

## Life After Death

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**The number of dead at the Beslan school #1 has climbed over 300, and the number of missing is approaching the number of dead. More than a half of them are children. Never in the world history have so many hostages died. Andrei Kolesnikov is reporting from Beslan.**

### The Open House Day

On Friday, the fight at the school #1 continued till dark. The school was on fire, and firefighting proceeded along with the fight. The fire engines would drive into the schoolyard of the neighboring school #6, fill the water tanks, and drive back to the fire. There was a man standing near a fire engine, an Ossetian of about 30, in dirty and burnt clothes.

“Are you from there”, I asked.

- He nodded. “We came in with the Alpha<sup>1</sup> team.”

I wanted to ask if he is a firefighter, but he had anticipated my question:

- “Well, I am someone in between a firefighter and something else. Better not to ask. Go ahead, call me Anzor” – he offered. –“You would not understand about my job, and there could be trouble.”

During the summer, they had been doing remodeling in the school, and a hole in the gymnasium wall made to put in a water pipe had been left unfinished. Now, the hole became a large breach, and some firefighter armed with sledgehammers and crowbars were working to widen it still more.

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<sup>1</sup> Alpha Group – a special forces counter-terrorist unit.

- “Did it take long to make the breach?”
- “No, not long. Took longer to climb in. Turned out it was a kind of a commercial gym, I think, not the gymnasium where the children were. We got into the gymnasium already after the first explosion, and everything was on fire. We came in and there were mountains of bodies: men and women, and also children. Children were naked from the waste up. There was not a space to put a foot, but we had to move in. And we went. “

He confessed his own voice sounded strange to him.

- “Is it me talking?” he asked doubtfully.
- “Of course.”
- “I don’t understand. It seems the words are mine, and these all has happened to me, but I hear it said by somebody else, from afar. Could it be possible?”
- “Of course”, I comforted him.

This calmed him.

- “We’ve pulled some people out of the gymnasium. I brought out four. The Alpha men were pulling people out at the opposite side of the room. People were lying around as some kind of clots... Many have been pressed into the corners by the blast, or maybe they just rushed there. There were not many alive. But how we were to know who is alive and who is not? Twice I made a mistake. I pulled out a girl, and then there was the second explosion. Just before that I saw two girls in a window: they were shouting and waving a handkerchief. One about seven and an older one. There were gunmen sitting beneath them shooting at the Alpha team from underbarrel bloopers... I waved to the girls that I am coming to get them. They laughed happily. Then there was the explosion and I have not seen the girls since. I am going to search for them in the school, they should be still there.”

The fire brigade foreman was issuing orders:

- "All units. We top the tanks and back to the school! To extinguish the second floor! Everybody goes! The gunmen are killed! There is nobody there! What, somebody does not want to go? Does everybody go? What then we are waiting for?!"
- "There are still three of them sitting on the second floor", droned on Anzor, as if to himself. "They are still defending the second floor. There was this steel made machine gunner, he was a wonder. They tried to take him down by rocket grenades; you name it, they used on him, but he was still holding up. He sat between the second floor and the roof... what is it called...yea, the attic... I think it was him who took down these Alpha men. Happened to be some kind of a profi, fought back good. And from the neighboring house a gunmen with an automatic rifle would give no quarter. He caused huge problems. They are all lying downstairs now. I saw seven. There is a Negro, and an Arab lying..."

There were several huge explosions.

- "No kidding!", said Anzor in surprise, getting animated. "They are using tanks on them. Looks like there are serious problems. Meantime, the people have to do their job, to fight this fire."
- He continued, "The Negro was killed two days ago, when they were taking over the school. He has been just lying there and got eaten a bit by worms. And the Arab, they laid him on a door panel, put bandages on him, as is their custom, and put in the sun to dry. " "Wanted to mummify him, sons of bitches!", he added, suddenly getting angry. "One of them tried to get away, was pushing a child about twelve in front of himself, but his nerves gave way and he blew himself up."
- "And what about the child?"
  - "Well, the child too, of course, did not survive... Another gunman was pulled out half dead and people almost tore him to bits while he was being taken to the department, but somehow he was rescued and brought to the headquarters in one piece. I agree he should have been rescued: he, at least in some way, could be made useful to the society."
  - "Man your vehicles!", I heard the command.
  - "OK, I have to go", said Anzor. "Will take a look how the things are."

I went to the local cultural center where the journalists were stationed. It was 2.30 AM, and there was almost nobody left outside. A sleepy fellow in underwear shorts and a shirt with a press accreditation card dangling over it emerged from a tent erected on the grass and headed for the bushes. A technician from the Channel 1 was coiling his wires. There were no more

explosions. An hour later, the fire trucks started coming back. The firefighters said that there was nothing left of the gymnasium, but that they had no trouble extinguishing the second floor fire: there was really no more gunmen there.

I flagged down a car going my way, which was easy since these days the Beslan drivers were picking up every one who asked. We were leaving Beslan and already made the turn to Vladikavkaz , when we saw ahead a huge cortege silently coming our way, lights flashing and every headlight blazing. The cortege slowly swam by us. We counted at least a dozen cars. Who could it be at that time of night? We made a U-turn and placed ourselves at the cortege's tail. But they were no fools. A police car dropped behind the cortege and stopped in front of us. They stayed inside, and so did we. After a while the police car sped away. The cortege stopped about 200 meters from the operation headquarters. The area was immediately cordoned off and we could do nothing but leave. It turned out this was the President coming from the Beslan airport.

## Parents' Day

Early in the morning I watched the school being cordoned off by soldiers. The cordon perimeter went by the walls of the cultural center. It never extended so far from the school, not even in the first days of the hostage crisis. I circled the perimeter and found it well protected. The Ossetians did not understand what was happening. They wanted to get to the school, because their children were there. I think there was not a family in Beslan not affected by this calamity. They wanted to see their children, and I realized this is precisely why they were not let in.

- "Do you know what is happening there?" asked me a middle aged woman and motioned in the direction of the school. "The horror continues, or they would not put up the cordon."

She and her compound neighbors could not find their children: the six years old Madina Bukhaeva, the thirteen years old Soso Bigonashvili, and others, six all together.

- "We have been everywhere: the morgues, the hospitals, checked everything...", said the woman tiredly. "I was crying, a soldier from the cordon line came and asked me who of mine was dead and what was the name. I told him that maybe she was not dead, and he left."

- “Agunda is no more, Aza is no more...” mechanically counted the woman. “What have they done to us?”

At another place along the cordon line I was approached by another woman:

- “Do you know what is happening in the basement there? There again the gunmen are hiding with hostages”, she said quietly. “They are negotiating, but with no results so far. The gunmen don’t want to talk and don't make any demands. This is where our children are! We cannot find them because they are hidden in the basement! Oh, God, when will these all end?”

I tried to comfort her, told her that there are no more gunmen there, and therefore there could be no hostages, and that the school is cordoned off because of the mines. She listened eagerly. I caught myself believing her more than I believed my own words.

I had circled almost the entire perimeter. At one place, I came across some agitated men. Anzor Margiev was looking for his twelve years old niece, Elvira.

- “She and her mother were standing on the gymnasium floor when a ceiling block crushed down after the explosion.”, explained Anzor. “The mother remained on her feet, but the girl got pinned down and the mother could not pull her free. The ceiling was coming down, so she picked up a three years old boy and ran. He was not hers, but there the children were not “mine” and “theirs”, there were no “theirs”. You see there: this is Elvira's father sitting on the bench. He has not been talking to anybody for over a day, and looks much aged. And the girl is lying there. I know exactly the place where she is and I can find her, but they would not let us in there! “

- “How will you now be getting on with the Ingushes and Chechens?”, I asked.
- “Will see what needs to be done about the Ingushes”, responded an old Ossetian. “But we have to begin with our own. Who were the people who did renovations in the school? What kind of Ingushes they were? Why were they let to work there? The administration was proud of themselves for saving money, happy that the Ingushes did not ask much. But they had hidden their arsenals under the gymnasium floor. Everybody knows it. Maybe somebody had been paid off. We will learn everything. We have our ways.”

I stopped a boy and asked him how to get closer to the school. He showed me. It was not difficult: somebody's backyard, a fence, a footpath... The gate in the fence of the next yard opened on the central entrance of the school.

### Five Stretchers a Minute

I had a good view of what was happening in the schoolyard. The rescue workers were carrying out of the gymnasium black plastic bags and putting them on the asphalt pavement, the place where three days ago the first day of school opening ceremony was to commence. They were also carrying out debris, and for both they used the same kind of stretchers. The debris they were putting on the left, and the black bags on the right. The workers were many and they worked speedily. They were carrying out about five bodies a minute. They have been working already for more than an hour, though they would stop now and then for a smoke.

The entrance to the school was guarded by the Ossetian OMON<sup>2</sup>. They would not let in anybody but rescue workers and investigators of the prosecutor's office. The arriving police big shots barked at them trying to get through, but each time they would back up after a short conversation in Ossetian. Among themselves, the OMON men were speaking Russian.

According to the OMON, the first shots and explosions had, in fact, caught everybody by surprise. Allegedly, some gunmen hatched a plan: to lure the Ministry for Emergency Situations workers into the school under the pretext of removing dead bodies, and then to kill them, put on their uniforms, and to escape in their car. But then there was a quarrel between those who wanted to escape and those who wanted to stay and die for the cause, together with the hostages. The quarrel had led to a shoot out, and the home made bombs hanged around the gymnasium exploded hit by stray bullets. The hostages started to flee the building and the situation went out of control.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> OMON – the special purpose police force.

<sup>3</sup> As of now, two years later, there is still no detailed, coherent, or substantiated official account of the events. The Duma commission that has been investigating the tragedy continues postponing issue of its findings. According to

Meanwhile, they started admitting more people into the school. The first was Arsen Fadzaev, a Duma deputy, accompanied by numerous assistants, some of them self-appointed, I think. Then came Andrei Fursenko, the Minister of Education, in a red Mitsubishi Pajero. He came out a half an hour later with such a look on his face that I did not dare to approach him. I caught up with him in the evening. He spoke haphazardly:

“I have also been to the hospital, afterwards. There are wounded children there. Have you been there? We must do everything for them, at least something.... Do you know the old parable about the starfish? There was a storm and a lot of starfish had been beached. And an old man was walking around collecting them. They asked him why he is doing that, because there were thousands of starfish, and he said that at least something should be done at least for a single one... Perhaps it was not a good example. Anyhow, I want to explain that that we should try the best we can for them, for everybody. We have a rehabilitation center; we are becoming experts in this kind of things, unfortunately.”

The rescue worker continued carrying out bodies. They were dressed variously: some were in blue uniforms and white helmets, and wearing respirators, and other in T-shirts of various colors with their faces swathed in towels. The smell was reaching us too.

A flaxen haired OMON soldier emerged from the gymnasium and returned to his place in the cordon line, and addressed his comrades:

“See, guys, there is a sword lying there. I wonder what did they use it for? They just found an unexploded grenade. There are many of those.” He said there were places in the school where the rescue workers have not got to yet.

I asked him, “Do you know what the people outside the cordon line are saying? They think they are being not let in because there is still somebody in the basement.”

“No, for already an hour and a half there has been nobody left there. Everybody have been carried out and packed up.”

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an unofficial version, the events had been triggered by the federal troops firing one or more incendiary rocket propelled grenades into the roof of the gymnasium.

Two rescue workers came out of an ambulance. One has his hand bandaged, and another – his head. They went behind the cordon line, but in a few minutes came out running. They were chased by another rescue worker.

“I’ll put you to bed! Yesterday you were lying unconscious, and today you are back! Stop!”

But the injured have already disappeared into a neighboring garage. Then I saw Anzor Margiev, the uncle of the missing Elvira. He had come by the same shortcut I used earlier. He was 50 meters away from the gymnasium and he intended to make it there. I told him that it was probably too late: many had been already carried out and put into the refrigerator trucks. The first truck had already left and second was about to depart. He looked at the truck with anguish.

“How are we to find her now? Do you know where the truck is going?”, Anzor asked a soldier standing in the cordon line.

“To where it should go”, responded the soldier, looking as if he said more than he was allowed to say.

## The Prosecutor Disgraced

The square before the cultural center was filled with journalists and Beslan residents. The meeting with the powers-that-be was to begin a quarter of an hour ago.

“What is this? What did you come for? To take our pictures?” shouted the Ossetians, while the journalists frantically photographed them from above, from the steps of the cultural center.

“Take away your cameras, or we will smash them! This is because of you that the gunmen went crazy. Why have you said there were 354 people in the school, while there were more than a thousand? Because of you the gunmen told the hostages that if they say there are 354 people, so be it, and no more will be left alive. Get out of here!”

“Is nobody coming to meet with us?” asked quietly a young Ossetian woman. “Are they out of their minds?”



In her hands she held a school notebook with a large picture of her ten years old daughter inserted between the pages.

At that moment the crowd swung in the direction of the cordon line. A woman gave a heart-rending cry, then another one.

“Somebody there got crashed!” sorrowfully said a voice nearby.

The people moved right up to the cordon line and stopped there. There, on the ground, sat an old Ossetian woman, with her eyes closed, embracing her head with her hands. She moaned and swung from side to side. Her face was white and covered with large beads of sweat.

“Three of her grandchildren have perished in the school, and the fourth is missing”, people in the crowd were saying. “She has been waiting to hear where the missing one is. Looks like she has no strength left to wait. “

Another two women began crying loudly, and were carried out of the crowd and sat on wooden boxes. Still, no one of those for whom the crowd was waiting had appeared yet on the steps of the cultural center. But the people would not leave, as if they waited for a miracle. For the last three days they got accustomed to waiting for a miracle on this same spot. And the miracle did happen: in the afternoon there appeared the Prosecutor for the North Ossetia, Aleksander Bigulov.

“Presently, examination of the scene of the incident continues on the premises of the school”, he said standing on steps of the cultural center. “Measures of the field investigation character are being taken.”

“Fuck you!” came a shout from the crowd. “There are our children there!”

The prosecutor pretended he did not hear.

“Entering the school premises is prohibited. The list of dead and wounded is being verified. This is all I am competent to tell you”, said the prosecutor and began descending the steps.

“Scoundrel!” came shouts from the crowd below, but no one laid a hand on him while he was making his way through the crowd.

“My daughter is missing!” shouted a woman. “How I can find her? How can we all find them?”

“Come see me, we’ll talk”, responded the prosecutor over his shoulder.

“You have a phone number, you, bastard?” moaned the woman, but he did not turn.

The prosecutor came out of the crowd and said, with concern in his voice, addressing one of his assistants, “Do we have water? Cold water.”

“Not cold, I am afraid not”, responded the assistant sounding distressed.

“Too bad”, shook his head the prosecutor. “I’ve been standing over there like a fucking idiot.”

## Information for the Top

I used my proven shortcut to get back to the school. Already, there was heavy machinery working there. There were also more people in the schoolyard. Having noticed a group of people in civilian approaching the entrance, I joined them (they paid no attention to me) and got through the gate without any trouble.

An excavator was collecting the debris brought out of the gymnasium. The inside of the gymnasium looked more or less cleaned up. Charred floorboards under the feet. Gymnastic ladders hanging on the walls scarred by shell fragments. Burned basketball baskets and some survived basketballs. The gymnasium looked small, strikingly small. I couldn’t understand how more than a thousand people had survived three days in there.

The smell was unbearable. The rescue workers, as if not bothered by it, were steadily clearing the assembly hall and the school cafeteria. They thought there could be people there as well.

Another refrigerator truck came into the yard and they began loading it with the bodies that still remained lying on the asphalt pavement. Many of the black bags only looked large and the workers were lifting them effortlessly. Those were bodies of children.

About 50 meters away, behind a small attachment adjoining the school building, on the side facing the railway tracks, there lay on the asphalt pavement bodies of the gunmen. Most of them were bagged, but heads of two of the corpses had been left exposed. One had a 10 rubles note stuffed in his mouth. Another gunman had nowhere to stuff anything in: he had a half of his head missing. Rescue workers were passing the corpses with indifference, but the Ossetians: the prosecutor office staff and soldiers from the cordon line would spit on them. Yet some others would stay and look at the corpses long and hard, as if committing them to memory.

At some point, the prosecutor's staff brought to the corpses two men. One of them was slim and short, dressed in remarkably clean jeans and a T-shirt, and another was tall, in a dirty and tattered sport suit. They had T-shirts on their heads covering their faces with eyeholes cut in them. Policemen held them by the arms.

The prosecutor's staff began the identification procedure. Both men started whispering agitatedly into the investigators' ears, pointing to the corpses, as if they were afraid to be overheard.

Suddenly we heard a piercing scream, "Give them to us!", coming from the crowd standing on the railroad embankment, on the other side of the cordon line. The investigator looked at the prisoners and shook his head "no", with regret, as I thought.

"Give them to us!", came again he shout.

"I cannot!", shouted back the investigator.

The prisoners were taken away.

About 30 meters away from the entrance to the gymnasium there were piled on the ground belongings of the gunmen. A "Gazel" minibus with "Russia's Office of the Prosecutor" written on it stood by. An investigator fished from a large backpack a pair of snickers, then a fat little book.

“OK, put it down: a book with blue covers and with inscriptions in Arabic... And what are these balls?” The investigator took out a small pack of gold tinted balls. “ Some kind of Extasy? OK, we’ll find out. Well, they’ve got fucking stocked up.”

Another load of the gunmen’s belongings (how did they manage to sort them out so quickly?), a stretcher full of them, was brought and dumped near by. The investigator looked at the new pile with loathing.

A few of his colleagues were sitting on the grass, about 10 meters away. As I watched them, they were brought a couple of chairs.

“OK, let’s count”, said one of them. “We need to get information to the top. To the very top.”

“No problem. As of this moment, everything is clear. 224 plus those 18 who were thrown out of the window, and they have been laid separately, plus the yesterday’s 79. How many altogether? 328? And there are also four bags of body parts. “

“No, 321. But there are more bodies in the hospitals. Plus 28 of those scoundrels.”

“No, 26 scoundrels. And we don’t plus them. But there have been 18 of those thrown out, not 21, I think.”

“Urgently verify the number of the thrown out! 18? And did you count the gunmen together with their broads?”

“Together, of course.”

“OK, this is all for now. Call upstairs!”

“But we still don’t know how many are there in the hospital morgues.”

“It’s not of our business. Do it, call!”

At that moment a rescue worker approached them: “Another gunman has been found. Go, take him away.”

But the gunman was already being taken on a stretcher to join his comrades in arms and then dumped on the asphalt pavement besides them. A crowd of rescue workers and investigators immediately gathered around him. I thought of joining them, but then changed my mind: I was more interested in the conversation that the people on the grass were having.

“They say somebody got away?”, asked one of the investigators.

“That’s right”, answered another. “They were taking off their black overalls, and they had civilian clothes under it, and were getting away in them. But they could not get far... I hope. They don’t know the area. “

“They could have taken a taxi”, said another investigator.

“A taxi? Carrying weapons!?! Well, I suppose they could.”

“Does anybody know if they have had accomplices and where? The word is the cop whom they brought with them in the car was, in fact, in cahoots with them, was escorting them.”

At that point they finally noticed me and I had to leave.

## Emergency Helplessness

In the evening, on the wall of the cultural center there was posted finally the list of wounded. The people studied it intently, were rereading it many times over, and even when it became dark they continued peering into the list. Next to it they put in a chair a woman physician, just in case. It looked to me like the woman was in danger of going to sleep and slipping off the chair.

“Why, is there anything that can be done to help them now?”, I asked her.

“Well... at least they can be pumped full of drugs. This would help them for a while.”

“And then?”

“Then they will come to, eventually, anyway.” She closed her eyes.

“Listen”, I told her, “I think you also need help”.

“Yes”, she agreed tiredly. “And you don’t? Everybody does.”

## Death Water

Next day Beslan had the first funerals. In the morning I walked through the town as if I was walking through a cemetery: it seemed I heard weeping coming from every house on the street.

The school was very quiet. Since yesterday it has been opened to all. At the center of the gymnasium there were placed, on chairs, candles and opened two liters bottles of mineral water, five bottles altogether. There was also water in several disposable plastic cups. Next to them flowers were laid, and there also stood a children toy, a stuffed yellow elephant with raised trunk. Flowers everywhere: on window sills, in classrooms, in corridors. Also on window sills there were laying many women shoes and children sandals. There was dead silence. People were even afraid to shuffle their feet accidentally.

Two staircases at the opposite ends of the building led to the second floor. The school building was large. The classrooms were littered with notebooks, books, textbooks, smashed tape-recorders, and LP disks. A plaque hanging on the wall of the Russian Language and the Nature Studies room read: “Alarm Signal – 4 bells. Evacuate the room immediately, rooms 1,2,3,4”. On another wall there hanged a map, “Industrial Map of the USSR, 1928-1978”. On the window sill stood globes poked by bullets, and also flowers and children toys.

In another room I saw a “board of fame” featuring, under the title “Smart Boys and Smart Girls”, ten photographs of children, ages from 7 to about 14. Four photographs were missing, and flowers were heaped under the board. I realized that the missing photographs were of those who survived.

A rain started and then quickly turned into a downpour, and it came to me that the candles in the gymnasium would go off, because the gymnasium had now no roof. But it turned out that the people opened umbrellas and stood holding them above the candles.

The neighboring gym, the commercial one about which Anzor had told me, turned out to be very small. There were some weights and dumb-bells on the floor, and overturned training machines.

As Anzor had said, there was a breach in the wall, not a large one, but large enough to squeeze through. The wall was five bricks thick.

In the adjacent toilet the hand wash faucet was running and the floor was swimming with water. I could have closed the faucet, but I realized that anybody would have done it if they wanted to. But nobody did. The faucet had been left running for the same reason that the bottles with mineral water had been put on the chairs.

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