



SILENCED VOICES: ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

by Siobhan Dowd

I have merely reported what I have witnessed, no more than that. I have written and, less frequently, I have spoken. I am even reluctant to comment, because it reminds me too much of the imposed opinions of my Soviet childhood and youth. It seems to me our readers are capable of interpreting what they read for themselves.

These are the modest words of Anna Politkovskaya, a woman often dubbed “Russia’s lost moral conscience,” and previously featured in this column in 2002. Politkovskaya’s writing was far more stylish than she herself gave it credit for: precise and fine, her prose was of a high literary quality and her material adroitly observed and interpreted. Indeed, her stature as a pioneering journalist of the new Russia brought her international awards and renown. Accordingly, the news of her brutal assassination on October 7, 2006 sent shock waves across literary communities around the world. She is the thirteenth journalist to have been killed during the presidency of Vladimir Putin.

While the latter's response to her murder has been muted, former president Mikhail Gorbachev's was uncompromising: he called it "savage" and "a blow to the entire democratic, independent press."

Politkovskaya was born in 1958 in New York. She came from a diplomatic family; her parents originated from the Ukraine and her father rose through the ranks to a coveted United Nations appointment. Educated back in Russia, however, she had access to the broadest of literature, including books then



Anna Politkovskaya

banned in the Soviet Union. Perhaps this was why, even before glasnost took hold, she was drawn to the heroism of dissent. As a student, she wrote a dissertation on the great but tragic poet Marina Tsvetayeva, a persona non grata under Stalin who also met a violent end. Tsvetayeva is said to have committed suicide by hanging in 1941, although rumors persist that her hanging was staged by the secret police.

Politkovskaya graduated in journalism from the Moscow State University in 1980. She first joined the large-circulation, official daily *Izvestia*, but later moved to the smaller, independent press, first to *Obshchaya Gazeta*, then to the bi-weekly *Novaya Gazeta*, where she worked for the rest of her life, becoming a special correspondent. She wrote stories about pressing social issues and soon won a name for herself for her strident articles on such subjects as the poor conditions in state orphanages or the plight of Russia's elderly.

When fighting in the Caucasus erupted, she became concerned about the situation of refugees, and it was this concern that first brought her to Chechnya. Chechnya, a corner in the northern Caucasus, first became mired in conflict in 1994 and has enjoyed scant calm since. An ethnic and religious mix (Russian/Chechnyan and Christian/Muslim), Chechens' calls for autonomy led to all-out war with the Russian State. However, the Russian army withdrew in 1998, after suffering heavy casualties and being sharply criticized by the Russian independent media for the heavy-handed bombardment of the area. Unfortunately, in the vacuum

of power that was then created, local warlords took control, and the region devolved into a bandit-style state, which threatened the stability of neighboring territories. One faction conducted a series of Moscow apartment bombings, in which some two hundred people died. These factors led to Putin's government declaring war again in 1999, this time with greater vehemence than before.

During this second engagement, there was far tighter control on the press in the region. Politkovskaya, who undertook several hazardous trips to the troubled enclave, became almost a lone voice reporting the devastation on the ground. Grozny, the main city, was, Politkovskaya wrote, "a living hell . . . another world, some dreadful Hades you reach through the Looking Glass" with "no signs of civilization among the ruins—apart from the people themselves." Her articles reported on the grave abuses carried out by the military on innocent civilians: for instance, she described how a whole village was "ethnically cleansed" over the course of one bloody week and how six civilians were arbitrarily killed on a bus by the military. (She claimed that the guilty soldiers then burned the bus to the ground, in order to make it seem that the vehicle had fallen victim to a rebel rocket attack.)

These courageous dispatches won her the 2000 Golden Pen Award from the Russian Union of Journalists and also formed the basis of her first book, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, published in English by Harvill Press. However, they also provoked a series of death threats, which by 2001 had become so severe that she was forced to flee Russia for Vienna, leaving behind her two teenage children. After living abroad for several months, she returned home to continuing threats. In 2002 she acted as a negotiator in the Dubrovka theater siege in Moscow, where 129 people died after the special services released gas into the building. Her 2004 book *Putin's Russia* was an unflattering portrait of the country's new moneyed classes. By then, her lifestyle had taken a heavy domestic toll: her husband had left her and her son had begged her to stop her dangerous work, and neighbors, alarmed by the police presence in and around her residence, ignored her. "I am a pariah," she concluded. "You don't get used to this, but you learn to live with it."

At the time of her death she had told the independent Radio Svoboda that she was on the point of publishing the results of her research into allegations of torture in Chechnya. She had refused recent invitations to leave Russia, saying, “The main thing is to get on with my job, to describe the life I see, to receive visitors every day in our editorial office who have nowhere else to bring their troubles, because the Kremlin finds their stories off-message, so that the only place they can be aired is in our newspaper.”

At about 4:30 p.m. local time on October 7, just as she was bringing shopping in from her car into her apartment building, Politkovskaya was approached by a gunman. She was shot four times, twice in the heart, once in the shoulder, and once in the head, and was found dead soon afterward, with the gun that had killed her discarded nearby. Police say they are seeking a man with a baseball cap seen in the vicinity at the time of her shooting.

Within hours, crowds with candles and wreaths gathered around the cordoned-off area. Around the globe, candlelit vigils were held in her memory. As Mikhail Gorbachev put it, the shooting of this steely-eyed, gritty woman was “a grave crime against the country, against all of us.” She is mourned by her son Ilya and daughter Vera.

Please write polite letters asking for a thorough investigation into Anna Politkovskaya’s murder to:

His Excellency Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin
President
The Federation of Russia
The Kremlin
Moscow, Russia

Please note that Elif Shafack, featured in the last issue of Glimmer Train, was acquitted. Many thanks to all readers who wrote letters on her behalf.

Siobhan Dowd, who’s written this column for us for years, is now devoting her time to her fiction writing. (See www.siobhandown.co.uk.) We thank her warmly for her contributions to Glimmer Train, and for now passing the baton to Sara Whyatt.