

Silenced Voice: Anna Politkovskaya

by Siobhan Dowd, with the cooperation of the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN, London

(December 3, 2001) *The Daily Telegraph* reports that "she looks more like a spinster aunt than a hardened war correspondent" and *The Guardian* suggests she is Russia's "lost moral conscience." To human rights professionals she is a heroine in her time; and to her teenage children, her recent exile renders her an all-too-absent mother. But all agree that Anna Politkovskaya is a devastatingly honest journalist, with the highest principles of fairness. She sees many sides of a problem, but never flinches from reporting what she witnesses.

But she is also a virtual lone voice crying in the wilderness. While the world reels from World Trade Bombers and the "war against terrorism" in Afghanistan, the goings-on in the small enclave of Chechnya are on the global back-burner. Russian President Vladimir Putin has visited U.S. President George W. Bush's ranch in Texas and has had tea with the queen, but no world leader has yet dared to suggest that his military's treatment of Chechen civilians smacks of a Milosovic-style ethnic cleansing. A spate of bombings in Moscow by Chechen separatists has on the contrary given him carte blanche to deal with his local "terrorist threat" in whatever style he chooses. Anna Politkovskaya is one of the few Muscovite intellectuals to raise a protest.

A special correspondent for the respected bi-weekly *Novaya Gazeta*, Politkovskaya received the 2000 Golden Pen Award from the Russian Union of Journalists. Grey-haired, be-spectacled, and robust, she led a busy life as mother and war reporter, at the pinnacle of her career, until last October, when a series of sinister death threats caused her to flee to Vienna. The threats arose in response to her series of startling and deeply troubling stories about Chechnya, which she has frequently visited. A compilation of these dispatches — dating from 1999 and 2000 — has appeared in English under the title *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, published by Harvill Press. Although it has won wide acclaim, she nevertheless reports feeling horribly silenced. As she put it in a recent interview, "what torments me more than anything is the thought that those people who wanted to stop my work have succeeded."



Anna Politkovskaya fled Russia after receiving death threats from the Russian military for her book, *A Dirty War*. Photo courtesy [St. Petersburg Times](#).

Chechnya, a corner in the northern Caucasus, has been conflict-mired since 1994. An ethnic and religious mix (Russian/Chechen and Christian/Muslim) its calls for autonomy led to a preliminary war in the mid-1990s, from which the Russians withdrew after suffering heavy casualties. However, warlords took over and the region devolved into a bandit-style state. One of the parties conducted a series of Moscow apartment bombings, in which some 200 died. This led to Putin's government declaring war again, this time with greater vehemence. The military has now been fighting for over two years.

Grozny, the main city, is, Politkovskaya writes "a living hell. It is another world, some dreadful Hades you reach through the Looking Glass. There are no signs of civilization among the ruins — apart from the people themselves." Amidst the exploding shells and gunfire, she reports, children live as if unconcerned. Mass graves have been unearthed. Russian soldiers shoot innocent civilians for no



[Silenced Voices](#), a monthly column about imprisoned authors, is written by Siobhan Dowd of the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN. This column originally appeared in the *Literary Review* (London).

discernible reason. If you don't give soldiers at the military checkpoints a "Form 10" (a code for a ten-rouble bribe) you risk a bullet in the back. "Any discussion of human rights is silly," says Politkovskaya. "Such rights simply do not exist." Two thousand civilians have disappeared, with no redress from the courts. There is no accountability for the federal troops' excesses. Reports of torture in custody are routine.

She concludes: "The overall picture of the Chechen ghetto is not just grim, it is incomprehensible. What does Putin want in Chechnya? What, in view of the fact that not one of the goals of anti-terrorist operation has been realised? The terrorist leaders are still at large. And the resistance easily replenishes its ranks with new recruits seeking revenge of the suffering and deaths of family members."

In February 2001, Politkovskaya was briefly arrested while in Chechnya's mountainous south. Russian soldiers allegedly threatened her with rape and execution while she was investigating allegations of torture inflicted on Chechens in custody. She was formally accused of infringing the strict laws that control media coverage of the conflict and ordered out of the enclave. In the autumn, a colleague of hers with good military connections warned of increasing danger should she pay another visit. She considered his words; but a promise to a boy there with severe burns that she would bring money for his much-needed operation, impelled her to return.

On her arrival she found the atmosphere in Grozny tenser than ever. However, the head of a new investigative federal commission spoke with her, acknowledging some of the problems that had been occurring with the military. An hour after this encouraging conversation, the helicopter in which he and his commission were travelling exploded. She reported the incident, casting doubt on the official claim that a Chechen fighter on the street had shot it down, since as she observed the heavy military presence that day was such that no fighter could have moved without being spotted.

On her return to Moscow, her editor telephoned her and warned her to stay home. The Ministry of Defense apparently knew the contents of her article before it had even been published, and had told him that while her conclusions about the incident were germane, the story should not come out. He also told her that a military man called Lapin was reported to have issued threats against her, and suggested he provide her with a bodyguard. She agreed, but further, more insistent threats came, saying that her guard would not save her. At last her editor urged her to leave; she reluctantly but hurriedly did so and has remained outside the country ever since.

She is planning a second book which will analyze the overall effect of the Chechen conflict on Russian society. She notes a resurfacing of such phrases as "enemy of the people," a rise in racism and intolerance, and a "tougher, less polite" atmosphere. Where, she wonders, will Russia's growth of a "great-power mentality" and "warrior" ideology lead? But more than anything else, she worries about her children who continue to receive anonymous threatening calls at their Moscow home, and hopes to be reunited with them soon.

Letters requesting that the threats against Anna Politkovskaya be thoroughly investigated, and that journalists be allowed to report on Chechen issues freely, can be sent to:

His Excellency Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin
President
The Federation of Russia
The Kremlin
Moscow
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Fax: +(70-95) 206-5173

October 18, 2001

Threatened Journalist Flees from Russia

By Artyom Vernidoub

One of Russia's best known broadsheet journalists Anna Politkovskaya, of the popular Novaya Gazeta (NG) newspaper who has won a reputation for exposing violations of human rights and other illegal activities committed the federal forces in Chechnya, has fled from Russia after receiving threats from an officer with the Khanty-Mansiysk Region's Interior Ministry department Sergei Lapin, known to his colleagues as Kadet.

In September this year Novaya Gazeta published an article by Anna Politkovskaya entitled "People Disappearing" about alleged summary executions and torture committed by a unit of Interior Ministry troops from Khanty-Mansiysk, serving in the Oktyabrskiy district of the Chechen capital Grozny.

In particular, on January 2 this year the Khanty-Mansiysk unit arrested 26-year-old Chechen national Zelimkhan Mourdalov.

"In the district department (manned by the Khanty-Mansiysk Interior troops) Zelimkhan was put at the disposal of Major Alexander Prilepin, head of the criminal police, more commonly known by the nickname Alex, investigator Zhuravlyov and officer Sergei Lapin, nicknamed Kadet -- that word was shaven on the back of his head," wrote Politkovskaya in the article.

"Later an investigation determined that namely those officers ordered that Zelimkhan be tortured and also tortured him themselves. His fractured bone stuck out from his right forearm. His right ear was cut off. His thorax bones were broken," Politkovskaya asserts in the article.

On the same day the crippled Chechen was taken from his cell reportedly to be sent to hospital. He has not been seen since that moment.

On January 7th, under pressure from Mourdalov's relatives, the prosecutor's office of Grozny ordered the arrest and remand of investigator Zhuravlyov, however the seniors of the Khanty-Mansiysk unit had already sent him back to his hometown of Nizhnevartovsk. On January 18 the prosecutors went after Lapin (aka Kadet), but his colleagues in the Oktyabrsky police station refused to hand him over. Soon afterwards, he too was sent home from Chechnya. On March 12 two investigators from the Grozny prosecutor's office arrived in Nizhnevartovsk to detain Lapin-Kadet. But Lapin was not detained. Instead, he gave a written promise not to leave Nizhnevartovsk pending trial. A month later the travel ban imposed on him was lifted by the Nizhnevartovsk municipal court. On September 10, Anna Politkovskaya wrote the article about the case. In her usual, sometimes over-dramatic style, she described the atrocities committed by the federal policemen in Grozny. For instance, in her article she wrote: "Khanty-Mansiyskers terrorized not only the population of Grozny, but also the prosecutor's office of Grozny. When anyone of the officers implicated in Mourdalov's case was summoned for questioning (at the prosecutor's office), a police brigade armed to the teeth went there, smashed furniture in corridors, and aimed their grenade launchers at the building."

Several days after the article was published, NG editor's office received the first threat by e-mail. An anonymous well-wisher wrote: "There exists trustworthy information that an operational worker of the criminal investigation department, who served in the Republic of Chechnya, who has a personal call-sign 'Kadet' (not a nickname), received training in special FSB (Federal Security Service) camps in spheres of subversive activities, sniper's training. At present, his whereabouts are unknown but there is evidence that he is in possession of a rifle and intends to visit the city of Moscow. Are you by any chance in the know about the aim of the disgraced Interior Ministry operative's visit to Moscow?"

"We immediately became suspicious because of the fact that the person knew that 'Kadet' was not a nickname but a call-sign. We receive dozens of such letters and otherwise we would have ignored the threat," NG's chief editor Dmitry Muratov told Gazeta.Ru.

"Therefore it was decided to provide Anna Politkovskaya with guards. Provided she was accompanied by guards, I allowed her to go to a live program at one television company, and then an anchorman revealed that Politkovskaya had come with guards, - I do not know why they did that, such idiocy. And five days ago one more letter arrived that reads that if in the course of ten days a refutation of Politkovskaya's article was not published, then Kadet had already arrived in Moscow".

"But," Muratov told us, "There will be no refutation".

After that Muratov decided to send Anna abroad. He did not specify where to though but later Ekho Moskvy radio station learned from the Committee to Protect Journalists based in New York that her destination was Vienna, Austria.

Deputy chief editor of NG Yuri Shchekochikhin, who is also a State Duma deputy, wrote a letter to the Minister of the Interior Boris Gryzlov and met with his deputy Vassilyev.

Muratov assured Gazeta.Ru that the Interior Ministry had promised to thoroughly investigate the situation.