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The Chechen War Comes Home

By YEVGENIA ALBATS

NEW HAVEN — As horrible as it was to watch the video footage from the Moscow streets around the theater where some 700 hostages were held until government forces stormed the building early this morning, it is as bitter to realize that this tragedy could have been predicted — and in fact, was bound to happen.

Three years ago, in early autumn of 1999, Vladimir Putin, who was prime minister at the time, ordered Russian troops back into Chechnya to end the rebellion that Chechens had been waging for independence since 1991. This second military campaign in the Caucasus Mountains had several goals, of which one was of supreme and special meaning: to provide ordinary Russians with a sense of security after a decade of political turmoil. The need for security and the desire to believe that there was a leader capable of delivering it made Vladimir Putin, who had never before run for office, the president of the country. Those same feelings have sustained Mr. Putin's popularity ever since.

The second war in Chechnya turned into another brutal, bloody, corrupted and shameful military campaign that quickly became a dead-end story. Many thousands of Russian soldiers died. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of Chechens, both guerrillas and civilians, have been killed. Three years of the military campaign has turned into an endless and horrific story of rapes, murders and torture of civilians by Russian troops. As a result, Chechen civilians, who were almost ready three years ago to give up on independence in exchange for reinstating some order in their land, are turning their backs on Moscow forever. They have nothing more to lose: women lost their children and husbands, countless parents have lost their daughters and sons. The survivors have no means of livelihood left.

Meanwhile, in Russia the desire for order and security has given birth to authoritarian politics that have nurtured a closed, unaccountable regime. In the name of stability, unity, patriotism and, of course, security, any information from Chechnya has been severely censored. Journalists are not allowed to report from Chechnya without special permission from the military authorities. No wonder: in early 2000, I managed to fly over the entire area of Chechnya in a helicopter; with only a few exceptions, I saw villages and towns burned to the ground, agricultural land completely destroyed from huge holes left by heavy bombs. Those reporters who dared to keep reporting without supervision by the military, like Anna Politkovskaya with *Novaya Gazeta* did, were either arrested or, worse, barely escaped being shot by the Russian military. Television networks, the only medium capable of reaching households across the vast country, have been prohibited from reporting anything other than the military's perspective.

Then the attacks on Sept. 11 put an end to international coverage of the situation in Chechnya. The devastated land locked within its own ruins was doomed to produce lunatics eager to get their message out to the Kremlin as well as to the outside world: "Stop the war! We cannot take it any more!" It was not a surprise that among those 40 or so terrorists who took over the Moscow theater building at least half were women. According to the press reports, those women in masks and camouflage, with explosives attached to their clothes, told their innocent hostages stories about their husbands, sons and loved ones killed back home in Chechnya.

This drama in Moscow should wake up my fellow citizens. Today, through brutal and inhuman means, they have been compelled to focus on Russia's policies in the Chechen war and their horrifying effects. The consequences played out on their TV sets. They are now forced to understand that the censorship that they allowed the Putin government to impose on the press cannot ensure security and stability. No Big Brother can provide the protection they desire.

So despite the fact that Moscow streets are now filled with policemen checking papers of those who look non-Slavic and therefore suspicious, despite the increased activity of the Russian secret services in exercising surveillance over politicians, despite all of the security precautions, several dozen heavily armed terrorists managed to stage their attack just a few miles from the Kremlin. Democracy cannot protect against all manifestations of terrorism, but an authoritarian regime clearly can do no better. Mr. Putin's Kremlin seeks to trade freedoms and liberties for the promise of security. He does so in violation of the Russian constitution. The tragic result is neither liberties, nor security.

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