

## Our Man in Moscow

Blair's friendly relationship with Vladimir Putin since his election has elicited 'British complicity in some of the worst horrors of our time', write Mark Curtis – namely, Russian state terrorism in Chechnya, dating back to Moscow's repression of Chechen demands for independence in 1994. The Major government strongly supported Russia in its first invasion of Chechnya in 1994, which claimed between 60,000 and 100,000 lives. Blair's support for the second invasion of Chechnya in 1999 was part of 'The beginnings of a strategic relationship with Russia (although many dimension of this have yet to develop) [sic]', in the words of the dystopic 2003 Defence White Paper. An advisor to former president Yeltsin, Emil Pain, stated that 'the main goal of the Russian army is not a struggle with terrorism but a desire to keep Chechnya within the [Russian] Federation ... For a struggle with terrorists a completely different tactic is needed: the concentration of the efforts of small mobile groups of Special Forces and of a small network of agents.'

In February 2000, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook visited the Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov, saying that he 'understood' Russia's approach to Chechnya, confessing it was 'important that we retain a relationship with Russia that enables us to work together constructively.' For Cook, Putin's 'style' was 'refreshing and open and his priorities are ones that we share.' On the same day as Cook's candour Human Rights Watch reported 'that at least sixty-two people had been had been killed earlier in the month in one of the worst massacres. Survivors described how around one hundred Russian soldiers systematically robbed and shot civilians on the southern outskirts of Grozny in a two-day rampage in which troops raped civilians, threw grenades into basements where people were hiding and executed anyone who tried to resist looting.'

In response to 'the single worst massacre of civilians' that Human Rights Watch 'have documented so far', Blair went to the opera with Putin on March 11th 2000, whilst Cherie visited the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg with Mrs Putin. A week before Blair's bonding with the Russian gangster, the *Observer* reported the murder of 363 people in the Chechen village of Katyr Yurt. A doctor, reports Mark Curtis, who had 'operated on hundreds of patients without anaesthetics, medicines or electricity during the bombardment' afterwards said: 'First they hit the village, then gave the civilians a corridor and they were shot. They didn't bring the dead to us, only those in agony. They brought ten bodies, to check if they were alive or not: one baby among them, grown ups, teenagers, some without both legs, burnt with traumas to the head, stomach.' Blair also 'agreed to despatch a team headed by David Miliband, the head of the Downing Street policy unit, to advise Putin's new government on how it could [quoting *The Times*] 'best handle a well-established bureaucracy and civil service to push through its wishes'' for Chechnya.

Blair continued his apologia for Russia's actions, declaring in an interview in October 2002 that 'I have always taken the view that it is important that we understand the Russian perspective on this. ... I have always been more understanding of the Russian position, perhaps, than many others.' No eyelids batted in Whitehall after, in the same year, one press report 'outlined the continuing grisly details of atrocities in Chechnya over recent months: a massacre of twenty-one men, women and children – bound together and then blown up – in July; the bodies of six men found in September, naked with plastic bags over their heads; discoveries of numerous other mass graves; townspeople being forced to watch women being raped by soldiers, and sixty-eight men who protested being subsequently handcuffed to an armoured truck and raped too.'

In a joint press conference a year later Blair confessed: 'I think the leadership of President Putin offers not just tremendous hope for Russia, but also for the wider world. I would pay tribute to him as a partner and as a friend.' The primary British and Western aim

‘has been the economic re-colonisation of Russia in the post-Soviet era, shaping the Russian economy to benefit Western business interests.’ If our heroic leaders, striking gallant poses, have to tolerate open genocide to achieve this, then so be it. The subsequently huge private profits for arms corporations are conveniently saddled by public subsidy, with the public paying the costs and taking the risks – a long-standing principle of economics in the West.