

# **BESLAN SCHOOL TRAGEDY: THE RHETORIC OF THE RUSSIAN MEDIA**

*Olga Zaytseva*

*California State University, Stanislaus*

On September 1, 2004, a school in the southern Russian town, Beslan, became the subject of international news coverage. A group of Chechen separatists seized the school and kept its teachers and students hostage for three long days. More than one third of the hostages died. Survivors told the world horrifying stories of their ordeal, how, deprived of food and water and exhausted by heat, they watched terrorists torture and slaughter their friends.

For Russia, Beslan was not the first encounter with terrorism. In Moscow alone during the last five years, terrorists demolished two high-rise apartment buildings, took hostage the audience and troupe of a *Nord-Ost* performance, and set up a number of bombs in subway and train stations (Granina “Five Years”). Each case brought large numbers of deaths and injuries, and only days before the Beslan tragedy, terrorists destroyed two civilian planes. Nevertheless, Beslan was the first time children were intended targets rather than “collateral damage.” This intentional cruelty directed toward children dismayed and horrified people around the world and drew tremendous media attention to Beslan.

When a nation goes through a calamity, different responses ensue. The government takes steps to minimize the impact of the event and prevent a similar tragedy in the future, laypeople try to make sense of what happened by transforming their experiences into stories, and the media serves as a looking glass for all these processes. Therefore, analysis of Russian media coverage of the Beslan school tragedy provides a glimpse into the ideology dominant in the country and the methods by which this ideology is reinforced and reproduced.

During the Beslan coverage, Russian media directed moral outrage and personal anxiety created by the tragedy into two channels: the sense of unity of Russian citizenry and the will to resist Chechen separatists. Both routes were appealing because they reinforced subconscious assumptions held by Russians, such as collectivist values, national over individual interests, a longing for the return of powerful and mighty Russia, and the unfavorable image of Chechens.

In this essay, I identify various narratives employed by Russian journalists and trace how they interacted with each other to create an intricate pattern of argumentation that reinforced the dominant ideology. For this project, I examine the online edition of the leading Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, read by a wide audience. The newspaper is distributed nationwide, and the online versions are uniform throughout the country. I found and analyzed 119 articles related to the Beslan school tragedy. The average number of Beslan-related stories during the month of September 2004 was about five articles per day, with the highest number of 15 articles on September 6 (the first issue after September 4, which marked the climax of the tragedy, when the hostages were freed and President Putin addressed the nation). I am a native Russian speaker, and I translated the articles.

## **Rhetoric, Ideology, and Media**

Sonja Foss defines an ideology as “a pattern or set of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values, or interpretations of the world by which a culture or group operates,” and she claims that an ideology usually permeates all rhetorical artifacts produced in that culture (291). However, the concept of ideology is more complex because ideology is not a stable, self-perpetuating entity. Without constant reproduction, it will undergo significant changes and eventually be transformed into or replaced by another ideology (Althusser 1).

Moreover, at any given moment, several distinct interpretations of “reality” exist, and each of them is false or inaccurate from the perspective of another view’s proponents because “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 36). According to Michael C. McGee, “the falsity of ideology is specifically rhetorical, for the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion” (458). But Maurice Charland disagrees with McGee’s conclusion. To counterbalance it, he proposes the theory of constitutive rhetoric and argues that “attempts to elucidate ideological or identity-forming discourses as persuasive are trapped in a contradiction: persuasive discourse requires a subject-as-audience who is already constituted with an identity and with an ideology” (134), or, to borrow from Louis Althusser, audiences are “always already” subjects.

During my analysis, I became convinced that Althusser’s and Charland’s views are applicable to the Beslan coverage, wherein Russians were not passive objects of the media indoctrination. Instead, based on their knowledge and experience, individuals provided unstated assumptions, actively participating in self-persuasion and reinforcing cultural values and beliefs. But to understand this process, we need to take a short detour into the history of the Russian-Chechen relationship.

## **History of the Conflict**

Russian-Chechen conflict roots can be traced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Russian Empire started expanding south into the Caucasian region, and further developed during the Soviet era. In 1944, as punishment for their cooperation with the Nazis, Stalin exiled almost the entire Chechen population (along with several other nations) to Central Asia, where many died. While Khrushchev later allowed the Chechens to return to their homeland, they have always felt some resentment to the Federal government (Pipes, “Give the Chechens”).

After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, General Dzhokhar Dudaev and his Chechen forces ousted the Soviet leaders of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomic Republic and declared independence (Lieven). Instead of long-desired peace and stability, independence brought anarchy and the dominance of criminal groups and armed radicals. This became a reason Russia did not consider Chechnya an independent state and ultimately led to the First Chechen War in 1994. However, the war proved an ultimate disgrace for the Russian military, and it ended in 1996 with the agreement granting Chechnya quasi-independence. The agreement was disastrous, because “Chechnya became a base for kidnappers, who combined greed with hatred of Russia and the West,” and in 1998, Islamists and Chechen commanders attacked neighboring Dagestan, which is part of the Russian Federation, to create a single Islamic state (Lieven).

This Second Chechen War remains an ongoing conflict. During all these years of military con-

frontation, the Chechen economy has been completely destroyed; the population faces poverty, hunger, and cruelty from both sides. This prolonged ordeal creates further resentment of the Federal government, which is unable to resolve the problem. At the same time, the Kremlin is unwilling to let Chechnya go for fear of undermining Russia's territorial integrity and encouraging other national elites to follow suit.

### **Theme of Good versus Evil**

In the *Izvestia's* Beslan coverage, Russian people were presented as innocent victims, decent and courageous people who are willing to sacrifice their own lives to protect their loved ones. They symbolized ultimate good while Chechen separatists were the incarnation of evil (e.g., Granina, "In the Last"; Ratiani, "'Under"; Todorovski). Stories of Russian personal courage, kindness, and devotion were a common aspect of the Beslan coverage. For example, one article told the story of 74-year-old Physical Education teacher Yanis Kanidis: "The terrorists gave him permission to leave on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, but he refused, declaring that he wouldn't abandon the children. The teacher objected to every cruelty on the part of the terrorists. The PE teacher was shot by rebels when he tried to prevent them from setting off the bomb in the gym during the raid" (Andruhin).

One of the most prominent themes during the Beslan coverage was survivors' stories. Twenty-nine articles, representing 24.3% or almost one quarter of the 119 analyzed in the study, were entirely devoted to these stories. Virtually every Beslan-related article contained at least a short version of those narratives. For example, in Zaitcev's September 1 article, he writes:

Using machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, terrorists fired on the nearby police station. During the shooting, one of the sixth graders managed to escape. "When I saw them, I knew right away that I didn't like them: they all wore black masks. So I decided to get away fast," he relates bravely holding back tears. Terrorists opened fire on the desperate boy, but he managed to duck behind a brick wall just in time.

These stories confirmed what Russians had already been thinking: that the terrorists hiding their faces behind black masks belonged to the dark side, while the innocent children, their parents, and teachers represented good. Moreover, the idea of a bright and resourceful sixth-grader escaping from and outwitting heavily armed insurgents promoted a sense of hope and implied that fairytale-style happy endings are possible in real life.

In the Beslan coverage, the stories of personal ordeal and endurance served several important functions. They put a human face on a tragedy that was distant for many people. Everyone has a child, grandchild, sister, brother, niece, or nephew, so when reading narratives presented in children's voices, people subconsciously imagine their precious little ones going through this horrible ordeal, insisting on attending only a school with good security (Gritchin), or asking his/her mom whether all first graders are taken hostage like this (Timofeeva), which enhances the story's believability and credibility (Fisher). In addition, many survivors' stories were accompanied by account numbers for monetary donations (e.g., Timofeeva; Gritchin), encouraging people to get involved. The assumption behind this campaign—that people are benevolent and would give money—reinforces the narrative of Russian altruism and heroism.

Moreover, the vivid pictures depicting the pain and suffering of children added to public dismay and indignation for terrorist actions and strengthened the narrative of the inhumanity and immorality of terrorists. The unstated assumption behind this connection is that noble, moral people never hurt children; they take care of and protect them. Thus, anyone who intentionally harms a child is an evil person. This idea was repeatedly and explicitly mentioned during the Beslan coverage. For instance, the article of September 9 stated, “Beslan is a strike to the heart, to the conscience. Children, people running under fire, a bloody medley—this could only be done by monsters. How and from what did these people appear, where and from what mothers were these people born, from what fathers” (Todorovskii).

### **Ingroup-Outgroup Perceptions as Means of Russia's Unification**

The juxtaposition of Russians and Chechens as good and evil allowed *Izvestia* to present them as two separate and adversary groups, creating among readers a sense of belonging to one (ingroup) and opposing the other (outgroup). Two main strategies dealing with ingroup-outgroup perceptions were employed to bring the Russian people together. The first strategy presented Chechens as morally deprived individuals and outlaws who threatened the stability and very existence of the Russian Federation and was often joined with the theme of the Chechens' ungratefulness and betrayal. *Izvestia* provided no explanation or justification for this theme, relying on the effect of cultural recognition. Many Russians still consider Chechnya a part of their country. The largest republic in the Federation, Russia is assumed to have the rights and responsibilities of the eldest brother who takes care of and looks after the little ones. Like any affiliation, this asymmetrical relationship presumes certain responsibilities for both parties. Many Russians complain that they do their job, but Chechens neglect theirs. For instance, in the article of September 1, Arthur Sabanov, a legislator of the regional assembly, pointed out that, “almost all summer, Chechen children relaxed in our camps and resorts, leaving no room for our own children” (Zaitcev).

Views of Chechens as outlaws interested only in easy money have come from several different sources. First, for decades, some Chechens were involved in kidnapping people for ransom (Lieven; Chuikov). Second, since the existence of the Soviet Union, Russians have had a collective stereotype of inhabitants of the Northern Caucasus as criminals and speculators, reinforced by their selling fruits and flowers at outrageous prices at farmers markets in Russian cities. Here is how the article published in *Izvestia* only several months before the Beslan tragedy describes this phenomenon: “According to the traders themselves, the flower market in Russia was long ago divided and settled. ‘Individuals of Caucasian nationality’ and criminals, in essence, are given the tasks of re-selling flowers and delivering and selling the special flower of Women’s Day – mimosa. Profit from the flower is several times greater than 1000 percent” (Salmin).

The second ingroup-outgroup strategy employed to unify Russian citizenry dealt with the international response to the Beslan school tragedy. *Izvestia* competently used both the foreign countries' solidarity with Russian people (e.g., Bai; Il'in) and their support for Chechens (e.g., Shestakov; Popova, “BBC Prohibited”). The former was important to intensify the sense of the commonality of Russian problems, presenting Beslan not as an extension of the Chechen question but as part of the global war on terror. Focusing on the tactic of systematic coercive intimidation used by terrorists

against the civilian population and disregarding their political goals, Russian journalists drew on the similarities between the Beslan school tragedy, the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., and the Madrid bombing and presented the tragedy as something universal, not typical only for Russia. For instance, the article of September 27 read: “After the tragedy in Beslan, Americans are considering school safety” (Popova, “After”). This implies that if Americans admit a similar tragedy may happen in the U.S., it may happen anywhere. Therefore, there is no need to look for the cultural roots of the calamity.

Instances of international support for Chechens, however, allowed Russians to feel their uniqueness and separateness from the rest of the world which does not understand them. In turn, this feeling enhanced the unity and cohesion of the group. In most of the cases of international solidarity with Chechens mentioned in *Izvestia*, the foreign media “expressed malicious glee when reporting on the North Osetian events” (Shestakov), while their government and the people sympathized with Russians. *Izvestia* did not explicitly accuse foreign colleagues of losing objectivity and touch with reality, but instead the newspaper used renowned French novelist Maurice Druon as its mouthpiece: “In the French and the western press in general, there exists a sort of mental rheumatism wherever Russia is concerned. We have not destroyed the hidden fear that the Soviet Empire instilled. In this, we are, without our acknowledgement, kin to the Poles and other nations of Eastern Europe, which lived under its oppression.” This kind of explanation is very attractive to Russians because it implies that their country is powerful enough to be feared. As Richard Pipes points out,

When asked, without reference to other nations, how they feel about themselves and their country, Russians brim with pride. They mention their “dramatic history, rich culture, friendships, honesty, openness, emotions, calm.” . . . But the picture changes radically when they are asked to think of themselves in relation to other nations. According to Validata surveys, Russians suffer from an acute sense of inferiority: they have the lowest level of self-esteem of the five nations studied (the United States has the highest). (“Freedom” 13)

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russians have been suffering from a lost sense of national identity. A calamity like Beslan was unthinkable in the prime years of the USSR, when the country was unified and ruled by the Communist party. Many Russians feel that, at that time, their Motherland was feared and respected around the world, and they long to restore Russia’s lost grandeur.

### **Unity of Russian Citizenry as the Rhetorical Cure**

The newspaper repeatedly discussed the steps that should be taken to secure the triumph of good over evil. The steps included reforming homeland security, introducing tougher antiterrorist laws, creating a bipartisan committee for parliamentary investigation (e.g., Sokolov; Vinogradov; Ratiani, “Sergei Mironoff”). However, the condition essential for any successful reform—the unity of Russian citizenry and their trust in and willingness to support President Putin—was discussed rather vaguely and inconsistently.

*Izvestia* presented unity as something Russians already possessed, demonstrated by these headlines: “There Is Little That Threatens the Unity of the Country Right Now” (Editorial); “Trust in President Putin Is an Expression of Our Last Hope” (Bazaroff); “Antiterrorist Rally Will Not Become Antigovernment” (Ustyugov); “Duma Demands Tougher Homeland Security Laws” (Vinogradov). President Putin became the symbol of national unity, and the country rallied around him. Although the

voices of criticism and dissatisfaction were constantly present, the criticism was always directed at someone else (local officials, intelligence, Special Forces, the media), not at President Putin (e.g., Getmanski; Petrovskai; Sokolov). Even when journalists acknowledged the Beslan tragedy as the ultimate test of Putin's leadership, they also expressed confidence in the trust of Russian people in their president. For example, a September 6 editorial states, "Certainly, Putin's rating will fluctuate somewhat, but because society doesn't have another psychological defender and Putin doesn't have any serious political opponent, society will consolidate around the president. Although this consolidation will be pale, weak, it will take place because people don't see any other core around which they can converge."

At the same time, *Izvestia* described Russian unity and support for President Putin as a goal that should be achieved at any cost. In some instances, the journalists' arguments hardly followed any logical pattern and sounded like a magical incantation that was expected to bring positive results after numerous repetitions. For instance, Boris Ustyugov wrote in "Antiterrorist Rally Will Not Become Antigovernment" that "Organizers are certain that the social movement will be permeated by the spirit of patriotism and will not become an 'antigovernment' protest because 'questions should not be directed at the government, but at ourselves.'" In other cases, journalists appealed to people's common sense and tried to persuade Russians to unite around President Putin.

*Izvestia* presented the unity of Russian citizenry as the ultimate rhetorical cure for any terrorist action. When an insidious enemy threatens Russia's existence, the nation should put aside any inner contradictions and fight for its survival. In September 2002, national unity became especially important because of the treacherous nature of the enemy. During the Beslan coverage, Chechens were depicted as immoral individuals, as parasites that cannot be persuaded, only exterminated: "'Those aren't people; they will never live peacefully. They just don't get that in Moscow,' tearfully states a woman, who graduated from the school [in Beslan] herself" (Zaitcev). The implication of this claim is that if Russian officials do not understand the nature of Chechens, Russian people should unite and take care of the enemy themselves (the narrative of people taking justice into their own hands). For instance, "At least two terrorists could be in the hands of the investigation. However, when the Special Forces led one of the captured terrorists out of the school, Beslan residents attacked him, separating the prisoner from the soldiers, and killed the terrorist with their bare hands. The soldiers tried to save him, but could not stop the enraged crowd" (Demchenko).

Ironically, this notion of mob law and the idea of supporting President Putin and establishing tough new laws against terrorists seem to exist in two parallel universes, with Putin doing his job in one and the public doing its job in another. The articles describing these instances only report facts and do not pass moral judgment, as though assuming these actions are justified by the situation. The public seems to be united, but at what cost?

## Conclusion

*Izvestia* offered national unity as the rhetorical cure for the Beslan school tragedy. However, the unification of Russian citizenry does not overcome, and even aggravates, the conflict between Russians and Chechens. Kenneth Burke argues that concentration on connection and "identification" by itself does not prevent hostility and "division," asserting that, "in the end, men are brought to that

most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts, wherein millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act . . . that ultimate disease of cooperation: war” (22). The Russian-Chechen confrontation results from centuries of perverted communication between two nations. Reinforcing existing stereotypes is not going to solve this problem. The only possible solution is to reject old ways of thinking and open an honest dialogue. Is this possible after years of troubled coexistence and perpetual conflict? I can only hope the day of acceptance and understanding will come.

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