

Over a two-week period in September of 1999, several large apartment buildings in Russia suffered catastrophic explosions in the middle of the night. The seemingly random nature of the bombings caused panic, and the Russian government placed the blame on Muslim terrorists from Chechnya. Then, on the evening of September 22, an unexploded bomb was found in the basement of an apartment building in Ryazan, a city to the southeast of Moscow. Not only was this bomb safely defused, but the perpetrators were soon caught. The country, however, was in for an incredible shock: The would-be bombers turned out to be members of the FSB, the Federal Security Service, the principal security agency in Russia (also the main successor to the KGB).

Pavel Voloshin, a thirty-year-old journalist for the newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, went to Ryazan—along with many other journalists—to investigate what had happened. The government had come out with its own official version of the incident, which was that Russia FSB (as opposed to a regional office of the FSB) had been putting on a training exercise. Voloshin, however, was troubled by the facts that were already known and also by how the government was denying access to further information. In the article below, Voloshin raises very serious questions about the Russian government's role in the "training exercise" in Ryazan as well as in the bombings that had actually occurred.

Pavel Voloshin on Ryazan

("What was in Ryazan: Sugar or Hexogen?" by Pavel Voloshin, *Novaya Gazeta*, No. 6, February 14, 2000; original in Russian.)

...That evening, September 22, Aleksey Kartofelnikov, one of the tenants of the building on Novoselov Street, noticed a suspicious Zhiguli [compact sedan] with numbers sealed with paper near his entrance. Several men were unloading some bags from the car and taking them into the building's basement. The police squad called by Kartofelnikov found bags in the basement and a clock mechanism attached to them.

The residents were evacuated, and the explosive device was defused by sappers of the engineering and technical department of the Ryazan public security police. An express analysis carried out with the help of a gas analyzer by explosives specialists from the Ryazan Department of Internal Affairs showed the presence of hexogen vapor in the detected substance [hexogen is a white solid used as a military explosive]. The found explosives were immediately sent to Moscow, and the local leadership of the FSB reported on the successful prevention of a tragedy.

The joy of the Ryazan FSB officers over the victory over terrorism did not last long. Two days later, the leadership of the FSB of Russia stated that, in fact, exercises organized by this special service [Russia FSB] were being held in Ryazan to test the combat readiness of local power structures and the vigilance of citizens. The sacks found in the building on Novoselov Street turned out to contain ordinary refined sugar, and the readings of the instruments that recorded hexogen vapors were nothing more than an error of experts. In some comments, the leadership of the [Russia] FSB mentioned the insufficient qualifications of Ryazan sappers and improper care of the instruments.

According to the results of the exercises, the training of the Ryazan special services to prevent terrorist attacks was assessed at eighty percent, and the most distinguished participants were awarded cash prizes and valuable gifts...

An order to be silent?

Today, provincial Ryazan will soon catch up with Moscow in terms of the number of foreign journalists per capita. The suites of local hotels are occupied by correspondents from the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Los Angeles Times*, while reporters from the *Independent* and *Figaro*, in company with a CBS film crew, besiege the local police and the FSB.

The special services of Ryazan are on the defensive. FSB officers shudder at the word "interview." By order from Moscow, all contacts with the press are prohibited. The press service of the FSB of the Ryazan region was instructed not to comment on the events of last autumn. Moreover, Ryazan police officers and employees of the Ministry of Emergency Situations received a similar order. The order is being carried out—to all journalistic inquiries, the head of the press service of the FSB of Ryazan, Yuri Bludov, replies categorically: "No comments."

Then we will take the trouble to comment. Because somehow the available facts do not add up too much to an optimistic official picture.

Training?

So. On the evening of September 22, exercises were held in Ryazan. Then why was the central leadership of the FSB so confused? Recall that only two days later the official version was made.

Further. Not a single exercise in our country (except perhaps the first nuclear tests) has ever been surrounded by such a veil of secrecy. Nevertheless, all information on the exercises being held is closed, even that which is meaningless to close.

For example, the materials of a criminal case initiated by local security officers on the fact of the discovery of explosives.

The investigator of the Ryazan FSB could not open the case just like that. This requires good reasons—for instance, the results of an examination. You also need a good reason to close a case. The Moscow leadership of the FSB stated that the case was closed, representatives of the Ryazan FSB refused to confirm this.

But the main question, it seems, is hidden not in legal subtleties but in the data of the examination: sugar or hexogen?...

What was in the bags?

As you know, during their discovery, the gas analyzer of explosives specialists from the Ryazan Department of Internal Affairs showed the presence of hexogen vapor. The head of the engineering and technical division of the public security police department [head of the local bomb squad], Yuri Tkachenko, who personally carried out the neutralization, is completely sure that the device was working. And evidence that the bags contained sugar has not been published.

Could an error have occurred? Yes. In several cases. Outdated technology and methodology. But the Department of Explosives Specialists is a unique unit not only for Ryazan but also for all nearby regions. There is no such thing either in the FSB or in the Ministry of Emergency Situations. Not only that, only sappers-professionals (thirteen people) who have accumulated vast experience work here. All of them more than once took advanced training courses at the Scientific and Technical Center in Moscow, and passed exams every two years.

About technology. Equipment in Ryazan, oddly enough, is world-class. A single gas analyzer for detecting vapors of explosives (the same one) costs about 20 thousand dollars. The head of the engineering and technical department of the Ryazan public security police, Yuri Tkachenko, is confident in his people. He is also confident in the technology. It simply cannot be otherwise—their life depends on the serviceability of the instruments.

An error could occur if the equipment was not properly maintained and the gas analyzer retained traces of a previous specimen.

But Yu Tkachenko claims: “Maintenance of a gas analyzer is carried out only by a narrow specialist and strictly according to the schedule; there is scheduled maintenance, there are preventive checks, since there is a source of constant radiation in the device.”

A gas analyzer is not an enema, it is not washed, but for prevention, a set of planned measures is carried out. Therefore, “traces” could not possibly remain. They could not also because none of the local specialists even remembers the last time (except September 22) they examined hexogen vapor. This is a rare case in the practice of any laboratory.

Further. Why were the exercises never completed? Why were Ryazan specialists not given the opportunity to conduct a full examination of the contents of the bags, and the cargo was urgently sent to Moscow by employees of the central office of the FSB? Sent, surprisingly, to the Forensic Expert Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Why, if it was already clear that sugar deposits had been found in Ryazan? Tried to make it in time for morning tea? Or were you still unsure?

Examination of explosives is a complex matter. To write a comprehensive report, you need to conduct at least five tests, and this takes time. But even before the end of the study, the leadership of the FSB announced that the substance found was harmless sugar with the addition of “hexogen” for smell. It is impossible to verify the results of the examination—

the work of Moscow forensic specialists is classified. Our conclusion: the Ryazans were not mistaken. Technique and people worked professionally. There was hexogen in the “training” bags.

Why a combat fuse?

The second “material evidence” is a fuse. According to the experts who neutralized the found charge, the detonator attached to the bags was not a dummy and was made at a quite professional level.

It is not clear then: why equip a dummy explosive device with a live fuse?

More. If real explosives were used in the exercise, how safe was it for the residents of the building? For transportation along the highways, streets in an ordinary Zhiguli?

Many questions are raised by the choice of a place for the exercises, and the manner in which they were conducted. Andrey Chernyshev, the ensign of the police, who was the first to enter the mined basement, testifies:

About ten, a message was received by the duty officer: in the building at Novoselov Street, 14/16, they saw suspicious people coming out of the basement. Near the building we were met by a girl who told us about the man who came out of the basement and drove away in a car with the license plates taped over.

I left one policeman at the entrance, and with the other I went down to the basement. The basement in this building is deep and completely flooded with water. The only dry place is a small nook, like a stone closet. We shone a flashlight, and there were several sacks of sugar, stacked in a pile. The top bag is notched, and you can see some kind of electronic device: wires wrapped with electrical tape, a clock... Of course, with us there was a slight shock right away. We ran out of the basement, I stayed to guard the entrance, and the guys went to evacuate the residents.

Fifteen minutes later, reinforcements arrived, the authorities from the Internal Affairs Directorate arrived. Bags with explosives were taken out by employees of the Ministry of Emergency Situations in the presence of representatives of the FSB—of course, after our explosives specialists had neutralized them.

No one doubted that the situation was tense. I still have confidence that these were not exercises. And the choice of a building for a terrorist attack is typical: it is in plain sight and a crowded place.

Why building 14/16?

A 24-hour grocery store has been added to the ground floor of the building 14/16 on Novoselov Street. At the very least, it is strange that residents suspected people of terrorism who were unloading bags of sugar near the hatch of a warehouse of a round-the-

clock grocery store. In addition, there are several residential buildings nearby, which, in all respects, are more suitable for conducting exercises. And the outskirts are not the center of the city.

But for a terrorist attack, the building on Novoselov Street is the best fit. Especially if the purpose of the explosion is the maximum number of victims.

The square is on the outskirts of Ryazan, popularly nicknamed the Old Circle. Novoselov Street. On a small hill there is a single-entrance yellow tower, a twelve-story building made of silicate brick, similar in design to the previously destroyed building on Kashirskoye [Highway]. In the event of an explosion, the residents had no chance of survival. Visitors to the store located on the ground floor would also suffer. According to one of the residents of the building, a builder by profession, the neighboring building would not have survived the explosion either. It would just slide down the slope, as if on an ice slide. The soil in this place is weak, sandy.

The choice of a building prepared for an explosion is the same as in the capital: a low-prestige outskirts, a typical building inhabited by ordinary people—idle factory workers and penniless engineers. (By the way, it would seem that it is more profitable for terrorists to intimidate the Russian elite. But no. Prestigious buildings are not blown up for some reason—the public outcry will not be the same. The people will not be afraid.) The scale of the explosion prepared in Ryazan is similar: the farther from the center of Moscow, the more destruction. Manege [Square], the minimum number [August 31, in the heart of Moscow, 1 killed, 30-40 injured]; Guryanova [Street], half of the building [September 9, an apartment building about 10 miles from central Moscow, 100 killed, 690 injured]; Kashirskoye [Highway], the whole building [September 13, an apartment building about 25 miles from central Moscow, 124 killed, 7 injured]; in Volgodonsk an entire micro-district suffered [September 16, a truck bomb exploded in front of an apartment building in a city about 700 miles from Moscow, 18 dead, 89 hospitalized, left a crater about 12 feet deep and 40-50 feet wide]. The tragedy in Ryazan could overshadow everything that had happened before [would have occurred in the early hours of September 23 in an apartment building about 125 miles from Moscow].

If something is blown up – a terrorist attack. Demined – exercises.

And the last. The behavior of high officials of the FSB seems very strange. Such a synod did not go to Volgodonsk; in Moscow, high-ranking officials did not talk to the residents.

Marina Vitalievna Severina, a resident of the ill-fated [Ryazan] building, testifies: “Several people from the FSB came to us, led by a colonel. They apologized. They said they didn’t know anything.”

In addition to an apology, officials from the FSB asked for one more thing: they persuaded the victims of the games of the special services not to sue.

And Aleksey Kartofelnikov, the most vigilant resident of the building on Novoselov Street, to whom, perhaps, the neighbors owe their lives, now knows: "If something is blown up, it means a terrorist attack. If the mines have been cleared, exercises..."

All the questions of the residents of Ryazan and journalists the leadership of the FSB and the country are simply obliged to answer. At least in order to dispel doubts. First of all, the special services of the state themselves should be interested in this.

Only its authors can protect the official version. This is not difficult—it is enough to publish, for example, an order to conduct exercises in Ryazan and clearly explain: whose idea, under whose leadership the operation was carried out, and according to what scenario. Name the perpetrators—those very mysterious terrorists who unloaded bags from a "Zhiguli" with sealed numbers. To give them the opportunity to talk about their "daring feat," even if with their backs to the TV camera. Publicize the order to end the exercises and their results. To allow journalists to see experts in Moscow and Ryazan, remove the secrecy stamp, which will allow interviews with direct participants in the events.

And then they might be believed.

In the meantime, we, adhering to the official version, ask the Prosecutor General's Office to explain: how legal are such exercises? Especially if it turns out that the explosives used to test the vigilance of the Ryazan residents were real...

PS – Comment by a Specialist

In order to somehow dispel the fog around the "Ryazan exercises," we turned to an army specialist with the rank of colonel with a request to comment on the situation. Are exercises conducted with the use of real explosives? Are there instructions and regulations that control such activity?

Powerful explosive devices are not used even in live-fire exercises... If you need to check the ability to find and neutralize an explosive device—for example, a mine—they use models that do not contain either a fuse or TNT.

Demolition classes, of course, include the actual detonation of sufficiently strong explosive devices (specialists must be able to destroy them). But no more than two or three for a training group of 20-30 people. They have a clear idea of what they are blowing up. And, of course, such exercises are held at a restricted location, without outsiders. Only trained people are present. The involvement of the civilian population is out of the question.

All this is strictly regulated. There are manuals on engineering support, manuals on demining, relevant instructions and orders. Of course, for the army and special services they are similar...