

Anna Politkovskaya

The award-winning Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya was murdered on 7 October 2006 and it is widely believed that her death is linked to her fearless reporting, particularly on the Chechen wars. She was a special correspondent for *Novaya gazeta*, Moscow, and her writing about Chechnya include the books *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya* (2001) and *Putin's Russia* (2004). *A Russian Diary*, the book Anna was working on at the time of her untimely death, is due to be published by Harvill Secker in 2007. Politkovskaya acted as a mediator in the Nord-Ost theatre siege in Moscow in 2002. Two years later she fell seriously ill as she attempted to fly to Beslan to cover the hostage crisis there, leading to speculation that she had been deliberately poisoned to stop her from reporting on the crisis. Politkovskaya was recognized worldwide for her championing of human rights.

The following essay was written just weeks before her tragic death.

I am a pariah. That is the main result of my journalism throughout the years of the Second Chechen War, and of publishing abroad a number of books about life in Russia and the Chechen War. In Moscow I am not invited to press conferences or gatherings which officials of the Kremlin Administration might attend, in case the organizers are suspected of harbouring sympathies towards me. Despite this, all the top officials talk to me, at my request, when I am writing articles or conducting investigations – but only in secret, where they can't be observed, in the open air, in squares, in secret houses which we approach by different routes, like spies. The officials like talking to me. They are happy to give me information. They consult me and tell me what is going on at the top. But only in secret. You don't get used to this, but you learn to live with it. It is exactly the way I have had to work throughout the Second War in Chechnya. First I was hiding from the Russian federal troops, but was always able to make contact clandestinely with individuals through trusted intermediaries, so that my informants would not be denounced to the top generals. When Putin's plan of Chechenization succeeded (setting 'good' Chechens loyal to the Kremlin to killing 'bad' Chechens who opposed it), the same subterfuge extended to talking to 'good' Chechen officials, whom of course I had known for a long time, and many of whom, before they were 'good' officials, had sheltered me in their homes in the most trying months of the war. Now we can meet only in secret because I am a pariah, an enemy. Indeed, an incorrigible enemy not amenable to re-education. I'm not joking. Some time ago Vladislav Surkov, Deputy-Head of the Presidential Administration, explained that there were people who were enemies but whom you could talk sense into, and there were incorrigible enemies into whom you couldn't.

A few days ago, on 5 August 2006, I was standing in the middle of a crowd of women in the little central square of Kurchaloy, a dusty village in Chechnya. I was wearing a headscarf folded and tied in the manner favoured by many women of my age in Chechnya, not covering the head completely, but not leaving it uncovered either. This was essential if I was not to be identified, in which case nobody could say what might happen. To one side of the crowd a man's tracksuit trousers were draped over the gas pipeline which runs the length of Kurchaloy. They were caked with blood. His severed head had been taken away by then and I didn't see it. During the night of 27-8 July two Chechen fighters had been ambushed on the outskirts of Kurchaloy by units of the pro-Kremlin Ramzan Kadyrov. One, Adam Badaev, was captured and the other, Hoj-Ahmed Dushaev, a native of Kurchaloy, was killed. Towards dawn not far short of twenty Zhiguli cars, full of armed people, drove into the centre of the village and up to the district police station. They had Dushaev's head with them. Two of the men suspended it in the centre of the village from the pipeline, and beneath it they hung the bloodstained trousers I was now seeing. The armed men spent the next two hours photographing the head with their mobile phones. The head was left there for twenty-four hours, after which militiamen removed it but left the trousers where they were. Agents of the Procurator-General's Office began investigating the scene of the fighting, and local people heard one of the officers ask a subordinate, 'Have they finished sewing the head back on yet?'

The body of Dushaev, with its head now sewn back in place, was brought to the scene of the ambush and the Procurator-General's Office began examining the scene of the incident in accordance with normal investigative procedures. I wrote about this in my newspaper, refraining from comment beyond dotting a few i's in respect of what had happened. I reached Chechnya at exactly the same time as the issue of our newspaper with the article. The women in the crowd tried to conceal me because they were sure the Kadyrov people would shoot me on the spot if they knew I was there. That reminded me that Kadyrov's government has publicly vowed to murder me. It was actually said at a meeting that his government had had enough, and I was a condemned woman. I was told about it by members of the government.

What for? For not writing the way Kadyrov wanted? 'Anybody who is not one of us is an enemy.' Surkov said so, and Surkov is Ramzan Kadyrov's main supporter in Putin's entourage. 'Ramzan told me, "She is so stupid she doesn't know the value of money. I offered her money but she didn't take it,"' an old acquaintance, a senior officer in militia special forces, told me that same day. I met him secretly. He is 'one of us', unlike me, and would face difficulties if we were caught conferring. When it was time for me to leave it was already evening, and he urged me to stay in this secure location. He was afraid I would be killed. 'You mustn't go out,' he told me. I decided to leave nevertheless. Someone else

was waiting for me in Grozny and we needed to talk through the night, also in secret. My acquaintance offered to have me taken there in an OMON car, but that struck me as even more risky. I would be a target for the fighters. 'Do they at least have guns in the house you are going to?' he continued anxiously. The whole war I have been caught in the middle. When some are threatening to kill you, you are protected by their enemies, but tomorrow the threat will come from somebody else.

Why am I going on at such length about this conversation? Only in order to explain that people in Chechnya are afraid for me, and I find that very touching. They fear for me more than I fear for myself, and that is how I survive.

Why has Kadyrov's government vowed to kill me? I once interviewed him, and printed the interview just as he gave it, complete with the moronic stupidity and ignorance that are characteristic of him. Ramzan was sure I would completely rewrite the interview, and present him as intelligent and honourable. That is, after all, how the majority of journalists behave now, those who are 'on our side'.

'Why have you got such a bee in your bonnet about this severed head?' Vasili Panchenkov asks me back in Moscow. He is the Director of the Press Office of the troops of the Ministry of the Interior, but a decent man. 'Have you nothing better to worry about?' I am asking him to comment on the events in Kurchaloy for our newspaper. 'Just forget it. Pretend it never happened. I'm asking you for your own good!' But how can I forget it, when it did happen? I loathe the Kremlin's line, elaborated by Surkov, dividing people into those who are 'on our side', 'not on our side', or even 'on the other side'. If a journalist is 'on our side' he or she will get awards, respect, perhaps be invited to become a deputy in the Duma. If a journalist is 'not on our side', however, he or she will be deemed a supporter of the European democracies, of European values, and automatically become a pariah. That is the fate of all who oppose our 'sovereign democracy', our 'traditional Russian democracy'. (What on earth that is supposed to be, nobody knows; but they swear allegiance to it nevertheless: 'We are for sovereign democracy!')

I am not really a political animal. I have never joined any party and would consider it a mistake for a journalist, in Russia at least, to do so. I have never felt the urge to stand for the Duma, although there were years when I was invited to. So what is the crime that has earned me this label of not being 'one of us'? 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. That is why my principal genre is reportage, sometimes, admittedly,

with my own interjections. I am not an investigating magistrate but somebody who describes the life around us for those who cannot see it for themselves, because what is shown on television and written about in the overwhelming majority of newspapers is emasculated and doused with ideology. People know very little about life in other parts of their own country, and sometimes even in their own region.

The Kremlin responds by trying to block my access to information, its ideologists supposing that this is the best way to make my writing ineffectual. It is impossible, however, to stop someone fanatically dedicated to this profession of reporting the world around us. My life can be difficult, more often, humiliating. I am not, after all, that young at forty-seven to keep encountering rejection and having my own pariah status rubbed in my face, but I can live with it. I will not go into the other joys of the path I have chosen, the poisoning, the arrests, the threats in letters and over the internet, the telephoned death threats, the weekly summonses to the Procurator-General's Office to sign statements about practically every article I write (the first question being 'How and where did you obtain this information?'). Of course I don't like the derisive articles about me which constantly appear in other newspapers and on internet sites which have long presented me as the madwoman of Moscow. I find it disgusting to live this way, I would like a bit more understanding. The main thing, however, is to get on with my job, to describe the life I see, to receive every day, in our editorial office, visitors 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, *Novaya gazeta*.

Translated by Arch Tait

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