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By the Numbers: Russia's Terrorists Increasingly Target Transportation

*by Brian Michael Jenkins and Bruce R. Butterworth
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January 7, 2014 - As reported worldwide, terrorists detonated two bombs in the Russian city of Volgograd last month. Is this part of an emerging pattern in Russia and elsewhere? Does it indicate that the upcoming Olympic Games are increasingly vulnerable?

Volgograd's rail station is hit

The first device exploded on December 29 in Volgograd's rail station, killing 18 and, as initially reported, injuring 45 persons. The second device blew up on a city trolley bus the following day, killing 16 and again, as initially reported, injuring 30 persons.

Note that conflicting reports about the number of casualties often persist long after such events. Injuries from both attacks are likely to be just under 100. However, some sources are reporting 104 persons injured. Both were suicide attacks, and they followed a previous suicide attack in Volgograd against a bus last October that killed seven and injured 40.

The bomb at the railroad station went off just in front of the security checkpoint. More people might have been killed, but security equipment at the checkpoint deflected the blast. Security measures are also in place to protect bus passengers, but reportedly these are easier to avoid.

Both bombings were blamed on Islamist extremists, specifically a shadowy network of Islamist extremists called the Islamic Caucasus Emirate or Caucasus Caliphate led by Doku Umarov. Umarov and his followers are the latest, and more Islamist, successors to the Chechen rebels, who have fought two wars for independence since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russian authorities brutally suppressed the insurgency, but terrorist campaigns continue.

Umarov's vow to disrupt the Olympics in Sochi, 400 miles from Volgograd, make him a prime suspect, but he is not the only one with scores to settle in Russia's ethnically complex and always turbulent Caucasus. To achieve his goal, Umarov is said to have lifted a self-imposed ban on civilian casualties.

Transportation is an attractive target

If body count is the terrorists' goal, then surface transportation provides an attractive target—crowds of strangers in confined environments. While Umarov's Chechen predecessors carried out spectacular hostage seizures at hospitals, a primary school, and even at a theater in the heart of Moscow, trains, subways, and buses have featured heavily among their targets.

Russia is indeed one of the current main killing fields in terrorist attacks directed against public surface transportation. Of all attacks in the world, 5.1 percent occur in Russia, which is just behind Israel with 5.3 percent. Only India, Pakistan and Columbia have more.

The restive North Caucasus area generates most of the bloodshed in Russia. According to the Mineta Transportation Institute's database of attacks on public surface transportation, 157 attacks occurred since 2000, killing 348 persons and injuring nearly 1,200. Of these attacks, 42 (27 percent) were specifically attributed to Chechen or other separatist Islamic terrorist groups from the North Caucasus area, although many of the perpetrators not identified in other attacks are probably connected with the conflicts in that area. Yet these same 42 attacks disproportionately generated 287 (82 percent) of all fatalities and 1,000 (83 percent) of all injuries.

One reason for this lethality is the use of suicide tactics. Only 13 (8 percent) of the 157 attacks were suicides using bombs or grenades. All but one of them stem from conflicts in the North Caucasus. Yet they accounted for 58 percent of all fatalities and 52 percent of all injuries. This toll becomes even more striking when we remove the 15 derailments (which did not involve suicides) of passenger trains, which generated a total of 34 fatalities and 306 injuries. The percentage of the total fatalities and injuries then jumps to 65 percent and 70 percent, respectively.

Train tracks were the terrorists' most frequent target, with passenger and subway trains just behind them, figuring in 21 percent and 20 percent of their attacks. Derailments, as we have suggested earlier, also can be lethal. In 2009, terrorists detonated a bomb under Russia's high-speed train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, killing 27 and injuring 95.

Moscow Metro attack was especially deadly

Passenger train and subway stations figured in about 10 percent of the attacks. Some of the deadliest terrorist attacks occurred on Moscow's Metro. Bombings on subways and in enclosed subway stations proved to be the terrorists' most lethal means of attack. In February 2004, a suicide bomber killed 41 people and injured 120 others in the Moscow Metro. A second suicide bomber in August 2004 killed 10 and wounded 50 people. In 2010, two nearly simultaneous suicide bombings in the Metro killed a total of 40 and injured 100 persons.

Buses like the one in Volgograd last month accounted for about 17 percent of the targets; bus stations and bus stops accounted for another 10 percent. Bombs were employed in almost all of these 43 attacks.

Looking at the ten most lethal combinations of bombs, targets, and how the bombs were delivered to those targets in attacks in Russia, seven (including the most lethal) involved suicides. Of these same ten attacks, the December 29 Volgograd station attack was the third most lethal combination, and the December 30 bus trolley attack the fifth most lethal. In fact, the Volgograd station attack is the ninth most lethal combination of all attacks in the world.

Russia's terrorists have also attacked air travelers. In 2004, female suicide bombers brought down two Russian airliners on domestic flights, killing a total of 89 victims. In 2010, terrorists bombed Moscow's Domodedovo Airport, killing 37. That attack was also blamed on Umarov's group.

Russia likely to increase its already-high security

In response to this continuing threat, Russia has increased security at transportation targets and is likely to increase it further in response to the latest attacks in Volgograd, especially as we approach the Sochi Olympics.

However, there are limits to what can be done. Security at train stations can create lines of people waiting to go through security checkpoints, offering terrorists lucrative targets. And while buses can be protected, as the Israelis learned during the terrorist offensive of the Second Intifada, it is done only through a comprehensive and expensive program of intelligence, roving and permanent trained guards, awareness training for employees, and very strong citizen support and involvement.

While circumstances in Russia are unique, the Volgograd bombings conform to some long-term worldwide trends. Terrorist attacks on surface transportation targets are increasing and are increasingly lethal, with the biggest threat posed by multiple bomb attacks or campaigns targeting crowded train stations, commuter trains, subways and buses.

Each tragedy enables us to learn more and underscores the importance of doing so. Passenger screening can keep bombs off trains, but passengers waiting to go through security checkpoints remain vulnerable to attack. This will renew the debate about whether new security perimeters should be established at the entrances to train stations and airport terminals. The Volgograd attack also underscores the importance of intelligence, which failed in Volgograd, but it reportedly prevented other terrorist attacks in Russia.

For further reading: See the authors' 2012 report on bus bombings during the Second Intifada ([Security Awareness for Public Bus Transportation: Case Studies of Attacks Against the Israeli Public Bus System](#)), their 2010 report on high-speed train derailments ([The 1995 Attempted Derailing of the French TGV \(High-Speed Train\) and a Quantitative Analysis of 181 Rail Sabotage Attempts](#)), and their 2013 report on high-speed rail security ([Formulating a Strategy for Securing High-Speed Rail in the United States](#)). These and other reports can be accessed free of charge and without registration at MTI's website at <http://transweb.sjsu.edu>. Go to "Research" and "Publications."

About the authors: Brian Michael Jenkins is an international authority on terrorism and sophisticated crime. He directs MTI's National Transportation Safety and Security Center, which focuses on research into protecting surface transportation against terrorist attacks. Bruce R. Butterworth has had a distinguished government career, working at congressional, senior policy, and operational levels. He had a leading role in creating MTI's unique database of attacks on public surface transportation.