

- **See No Evil: An Interview with Anna Politkovskaya**
- Emma Gray, Europe Program Consultant, CPJ
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The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) today released an exclusive interview with exiled Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a correspondent [until October 2001] with the Moscow-based newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, who is known for her investigative reports on human rights abuses committed by the Russian military in Chechnya.

Politkovskaya fled Russia to Vienna in early October after she received death threats related to her reporting in Chechnya. "What torments me more than anything," Politkovskaya says in the interview, "is the thought that those people who wanted me to stop my work have succeeded."

Europe program consultant Emma Gray met with Politkovskaya in Vienna on October 26 [2001], to discuss the recent threats she has faced, her coverage of the conflict in Chechnya, and the current state of journalism in Russia.

Committee to Protect Journalists: Describe the events that led you to flee Moscow.

Anna Politkovskaya: The first unpleasant signals came from a colleague at the newspaper, a former army man with good military sources. "You'll be killed if you go back to Chechnya," he told me in September, just before my most recent trip to Chechnya.

But I felt obligated to the people in Chechnya. A boy who had suffered very serious burns was waiting for me to deliver money for an operation. I had also promised to write an article about the fact that there has been no electricity in [the Chechen capital] Grozny for two years.

CPJ: In spite of these threats, you did return to Grozny.

AP: When I arrived in Grozny, there was a very tough blockade. No one could move; you had to stay home all day. I sensed something must be something going on. By chance, I was introduced to the head of a commission that had been created to investigate the Russian military in Chechnya. I was astonished and glad that someone had been given such a task.

The head of the commission said he was returning to Moscow to present his findings to [Russian president Vladimir] Putin. An hour after we spoke, the whole commission was killed when its helicopter exploded. The official version was that a Chechen fighter shot it down with a Stinger missile. I knew there was simply no way a Chechen fighter could be out on the streets—nothing could have moved that day without being spotted. Naturally, I wrote an article saying that it was impossible for anyone to fire a missile without the express permission of the Russian military itself. Then I had to get out of Grozny, and I flew to Moscow.

CPJ: What happened when you returned to Moscow?

AP: [My paper's editor-in-chief, Dmitry] Muratov told me to stay home and came over to see me. He had been summoned to the Ministry of Defense, which knew all about the contents of my article even before it came out. The next day, Muratov came back and told me that he had been summoned again to the ministry. They told him that my conclusions were correct, but that the ministry simply could not let this information get out. Muratov told me there had been more threats

against me, this time from a person in the military whose crimes I had written about. "A man called Lapin, with the nickname 'Kadet' has sworn to get rid of you," he said. We talked about it and concluded that Lapin could not be acting by himself. So I stayed at home one day, two days, 10 days. The Ministry of Interior did nothing to find Lapin.

Eventually, my editor said that I must return to work. I left home twice with a guard from the newspaper to give two television interviews. One of the broadcasts showed that I had a guard. After that, the next series of threats began, telling me that the guard wouldn't save me. My editor said I should leave the country, and he told me to choose a destination.

My choice was Vienna because nearly a year ago I had applied for and received a grant from the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences, which gives fellowships to journalists who want to write books.

CPJ: Are you able to work here?

AP: For the first week I couldn't write anything. I sat woodenly in front of the computer. But I gradually calmed down and started to write each day and to work. The book is about the changes in Russian society as a result of Putin's war. My position is that the war has wrought colossal changes in our country. It has made our country worse in a moral sense. The economy is torn as well, but what interests me is the moral context; things like the brutalizing of young Russians who have to serve in Chechnya and return to Russia violent or psychologically disturbed, the capitulation of the mass media, or the increasing intolerance of ethnic minorities living in Russia.

CPJ: What is your opinion of the way the Russian press is covering the war?

AP: Most of the mass media chose to cover this war without leaving Moscow. If they did go to Chechnya it would be only to travel to the Russian military base. All visits to Chechnya were controlled by the military, and no one could step out of line. Many of my colleagues accepted this situation straight away, and most of them thought that it was right, that this was patriotic journalism. When the war started, many of my close journalist friends said they could not write about this war in the same way they had about the first one [the 1994-96 conflict]. After the explosions [300 people were killed in attacks on apartment blocks in Moscow in August 1999, acts that the Russian government blamed on Chechen terrorists and that sparked the second conflict], they said they did not want to understand the [Chechens' separatist claims] and agreed they should be "flushed down the toilet" [as Putin has said].

There was strong propaganda, especially on the TV, saying the Chechens were guilty, even though there was no evidence at all. The idea began to spread throughout the mass media that an entire people must accept collective responsibility for the actions of one person or one group. That is an idea that I simply cannot accept.

CPJ: Why do you think so many of your colleagues took the government line?

AP: Most Russian journalists who are working today were educated and started to work during the Soviet era—a time when journalists were propagandists. Propaganda was the basis of journalism, and everyone knew how the system worked. So the years of free journalism were very hard for many. When the opportunity came to return to propaganda, some people were more than happy to do so. It's far less work. You just sit in Moscow, don't go out looking for information. You just write about how evil the Chechens are without moving from your seat. You live the sweet Moscow life and even get thanks for it—awards from President Putin for fine coverage of the war.

CPJ: You've spoken about your desire to return to Moscow. Do you feel it's safe to return?

<http://www.cpj.org/news/2001/Russia13nov01na.html> to our block of apartments; someone like me—the same age and height, and gray-haired. I told them, "These things happen in our city." They said, "No, it was meant to be you." There are

constant phone calls to my home from anonymous callers. They call my daughter's cell phone as well asking, "Where is your mother?" My children are terrorized.

CPJ: Why do you carry on?

AP: I am exhausted by my monthly trips to Chechnya. It is a very hard life. If I knew that others were going there, I would be able to relax. But they are not going, so I feel it is my duty to continue to visit Chechnya. Things will be worse for everyone if there is a lack of information. I see myself as a conduit of information from one place to another, a means of showing Russians what is really happening in Chechnya so they do not mistakenly believe that the military action is creating order.

The military is doing nothing of the kind, and if they continue to use such methods, they will create more warriors—which will be more dangerous for all of us. It is this ideology that I want to combat. What torments me more than anything is the thought that those people who wanted me to stop my work have succeeded. I worked so hard to shine a light on the events in this war, and now they have stopped me.

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