Review by Elayne Jude, writing as Paula Jaegar

Towards the end of "Beslan: The Tragedy of School No. 1", Timothy Phillips discusses the tricks played by trauma on the memory. "Though hard facts and downright lies could sometimes be distinguished", he notes, "more often than not I had to accept that no single, reliable account existed."

It is the closest he comes, in this most unsparing postmortem of the siege, to admitting defeat.

The State that began its strategy of dealing with Beslan by disseminating a wildly and provocatively inaccurate underestimate of the number of hostages held, and ended it by shelling the building it knew to be full of children, has yet to produce answers to a myriad of basic questions. In the absence of a proper investigation of the conduct of the siege, there is no antidote to the fervid rash of suspicion, paranoia and scapegoating. False memory mutates into folklore, rumour hardens into fact. New enemies are uncovered, and denunciation splits apart those survivors who might be one another's best support.

September 1st, 2004; in Beslan, a small, relatively prosperous town in the Russian republic of North Ossetia, School No. 1 was celebrating the Day of Knowledge, the first day of the new school year. It's an important rite of passage, more significant to Russians than is a graduation ceremony to a Brit. In an echo of New Year, the oldest pupil carries the youngest on his shoulders to perform the Ceremony of the First Bell. There was the usual big turnout; staff, mothers, grandmothers, siblings, neighbours, a few fathers. The pupils in their new uniforms, carrying balloons. The schoolyard clean, almost sterile.

By 10:16 that morning, Russian radio was carrying reports of the seizure of the school full of hostages, stating, wrongly, that negotiations are already underway. Until 5pm the number given by the authorities is 120. This was revised to 300-400, By the following day, a mysteriously specific and utterly fictitious number was established: 354. This survived till after the end of the siege and no-one has been able to explain it.

It mattered enormously. The townspeople, standing vigil outside the school for the duration, began almost immediately to make lists of those known or likely to be inside. The hostage who took the first note out stressed that there were over a thousand people inside. The school roll was available.

Most crucially, the school was surrounded by Russian and international news cameras. The hostage takers had access to television and radio. They were incensed by the official figure. A final figure has never been established, but there were probably 1200-1300 hostages. The hostage-takers felt that their "achievement" had been belittled; and this almost certainly increased their brutality towards the hostages.

It started immediately. The adult males were separated from the women, children and old people who have been corralled into the gym, and in an upstairs room most of them are blown apart by one of the two females detonating her bomb belt. Grown men blown up by a woman; a very calculated insult in any Caucasian culture. Another man, trying to calm the initial panic and mayhem in the gym, is shot through the head. The hostage takers booby-trap the building. Bombs are placed in basketball nets. Some of the containers are transparent, their innards visible; nails, glass, ballbearings.

There is very little food available, and then it's withdrawn. Drinking water is quickly forbidden. Access to toilets is sporadic, then cancelled altogether. The heat, the stench, the wailing of babies, the loud upset of bewildered children. The adolescent boys are too proud to piss in front of the women, their mothers, teachers. They hold it in for unbelievable stretches of time, despite the pain, and the relief from dehydration that drinking the urine would bring. It's a feat of endurance, and a statement of a very specific Caucasian masculinity, says the author; "It is in acts like these that the civilised, Western veneer - already cracked and scratched - seems to peel away entirely from Caucasian life to reveal identities very alien to which we are accustomed. Stubborn, clannish versions of gender identities may be moulded to fit modern life without yielding any of their irrational essence." At one point, the hostage-takers carried buckets past fully functioning taps so that their starving dehydrated hostages could relieve themselves and then drink their own urine.

Phillips has broken the narrative up with chapters on the history of the Caucasian nations, their religions, cultures, mythologies, vendettas, relations with Russia and with each other. It's useful and enlightening and does suspend the painful tension of the siege. But the more one reads, particularly of the twentieth century, with Ossetians, Chechens and Ingush variously in and out of favour with Moscow, the deportations, border disputes and deadly ethnic clashes, the more one understands the most basic and irrefutable cruelty of all; most of the hostages knew from the beginning that this could only end badly.

How many hostages were there, and who were they? How many hostage-takers were there, and who were they? No definitive figure has been reached for the first. The authorities have settled on a figure of 32 hostage-takers, based on the number of bodies recovered. It's very possible that some escaped in the chaotic battle. The sole survivor claims to have been coerced; many of them may have been refugees, many had records for crimes of violence. The majority seem to have been Ingush, not Chechen. Ingushetia and North Ossetia have a dispute over a piece of territory lying between them which has previously belonged to both. So instead of, or as well as, understanding the event as a Chechen retaliation against Russian citizens, it's also possible to see an Ingush vendetta against old rivals who are sporadically sponsored by the Russians.

How did they acquire their knowledge of the building's layout, and the last minute alteration to the timing of the Day of Knowledge ceremony? Hostages report Russian Special Forces exclaiming over the newness and quality of the hostage-takers' bullet-proof vests. Yet they were so disorganised that they left switched off for at least an hour the mobile phone via which negotiations were to take place. Hostages recall the looks of astonishment and terror that appeared on many of their faces (it soon grew too hot to wear masks) at their leader's ordered

violences; as though few of them were acquainted with the plan. Russian authorities have hinted at connections to international terrorist groups without producing any evidence.

What was the relationship, if any, of former Ingush President Ruslan Aushev to the group? He was the only person to enter and leave the school during the siege. On the second day he won the release of 29 people, breastfeeding mothers and their babies. He left the building carrying in his arms the baby of a woman who could not bring herself to leave behind her other, older children. They all died. Was Aushev simply, as we would like to believe, a hero, or is there any substance to accusations of collusion ?

Who actually had control of the operation? Why was the cordon repeatedly breached? The 58th Armoured Division was deployed around the school with tanks and RPGs. According to Ella Kesaeva, a hostage and member of the support group Voice of Beslan, this required the explicit order of the President, who is also the Commander in Chief. Ownership of the local crisis committee quickly passed from the President of North Ossetia to the region's head of the FSB. In many cases the committee was ignored or overridden. The local minister for education learned only after the event was over that she had been made a member of it.

Who gave the order to shell the school? Was there any attempt at discrimination between fleeing hostages and terrorists in the final gun-battle? Was there a benign plan behind blowing a hole in the side of the building to make an escape route, which triggered the explosives inside the building and brought down the roof of the gym, causing the majority of deaths? The authorities had been warned that the school was booby-trapped. Had it been it accepted that human collateral was a price the mighty State was always willing to pay?

Negotiations were a mess. There was one official trained negotiator, who called every half hour. The terrorists' phone number was also known and used by a number of others, who spoke to the hostage-takers independently of him, and of each other, and without each others' knowledge.

The likelihood of a non-violent outcome was always doubtful. The only demands made by the hostage-takers that we know of were that four men present themselves together inside the school: The President of North Ossetia, Dzasokhov; the President of Ingushetia, Zyazikov; the eminent paediatrician Roshal, who had assisted at the Moscow Theatre siege two years previously; and Aslakhanov, President Putin's special advisor on the south of Russia.

This never happened. It was probably always, to use a currently fashionable term (hoping to kill it off quickly through deliberate overuse), a zero-sum game. The siege was constructed, almost certainly by Shamil Basaev, as a killing-field, a message, an exercise in retribution and in purest terror.

All over the world we saw the raw footage of attrition, confusion, hostages gunned down by both sides as they fled. Children brought out dead, bleeding, unconscious, stripped to their underwear, to the townspeople who had stood vigil for three days, taken to hospital in the backs of the cars of their families and friends.

If the event happened again tomorrow, would it be any different?

Probably not, thinks Phillips. But we would see less of it. Since Beslan, there has been no live outside broadcast of any other domestic catastrophe from Russia.

The violence continues. In the last two months the vice mayor of Vladikavkaz, capital of North Ossetia, about twelve miles north of Beslan, has been shot at, and the Mayor shot and killed. A female suicide bomber blew up a minibus full of cinema-goers. Policemen have been shot and killed. A special report on Russia in The Economist (November 2008) claims the number of attacks on police by Islamist militants, both Chechen and Ingush, has almost doubled in Ingushetia.

Timothy Phillips' book is important; forensically exact, modest in tone, sensitive to the complexities of grief and guilt, their dark traps. It speaks of a long patient compassionate and fully lived immersion in his subject. Perhaps because of his own identity as a Northern Irishman, he refuses despair. In an intimate seminar at Pushkin House, London, in November 2008, he ended his talk on a determinedly optimistic note.

The orphaned people of Beslan have recently opened their homes to several hundred homeless children, refugees from the Russian-Georgian-South Ossetian war.

Footnote:

'Beslan: The Tragedy of School No. 1' (Published by Granta, May 2007)
Timothy Phillips worked as translator on BBC documentaries on Beslan.
He has travelled extensively in Russia and the Caucasus. In 2007 he gave the first Anna Politkovskaya Memorial Lecture. Politkovskaya, a journalist working for the radical paper Novaya Gazeta, wrote on the wars in Chechnya and Ingushetia, and the state of the Russian Army.