

Putin's Electoral Show Trial

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With bitter fighting still raging through the Chechen mountains, Russia's victory fanfares are starting to ring hollow.

With the presidential elections just days away, the Kremlin is resorting to cheap publicity stunts.

Like Caesar parading the defeated Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix through the streets of Rome, presidential candidate Vladimir Putin wasted no time in flashing pictures of humbled Chechen warlord Salman Raduev across the nation's TV screens. Nothing appeals to the popular imagination more than the hangdog face of defeat.

But the comparison hardly bears close inspection. The rebellious Gaul surrendered to the Roman legions after stubbornly defending the fortress of Alesia for more than a year. Raduev was reportedly betrayed by his own bodyguards whilst negotiating a cash deal with Russian secret agents. Vercingetorix remains a national hero to this day. "Bloody Salman" was a national embarrassment.

Now Russian TV audiences can look forward to a noisy show trial - stage-managed to satisfy a growing lust for vengeance. Raduev, 32, stands accused of murder, hostage-taking and terrorism. He faces up to 50 years in jail.

But the TV viewers are likely to be disappointed. Raduev is a cowed, pathetic figure - a pale shadow of the blustering rebel general who took 3,000 hostages in Kizlyar, then fought his way out of Pervomaiskoe, in January 1996.

His trademark dark glasses and Fidel Castro beard have been removed to reveal the scars of five assassination attempts. Raduev has one glass eye, partial sight in the other, a plastic nose and a titanium plate in his skull (hence his nickname "Titanic"). Even Moscow's attorney general, Vladimir Ustinov, was forced to admit, "After all the wounds he's suffered, Raduev appears to have bats in his belfry."

But whatever Raduev's mental state, Russian prosecutors will be eager to implicate him in the September 1999 apartment bombings which claimed 300 lives in Moscow and Volgograd. Investigators with the FSB, Russia's security service, have reported that a search of Raduev's Kavkaz sabotage centre, near Urus-Martan, unearthed similar explosives to those used in the terrorist attacks.

And they may well get their confession. One source said that Raduev was "admitting to any crime that comes into his head, including an assassination attempt on Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze."

Last week, a government psychiatrist visited the Chechen warlord in his Lefortovo cell and declared him fit for trial. The captured general was promptly assigned a defence lawyer, the elderly Pavel Nechiporenko - but, if recent TV appearances are anything to go by, Nechiporenko's undoubted qualities do not include a gift for rhetoric.

"I feel sure that I can save him from the death penalty," the lawyer muttered at a recent press conference. He failed to mention that Russia has put a moratorium on capital punishment, following its acceptance into the Council of Europe.

The circumstances of Raduev's capture also undermine any claims that the rebel general is a credible military prize. He was seized in a bloodless "special operation" staged by the FSB near Novogroznensky, on the border with Dagestan. The warlord had previously offered to hand over top field commander Shamil Basaev in exchange for \$1 million. It is thought he was lured to Novogroznensky with promises of a cash payout, then was promptly betrayed by his squad of 100 bodyguards, known as the Wolves.

Certainly, Raduev had no shortage of enemies. Many Chechens see him as a maverick nationalist who soured relations with neighbouring Dagestan after his 1996 hostage raids, then appropriated vast sums of government money in order to buy weapons.

He became a vociferous opponent of the Maskhadov regime, which he considered too conciliatory and, in 1997 and 1998, made two attacks on Grozny's television centre - crimes for which he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment by an Islamic shariat court. He has almost certainly taken no active part in the second Chechen conflict - despite holding a number of riotous press conferences during which he declared a nuclear holy war on Russia.

Meanwhile, separatist leaders have been quick to deflate Moscow's triumph, claiming that the man in Russian captivity is not Raduev and, in any case, extensive plastic surgery makes a positive identification impossible.

But the publicity stunt, however empty, has served to deflect public attention away from two military disasters in Chechnya itself. On March 2, up to 30 interior ministry policemen were killed during a surprise attack in Grozny. Days later, a company of the 104th Pskov Airborne Brigade was almost totally annihilated near the mountain village of Ulus-Kert.

Here too, the Kremlin spin-doctors rose to the challenge and the subsequent media treatment of the Ulus-Kert massacre was masterful. While Putin himself attended a memorial service for the 89 dead paratroopers in the Pokrov cathedral of Moscow's Novo-Spassky monastery, the "Six That Got Away" were being interviewed on national TV.

The battle-shocked soldiers recounted their heroic last stand in the Chechen mountain mists after being surrounded by a vastly superior rebel force. They described the ultimate moment of self-sacrifice as Colonel Mark Yevtukhin, both legs blown off by a mine, called down artillery fire on his own positions. Then they added, without any obvious prompting, that they were eager to return to Chechnya and avenge their fallen comrades.

Meanwhile, the Russian press dwelt on the gory details - the dozens of dead paratroopers who could not be identified because the Chechens had cut off their heads or mutilated their faces. Soon, the ever impressionable TV audiences were baying for blood.

Once again, the rabble-rousing eulogies diverted attention from the bloody fighting around Komsomolskoye, which by then had reached a humiliating impasse.

Federal aircraft and artillery pummelled the settlement for the best part of two weeks in a bid to flush out rebel forces under Ruslan Gelaev. By March 14, the Russian generals were admitting that, several days earlier, the feared field commander had escaped their "impenetrable ring" with most of his entourage. The village that the Russians eventually occupied was an empty shell.

Gelaev, of course, would have made a real Vercingetorix. The second most senior Chechen commander after Basaev, he continues to enjoy the unquestioning respect of the rebel rank and file. But Gelaev still has two eyes, two arms and two legs. Moscow prefers to hound the cripples.

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