chechen War, and that President Kadyrov himself is a loose cannon who has assassinated more than one opponent in the past year. Chechnya is also suspected of being a prime transit route for drug smugglers, and the lawlessness and threat to Russia emanating from Chechnya are not lost on other parties, in particular, the US and Israel. This latest incident is a serious blow not only to Putin’s strategy of holding on to Chechnya at all costs, but to overall Russian security.