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Society Wrong to Blame Itself in School Shooting

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In April 1689, the 24-gun French ship Serpent was attacked by the Dutch off the coast of France. A battle ensued, one that was all the more dangerous because the Serpent was loaded with barrels of gunpowder and could have been blown sky high at any moment. The captain caught sight of a 12-year-old cabin boy who had hidden behind the mast in fear and ordered him brought out and tied to the mast, telling him, "He who cannot look death in the eyes does not deserve to live." The captain was Jean Bart, the famous French privateer. The cabin boy — his son Francois-Cornil.

Why do I mention this?

Sergei Gordeyev, a 10th grader at School No. 263 in Moscow came to class with a rifle and shot and killed geography teacher Andrei Kirillov. Later, when law enforcement officers arrived, he shot and killed policeman Sergei Bushuyev. Gordeyev comes from a family of high-ranking Federal Security Service employees. He is an unsociable, withdrawn straight-A student.

He is also apparently a fanatical Christian whose parents forced him to memorize religious

books. He spoke constantly about the Russian Orthodox Church and laughed at other religions, wrote stories about people who have superpowers and on the eve of the shooting sent a quote from Hans Christian Andersen to a friend that read: "A thoughtful atheist, living in good conscience, himself does not understand how close he is to God. This is because he performs good deeds with no thought of reward, in contrast to religious hypocrites." His friend did not continue the conversation on that topic, but simply asked what homework was due in chemistry class.

This shooting sparked an unprecedented amount of commentary. President Vladimir Putin announced said that it would be "necessary to educate a new generation with good artistic taste" to prevent such things from happening in the future. Mayor Sergei Sobyanin promised to review security in the schools and retest school psychologists. Members of the public also chimed in. "Just like jumping from a roof, those gunshots were the cries of a child desperate to be heard," said psychologist Yulia Gippenreiter during an interview on Dozhd television.

Excuse me, but what are you all talking about? There are no grounds for political or sociological commentary here. This is a strictly criminal act, of the same type that fills U.S. television or that appeared in 19th century Russian newspapers. Such crimes can happen anywhere, from Arkansas to China, and there are no "conclusions" to draw or "lessons" to be learned from it.

Amazingly, the authorities call for "ensuring" this and "checking" that. They, and those who hold that the boy was the victim of an oppressive education by his parents and that the gunshot was a "cry of desperation," both subscribe to one terrible idea — that personal responsibility does not exist.

If a young person kills his teacher, people are ready to blame anyone but the boy himself, and that denial of individual responsibility is one of the most frightening aspects of modern society. Every time somebody wages another pogrom or commits a terrorist attack or heinous crime, people always start asking either, "What else can we improve to remove this problem?" or else, "How else can we help these poor people?"

And don't tell me about the "unbearable burden of responsibility" on the shoulders of this well-to-do 10th-grader in Moscow. There was a reason I started this column with the story of a father who ordered his 12-year-old boy tied to the mast. I suspect that Jean Bart was even more demanding of his son than the Moscow FSB man was of his, and yet Francois-Camille become vice admiral of the French fleet.

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