Anna Politkovskaya’s Murder and Putin’s Russia

by Federico Varese

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Anna Politkovskaya was not a charismatic woman. When she was interviewed on the radio, her monotonous voice poured out endless facts and dredged through the minutest details of events she had witnessed. When I saw her for the first time at a conference in the United States, the lecture was not well attended, and the conference-goers had preferred another debate. I had a chance to talk to her briefly, and I saw her again at a debate in London: I remember that she left little time for others to speak, and she spoke with great intensity as though she could not neglect any argument or leave any point unsaid.

Anna Politkovskaya’s fate demonstrates that charisma, media savvy and skill in manipulating the television do not amount to the ability to move profoundly the consciences of men and women, even across cultural and linguistic barriers. At the time she was murdered, Politkovskaya was one of the most important journalists in the world and, as one of her colleagues wrote, proof that there is nothing so powerful as the written word. Her death outraged thousands of people, prime ministers and presidents in dozens of countries and for a day, at least, it obscured other news items.

She wrote hundreds of articles and two books, A Dirty War. A Russian Reporter in Chechnya (2001, English edition: Harvill 2001) and Putin’s Russia
(2004, English edition: Harvill 2004). The first is a report on the crimes committed in the Caucasus by the Russian army and, at the same time, a reflection on how the second Chechen conflict had a corrosive effect on the morality of her country. Her second book tells the story of the Soviet Union’s transformation into a market economy, its human costs, the violence and murders, and the mafias allied and mixed up with the great capitalists, football team owners, governors and industrialists. Putin is the architect of this transformation and, according to Politkovskaya, he never held dear the fate of his people: ‘I don’t like him because he does not respect other human beings; he treats them as pawns.’

Anna Politkovskaya had an adventurous life, but she was not in search of adventure and did not start her career as a war correspondent. During the first Chechen war (1994-1996), there were other journalists risking their necks as the bombs fell on Grozny. The live reports from the independent television channel NTV, which is now under the Kremlin’s control, did much to convince Russian public opinion of the conflict’s futility. During that period, Politkovskaja was concerned with social problems, particularly the deteriorating state of the health system, orphanages and conditions for old people. ‘I was interested in reviving the pre-Soviet journalistic tradition of social investigations’. This work brought her into contact with refugees from the northern Caucasus and prompted her to go where no journalist had ever dared, in pursuit of her stories.

She admitted that the second war (1999-2000) was not started without a provocation from the most extreme wing of the separatist movement and that Russia had to react. ‘It was the way in which Russia
reacted that was immoral. My country launched a
total war on the civilian population.’ Her dispatches
from the front were no different from her articles on
old people in Moscow: she directed her attention to
daily lives of ‘little’ men and women, who were not
protected by the authorities and were not rewarded
for their acts of courage. The stories of the Russian
colonel who saved eighty-nine old people from the
ruins of Grozny, the young Chechen who had not
been paid the promised compensation for the torture
he had suffered, and the bribes families had to pay
to get back the dead bodies of their conscript sons
were all a continuation of her writing in the nineties.

One of her best articles, in my opinion, was ‘A sick
dog in a large city’, which was published in Novaya
Gazeta in December 2005. It was the story of a
puppy that Politkovskaya adopted only to discover
that it was seriously ill and the victim of cruel
treatment. Everyone advised her to free herself
immediately of the oversized animal that was
frightened of everything and passed its days hiding
under tables, but she refused. Politkovskaya’s work
was part of the Russian literary tradition that
explored the tragedy of the little man (tragedya
malenkogo cheloveka), whose exponents included
Gogol, Tolstoj and Dostoevskij.

At some stage in her life, Politkovskaya decided to
be not only a writer but also a civic activist. She
herself claimed that she was not simply a reporter.
In an interview two years ago with the British
newspaper The Guardian, she declared, ‘Yes, I went
beyond my journalistic role. By setting aside my role
as journalist I learned so much that I would never
have found out being just a plain journalist, who
stands in the crowd along with everyone else.’

Politkovskaya followed in the footsteps of the
pacifist and non-violent Soviet dissidents who during
the seventies adopted a peaceful and non-violent strategy for revealing the lies and authoritarianism of the regime. The regime refused to admit that it was an authoritarian one, and lied to itself and the rest of the world through its socialist rhetoric. The ‘defender of human rights’ of the late-Soviet period pretended to take seriously the rights established by law and the socialist constitution, and she used all legal means to have them enforced. It was a technique that gained a considerable following.

Politkovskaya decided to expose the lies in her country by using the channels that the Russian state itself had created. Every time that she recorded an atrocity or injustice, she demanded an explanation from the competent authorities in a newspaper interview. Her style was simple, direct and not at all self-regarding (unlike so many other ‘interviews with history’): she wanted to know who was responsible and look him in the face. For instance, she was more recently preparing to act as a witness in the trial against the Prime Minister of the Chechen Republic Ramsan Kadyrov, who she has accused of using his secret services to abduct and torture citizens for the purpose of extortion. On her desk she kept photos of two men, one Russian and the other Chechen, who had been ‘abducted, tortured and killed’. When she gained a victory, it was a triple one: it brought justice for the victims, it punished the killers and introduced an element of justice into the Russian legal system.

In the afternoon of 7 October 2006, a woman who had lost her youth and her good looks was shopping at the supermarket on Frunzenskaya Street, which runs alongside Moscow’s river. She did not dye her hair, but she did wear a pair of designer glasses as a sole concession to female fashion.

She was divorced and had two grown-up children,
of whom she saw very little. She lived with a very large sick dog in a rented flat. She had just returned from the hospital where her mother was a cancer patient. The doctors had said that there was no hope. Her sister had just arrived in Moscow to be close in the final phase of the illness. Several family tragedies were coming together: her father, a retired diplomat who was much in love with his wife, was unable to deal with news of the illness and a few days earlier he had had a heart attack while leaving home to go to the hospital, and it cost him his life.

Anna bought food in supermarket and some sanitary items for her mother at its pharmacy. In all, she had three bags. She got into her car, a grey Vaz-2110, put her bags on the backseat and drove to the flat at Number 8-12 Lesnaja Ulitsa, in a relatively affluent part of the city. She parked her car a few metres from the entrance to the building and went up to the flat with two bags. It was five past four in the afternoon. It was not raining. A little later, she came to get the rest of her shopping from the car. She took the lift and went down to the first floor.

On leaving the lift, she found herself in front of a thin man, who had entered the building a few minutes earlier and was about 180 centimetres tall and dressed in dark clothes. He wore a baseball hat and took no care to cover his face. He knew the access code, which should have been known only to the residents. He too had come from the supermarket on Frunzenskaya Street. In the company of a woman aged around thirty, he had bought some medicines. It was ten past four. He carried an Izh pistol with a silencer and the serial number erased. He fired three times. The first two shots hit his victim in the heart, and were fatal. The
third hit her right shoulder. A fourth shot was then fired into the head, to ensure that she was dead. The body was left lying on its back in a pool of blood at the entrance to the lift. The man chucked the pistol and went out into the street. Five minutes later, a neighbour who wanted to use the lift found the body and rung the emergency number, 02. It was twenty-one minutes past four. The murder occurred on President Putin’s fifty-fourth birthday. Anna Politkovskaya née Matsepa, forty-eight years old, was buried on 10 October 2006 at Troyekurovo Cemetery in Moscow. She is survived by her two children, Ilja aged twenty-eight and Vera aged twenty-six, her mother, her sister, her ex-husband and her dog.