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**The Shadow of Ryazan: Who Was Behind the Strange
Russian Apartment Bombings in September 1999?**

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The Shadow of Ryazan

Executive Summary

For two and half years, the government of Vladimir Putin has been haunted by the possibility that there will be a serious examination of the Russian apartment bombings that took place in September 1999. There is compelling evidence that, contrary to claims that the bombings were the work of Chechen terrorists, they were, in fact, carried out by the Russian government itself.

First, the bombings came at a moment when the corrupt oligarchy that ruled Russia faced the loss of its power. The bombings, by seeming to justify a new Chechen war, propelled Putin into power, and he preserved the oligarchy and the Yeltsin era division of property intact. Second, the organization of the bombings, including the speed and efficiency with which they were carried out, suggest the participation of an intelligence service.

Finally, the Federal Security Bureau (FSB) was caught planting a bomb in the basement of an apartment building in Ryazan under circumstances nearly identical to those of the Moscow bombings. The subsequent FSB claim that it was conducting a “test of vigilance” is unconvincing. The weight of the evidence therefore points to official responsibility for this terrorist act and, at the very least, demands an open inquiry.

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For the last two and a half years, a specter has haunted the government of Vladimir Putin. This is the possibility of a serious examination of the strange apartment house bombings that took place in September 1999 in Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonsk and cost three hundred lives.

The bombings terrorized Russia. The Russian authorities immediately accused Chechen rebels of responsibility for the attacks, and this galvanized public opinion in support of a second war in Chechnya. The war, in turn, made Putin, the former head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), an overnight hero and the leading candidate for the Russian presidency.

Almost from the start, however, there were doubts about the timing of the bombings that could not have been better calculated to rescue the political fortunes of the ruling, Yeltsin era oligarchy. Suspicions only deepened when a fifth bomb was discovered in the basement of a building in Ryazan, and those responsible for placing it turned out to be agents of the FSB.

Until recently, attempts to call attention to some of the paradoxes surrounding the bombings, one of the most pivotal events in post-communist Russian history, proceeded sporadically and were easily countered by the information apparatus of the state.

On March 5, however, Boris Berezovsky, a self-exiled oligarch and former key Kremlin adviser, held a press conference in London in which he accused the FSB of carrying out the bombings with Putin's complicity in order to justify a second Chechen war.¹ He presented as evidence the testimony of Nikita Chekulin, a former acting director of the Russian Explosives

Conversion Center, a scientific research institute under the Ministry of Education, who was recruited by the FSB as a secret agent. Chekulin stated, and confirmed with documents, that in 1999–2000, a large quantity of hexogen, the explosive that is believed to have been used in the apartment bombings, was purchased by the institute from various military units and then, under the guise of gunpowder or dynamite, shipped all over the country to unknown destinations. Berezovsky also presented a documentary film that was largely based on a previous television program about the Ryazan incident that was shown on NTV and reported in *Novaya Gazeta*.

In fact, the press conference did not offer much that was new. Nonetheless, it was significant because it renewed discussion of an issue that had never really gone away. At the same time as the press conference was being held, a pamphlet novel by Alexander Prokhanov, a Russian nationalist leader, entitled “Mr. Hexogen,” was enjoying a wide circulation in Russia. The novel, based on information from sources in the intelligence agencies, describes a conspiracy to unleash the second Chechen war and use it to elect a successor who would protect the interests of the corrupt Yeltsin “family.”

In explaining his support for the American led anti-terrorist coalition after September 11, 2001, Putin said that Russia had also been a victim of terrorism. This experience, however, looks rather different if the bombings in September 1999 were organized by leaders of the Russian government as part of an effort to preserve the power and wealth of a criminal oligarchy.

The view that the bombings were the work of elements of the Russian government is based on three types of evidence: the logic of the political situation at the time of the attacks;

what is known about the bombings in Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonsk; and the implications of the so-called “training exercise” in Ryazan. Unfortunately, in all three cases, the weight of the evidence supports the view that the bombings were not the work of Chechen terrorists, but rather the action of leaders of the Russian government undertaken to justify the launching of the second Chechen war.

In August 1999, on the eve of the bombings, it appeared that the Yeltsin “family” and the rest of the corrupt oligarchy that ruled Russia were facing an unavoidable day of reckoning. As the economic situation in Russia got steadily worse, Yeltsin’s approval rating dropped to 2 percent and an uneasy awareness spread among the persons closely connected to the Yeltsin regime that their positions, their wealth, and possibly their freedom and even their lives were in jeopardy.

In August 1998, Russia experienced a devastating financial crisis and, in its wake, Yeltsin was forced to compromise with the State Duma and accept as prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, the foreign minister and former head of the Foreign Intelligence Service. Primakov authorized a series of investigations that affected the members of the “family” themselves.

One investigation involved Berezovsky, who, in January 1999, was suspected of appropriating money belonging to the national airline, Aeroflot. More important for the “family,” however, was the investigation into possible kickbacks to Pavel Borodin, the head of the property administration in the presidential administration, from the Swiss firm, Mabetex, in connection with construction and repair work on the Kremlin. On January 22, 1999, the Mabetex

office in Lugano was raided, and records were discovered that showed payments of \$600,000 on the credit cards of Yeltsin's daughters, Tatyana Dyachenko and Yelena Okulova.

The threat to some of the country's most powerful figures prompted a response. Yuri Skuratov, the prosecutor general who was leading the investigations, was removed after a video of him engaged in "sex acts" with two prostitutes in a sauna linked to a Moscow criminal organization was shown on prime-time television. The cases involving Berezovsky and Mabetex, however, were not forgotten.

Dissatisfaction with Yeltsin was spreading and, in May 1999, Yeltsin fired Primakov and his government and installed as acting premier, the interior minister, Sergei Stepashin. A move to impeach Yeltsin for, among other things, illegally suppressing the Supreme Soviet in 1993 and launching the war in Chechnya in 1994, was narrowly defeated with the help of the distribution of bribes to wavering deputies. But the Fatherland-All Russia movement that was organized by Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, was gaining strength. On August 23, Luzhkov promised that if Primakov, the most popular politician in the country, was to run for president, he would support him.

The prospect of Primakov as president was frightening for the Yeltsin entourage because he had already demonstrated his readiness to pursue corruption cases and, as Skuratov was later to state, it was possible to bring criminal cases against every one of the oligarchs of the Yeltsin era.

By the summer of 1999, there was reported to be an atmosphere of near panic in the Kremlin, and there were reports that the Yeltsin “family” was planning provocations in Moscow, including acts of terror, in order to discredit Luzhkov. One such report, by Alexander Zhilin, which appeared on July 22 in *Moskovskaya Pravda* said that there was a plan to destabilize the atmosphere in Moscow by organizing terrorist acts, kidnappings, and a war between criminal clans. The plan, known among insiders as “Storm in Moscow,” was never implemented, possibly because an even more effective plan took its place.

On August 5, a Muslim force led by Shamil Basayev, a Chechen guerilla leader, entered western Dagestan from Chechnya, ostensibly to start an anti-Russian uprising. On August 9, Stepashin was dismissed, and Putin became prime minister. On August 22, the force withdrew back into Chechnya without heavy losses, amid suspicion that the incursion had been a provocation. At the end of August, Russian aircraft bombed Wahhabi villages in Dagestan in seeming retaliation for the incursion. This was followed, days later, by the explosions that obliterated the apartment buildings in Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonsk.

The bombings stunned Russia but, in their wake, the stage was set for the rescue of the Yeltsin era oligarchy. Popular anger over corruption was redirected against the Chechens. Putin, whose popularity rating had been 2 percent, launched a war against Chechnya and, in the process, became Russia’s savior. In April 2000, he was easily elected president and, in that capacity, he granted immunity from prosecution to Yeltsin and his family, put an end to all talk of a re-division of property, and preserved the Yeltsin era oligarchy virtually intact.²

Besides the logic of the political situation in August 1999 that suggested that only by provoking a war could the Yeltsin leadership retain their property and their power, the role of the Russian government in the bombings is suggested by the character of the explosions themselves. The four bombings all had the same “handwriting” as attested to by the nature of the destruction, the way the buildings’ concrete panels collapsed, and the volume of the blast. In each case, the explosive was said to be hexogen, and all four bombs were set to go off at night to inflict maximum casualties.

To do what they were accused of having done without expert assistance, however, Chechen terrorists would have needed to be able to organize nine explosions (the four that took place and the five that the Russian authorities claimed to have prevented) in widely separated cities in the space of two weeks. They also would have needed the ability to penetrate top secret Russian military factories or military units to obtain the hexogen.³

Finally, Chechen terrorists would have needed technical virtuosity. In the case of the Moscow apartment buildings, the bombs were placed to destroy the weakest critical structural elements so each of the buildings would collapse “like a house of cards.” Such careful calculations are the mark of skilled specialists, and the only places in Russia where such specialists were trained were the spetsnaz forces, military intelligence (GRU), and the FSB.⁴

Another troubling aspect of the apartment bombings was the timing. The bombings were explained as a response to the Russian bombing of Wahhabi villages in Dagestan in August 1999. A careful study of the apartment bombings, however, showed that it would have taken

from four to four and half months to organize them. In constructing a model of the events, all stages of the conspiracy were considered: developing a plan for the targets, visiting the targets, making corrections, determining the optimum mix of explosives, ordering their preparation, making final calculations, renting space in the targeted buildings, and transporting the explosives to the targets.

Assuming that these calculations were even approximately correct, planning for the apartment bombings had to begin in the spring. They therefore could not have been retaliation by Chechen terrorists for the Russian attack in Dagestan, which occurred only days before the bombings took place. They might, however, have been part of a plan that included the Chechen invasion of Dagestan, the Russian bombing of the Wahhabi villages, and the apartment bombings. But such a plan could only have been implemented by elements of the regime in cooperation with the FSB.⁵

As both the Chechen war and the presidential campaign progressed, some observers noted that events were unfolding in a manner that matched the conditions described by Harold Laswell, a University of Chicago political scientist, as being optimal for successful propaganda. In his book, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, Laswell said a propagandist's success is limited by the tension level of the subject population. "The propagandist who deals with a community when its tension level is high, finds that a reservoir of explosive energy can be touched off by the same small match which would normally ignite [only] a bonfire." Some persons who knew of the popularity of American political science literature with the FSB

became convinced that events were being played out according to a scenario written by Lasswell.⁶

The strongest indication that elements of the Russian government were responsible for the bombings, however, was the history of the supposed training exercise in Ryazan. In that incident, the FSB was forced to admit that they had put a bomb in the basement of a civilian apartment building because they were caught in the act.

The incident began on the night of September 22, six days after the bombing of Volgodonsk, when police answering a call reporting suspicious activity discovered a bomb in the basement of the building at 14/16 Novosyelow Street. Experts arriving at the scene found that the bomb tested positive for hexogen. Within minutes, not only the building but also the surrounding neighborhood was evacuated. In all, nearly 30,000 persons spent the night on the street. Police surrounded the airport and railroad stations, and roadblocks were set up on all of the roads leading out of the city.

The origin of the bomb was determined, however, in a totally unexpected way. On the evening of September 23, a call to Moscow was made from a public telephone bureau for intercity calls. The operator who connected the call caught a fragment of conversation in which a caller said there was no way to get out of town undetected. The voice at the other end of the line said, "Split up and each of you make your own way out." The operator reported the call to the police and they traced the number. To their astonishment, it belonged to the FSB.⁷ A short time

later, with the help of tips from the population, the police arrested two terrorists. They produced identification from the FSB and were released on orders from Moscow.

On September 24, Nikolai Patrushev, the head of the FSB, announced that the bomb in the basement at 14/16 Novosylov had been a dummy and that the incident had been a “test.” He congratulated the residents of Ryazan on their vigilance. This explanation stupefied the residents who had assumed that the bomb was real. The FSB said that the bomb was a dummy and that the explosive material in the sacks attached to the detonator was sugar. It said the gas analyzer that detected hexogen had malfunctioned.

Several months after the incident, however, Pavel Voloshin, a reporter for *Novaya Gazeta*, interviewed Yuri Tkachenko, the sapper who defused the “dummy” bomb. He insisted that it was real. Tkachenko said that the detonator, including a timer, power source, and shotgun shell, was a genuine military detonator and obviously prepared by a professional. At the same time, the gas analyzer that tested the vapors coming from the sacks unmistakably indicated the presence of hexogen.

Voloshin asked Tkachenko if the gas analyzer could have given a false result. Tkachenko said that this was out of the question. The gas analyzers were of world class quality. Each cost \$20,000 and was maintained by a specialist who worked according to a strict schedule, checking the analyzer after each use and making frequent prophylactic checks. These were necessary because the device contains a source of constant radiation. In the end, Tkachenko pointed out,

meticulous care in the handling of the gas analyzer was a necessity because the lives of the bomb squad's experts depended on the reliability of their equipment.

Voloshin also interviewed the police officers who answered the original call and discovered the bomb. They also insisted that the incident was not an exercise and that it was obvious from its appearance that the substance in the bags was not sugar.

Voloshin's articles in *Novaya Gazeta* had a major impact. Doubt became so widespread that the FSB agreed to participate in a televised meeting between its top officials and residents of the building at 14/16 Novosyelow. The purpose of the program was to demonstrate the FSB's openness, but the strategy backfired. During the program, which was aired on NTV, on March 23, FSB spokesmen could not explain why the "exercise" was carried out without measures to protect the health of the residents, why the gas analyzer detected hexogen, or why bomb squad experts mistook a dummy bomb for a real one. When the program ended, the residents were more convinced than ever that they had been unwitting pawns in a FSB plot and only through a miracle escaped with their lives.

In fact, the building at 14/16 Novosyelow Street was an odd choice for a test of vigilance because there was an all-night grocery store in the building, and residents could easily have assumed that someone unloading sacks of sugar was doing so for the store. As the target of a terrorist attack, however, the building was very well suited, especially if the goal was to claim the maximum number of lives. Like the building on Kashirskoye Highway in Moscow, 14/16 Novosyelow Street was a brick building of standard construction. In the event of an explosion, it

would have offered little resistance, and there would have been little chance for anyone to survive. At the same time, since the building was on an elevation, in the event of an explosion it would have hit the adjacent building with the force of an avalanche and, because the weak, sandy soil in the area offered little support to either building, probably would have toppled it. In this way, the tragedy in Ryazan would have eclipsed all the others.

In the face of evidence of FSB involvement in the bombing of the Russian apartment buildings, the government has refused to respond. It reacted to Berezovsky's allegations by accusing him of funding the terrorist activities of Chechen rebels.

The most serious evidence that the leaders of the government bombed their own citizens, however, is presented by the Ryazan incident and, in that case at least, the Russian authorities are perfectly equipped to refute the allegations that have been made against them. They need only to produce the persons who carried out the Ryazan training exercise, the records of the exercise, and the dummy bomb itself. The FSB, however, has refused to do this on grounds of secrecy and evidence relating to the Ryazan incident has been sealed for seventy-five years.⁸

The government has also prevented any inquiry by the parliament. In March 2000, a group of deputies proposed to send to the general prosecutor a request for answers to questions regarding the incident in Ryazan. The Duma voted 197 in favor and 137 against. However, 226 votes, an absolute majority, were needed for passage, and this was not achieved because the pro-Kremlin Unity party voted unanimously against. In February, another attempt was made to open a parliamentary inquiry into the Ryazan incident. In this case, 161 deputies voted in favor and

only seven against, but the remainder of the 464 members of the Duma abstained. As a result, the attempt failed.

In fact, the greatest support for the government's denial of any involvement in the bombings is fear of the implications if it turns out that the regime was behind them. Even the residents of the building at 14/16 Novsyelov were reluctant to draw conclusions about possible government involvement, although they unanimously rejected the notion that the incident had been a test. The most they would say was that someone tried to blow them up without offering an opinion as to who.

The question of "who," however, is very significant. If, as the available evidence indicates, the bombings were carried out by the FSB, it means the present government of Russia is illegitimate. It also means that a tradition has been established in Russia that can only lead to the country's degeneration.

Russia has experienced three years of economic growth after more than a decade of steady decline, and Putin has enacted some needed reforms. None of these changes, however, affect the real challenges facing Russia—crime, ideological disorientation, and demographic collapse. These problems are symptoms of a deep spiritual malaise and they can only be resolved by establishing the authority of moral values in the country that, in practical terms, would be expressed in the rule of law.

Under these circumstances, it is important to Russia's future that the bombings not be ignored. Failing to react to evidence of a crime by the Russian government means implicitly condoning it and leaving unchallenged a precedent that will serve as a standing temptation for the future, demonstrating to all subsequent Russian leaders how elections can be "won" and putting paid to the effort to apply law consistently and establish the authority of moral values in Russia.

Any effort to examine seriously the true authorship of the apartment house bombings would, by right and of necessity, be non-violent. It is possible that if the regime were seriously threatened, it would react with repression. A hypothetical repressive response from the government, however, would only actualize what had always been a potential, and the Russian public would have, at least, confirmed that it rejected the government's crime and was not complicit in it. The worst outcome would be for the Russian public to become gradually convinced that the present government was established as the result of an act of terror but to treat that as a normal phenomenon because, in that way, they would not only be accepting criminal domination but also cutting off the moral roots of their own subsequent regeneration.

Notes

1. The role of Berezovsky is ironic. He actively participated in the effort by the Yeltsin family to install their own successor to Yeltsin. After Putin became president, however, he began to limit the power of Berezovsky and, apparently in response, Berezovsky began to accuse the authorities of participation in the bombings in Moscow and Volgograd. "The more hopeless became his chances of returning to the political arena in Russia, the louder became his accusations... It seems that he opened a completely new form of political business: blackmail the authorities with the exposure of one's own crimes." Andrei Piontkovsky, "Rassledovanie. Priznanie Oligarkha Prokuroru Respubliki," *Novaya Gazeta*, January 21, 2001.

Berezovsky's odious reputation in Russia has also been useful in helping the authorities to avoid answering his charges and those raised in the documentary film. Although the film, which was made by French documentary filmmakers, was only 25 percent financed by Berezovsky, it has been consistently described in Russia as the "Berezovsky film." FSB officials, when they have commented on the charges of FSB complicity in the bombings at all, have said that they did not intend to enter into polemics with Berezovsky.

In general, the Russian authorities have responded to the controversy over the bombings by pretending it does not exist. There have been attempts to try supposed participants in the bombings but this is, in all likelihood, part of an effort to reassure the public that the FSB is doing "something" to investigate the bombings and that the issue has not been completely forgotten. In the fall of 2001, two persons who were not ethnic Chechens were tried in Stavropol for participation in the Moscow bombings, but both were acquitted. They were convicted of other serious crimes, but the evidence that they had any connection to the Moscow bombings was too obviously falsified even for a normally obedient Russian court.

2. This was not the first time that the prospect of elections had led to acts of terror in Moscow. In June 1996, on the eve of the first Presidential elections, a bomb went off in the Moscow metro, killing four persons and injuring twelve, and two trolleybus explosions injured thirty-eight. These explosions worked in favor of Yeltsin's candidacy by creating fear of instability. In the case of the Manezh bombing, an obscure, anti-consumerism group called the

Union of Revolutionary Writers left leaflets at the scene in which the group appeared to take credit for the explosion. The leaflet read, in part, “A hamburger not eaten to the end by the dead consumer is a revolutionary hamburger.” In the past, inane claims of responsibility by previously unknown or little-known groups have been a way of signaling that the real responsible parties were the intelligence services.

3. At the Berezovsky press conference in London, Chekulín described how large quantities of hexogen were purchased by his institute but, insofar as the institute had ties to both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB, this information actually casts little light on how hexogen could have reached the hands of Chechen terrorists unless the terrorists were working for the FSB.

4. See David Satter, “Anatomy of a Massacre,” *The Washington Times*, October 29, 1999. Of course, Chechens could have received demolitions training in the Russian military, but the high level of expertise demonstrated in the bombings resembled the product of years of specialized education rather than the rudimentary training that would have been provided in the Soviet or Russian army.

5. See “Silence after the Explosions,” Investigation. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, January 19, 2000. Although the bombings may have been organized by elements of the Russian government, the FSB and other investigative agencies, most of whose employees would have been in the dark about a conspiracy, conducted traditional investigations. This model of how the bombings were organized was based on the results of their investigations that were leaked to *Moskovsky Komsomolets*.

Beginning in September, press reports alleged that Berezovsky; Alexander Voloshin, by then the head of the presidential administration; Anton Surikov, a former member of the GRU; and Basayev met in France in June or July to plan the incursion into Dagestan. At the same time, on September 13–14, the newspaper, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, published parts of the transcript of a conversation between a man with a voice similar to that of Berezovsky and a man with a voice similar to Movladi Udugov, the unofficial spokesman for the radical Chechen opposition, including Basayev and Khattab, in which they appear to be on friendly terms and appeared to discuss the transfer of money from the person resembling Berezovsky to the radicals. Pavel Gusev, the chief editor of

Moskovsky Komsomolets, said that he had confirmed that the FSB officer who taped the conversation was later murdered “on the orders of those who had been recorded.”

It was the combination of these publications that may have inspired Tretyakov, the trusted, chief editor of Berezovsky’s most important publication, to offer a version of events which, if not absolving Berezovsky, at least suggested that he was not the only person involved in organizing the fateful incursion into Dagestan. Tretyakov wrote: “It is perfectly obvious that the Chechens were lured into Dagestan... in order to provide a legitimate excuse for restoring federal power in the republic and beginning the offensive phase of struggle against the terrorists grouped in Chechnya. Clearly it was an operation by the Russian special services... that was, moreover, politically authorized from the very top.”

“In light of all this, here is my own personal hypothesis: at worst, Berezovsky may have been used without his knowledge by the Russian special services or, more than likely, he acted in coordination with them... My hypothesis is far more realistic than the theory that ‘Berezovsky set everything up,’ which presumes his absolute influence on the two warring sides simultaneously.”

If Russian authorities were involved in the planning of the invasion of Dagestan, it is at least possible that they learned of a pre-existing Chechen plot to blow up Russian apartment buildings and decided to facilitate it for their own purposes. If the cycle of invasion and retaliation had not taken place, however, it is hard to imagine what would have motivated an attack by Chechens on random apartment blocks.

6. Harold Laswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1972) p.190

7. The alert telephone operator, Nadezhda Yukhnova, was given a color television set as an award for “vigilance” by the FSB at an awards ceremony in September.

8. The FSB has insisted that the persons who took part in the “exercise” are clandestine agents and cannot appear in public. However, there is no legal barrier to making the agents available to journalists. Article seven of the law on

state secrets of the Russian Federation, adopted July 21, 1993, states that among the things which cannot be considered state secrets and declared to be secret evidence are evidence about “extraordinary accidents and catastrophes threatening the security and health of the citizens and their consequences... facts about the violation of the rights and freedoms of citizens... [and] facts about the violations of the law by state organs and officials.” Zdanovich said that if the agents were necessary for the investigation, they would be produced. Since, however, the case [which, despite the FSB’s explanation of the Ryazan events, the general prosecutor refused to close] was one of terrorism, the needs of the investigation were determined by the persons conducting it: the FSB.

The FSB has also shown no inclination to allow an examination of the forensic evidence. The rubble from the bombings was cleared almost immediately despite the objections of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Emergency Situations. The haste with which the crime scenes were destroyed was all the more striking in light of the fact that, in the case of the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, suspects were identified and eventually arrested as a result of the careful sifting of the rubble from the explosions, a process that went on for months. The Russian authorities also declined offers of forensic assistance from the United States and other Western countries.

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