

**ANNA POLITKOVSKAIA:**  
*Russia's "Least Wanted Journalist"*  
*Reviewed by Daria Solovieva*

*The Second Chechen War*

Anna Politkovskaia

Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations/2002/E-Book (Russian)

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“On which side is the sense of self-preservation, and hence, justice, stronger?”

—*Leo Tolstoy, as a 24-year-old Russian*

*army officer, on the Russo-Chechen conflict, 1852.*

Anna Politkovskaia is arguably Russia's most famous journalist. She has covered the Russian military campaign in the breakaway republic of Chechnya since 1999. First published in 2002, Politkovskaia's work stands alone in its poignant critique of Russia's on-going campaign in Chechnya.

By most accounts, the first Chechen War, a devastating conflict that lasted from 1994 to 1996, was a military disaster for Russia, resulting in heavy civilian casualties, shattering Chechnya and sending thousands of refugees fleeing the region. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, Russian authorities have consistently referred to their current strategy in Chechnya as a part of the global war on terrorism. “If one of the terrorist organizations has claimed responsibility for this [the recent terrorist

attack in Moscow] and it is linked to Al-Qaeda, that is a fact that confirms the link between certain forces operating on the territory of Chechnya and international terrorism,” Putin said in an official statement on August 31, 2004.

The Russian authorities present the Second Chechen War as something drastically different from its first campaign there, a “counter-terrorist operation” that employs the “latest up-to-date equipment” and renders “minimal civilian casualties.” However, Politkovskaia dismisses these official statements from the Kremlin, providing firsthand accounts of equipment that is not “up-to-date” and strategies that are not aimed in any way to avoid civilian casualties. She describes the bombing of a “safe passage” of refugees, confirming the allegations of human rights agencies such as *Memorial*, a Russia-based human rights group investigating human rights abuses in Chechnya. She makes the case that the Russian involvement in Chechnya constitutes state-sponsored terrorism.

Politkovskaia is highly critical of the Russian public that “buys” the counter-terrorist argument and is largely oblivious to the Chechen casualties. She criticizes the Russian media for being “plagued by self-censorship.” “Even my own newspaper (the liberal *Novaia Gazeta*) takes out my harshest criticisms, calling it ‘propagandist,’” she writes. Further, she is disdainful of the Western media that has inconsistently covered the conflict and the great majority of the Western governments that have backed

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Putin’s “war on terrorism” in Chechnya. Because she is so openly critical of the war, Politkovskaia has received numerous death threats and survived several attempts on her life. One TV commentator has labeled her “Russia’s least wanted journalist.”

This book, which can stand on its own as a political treatise and a condemnation of the Russian campaign in Chechnya, sometimes ventures into philosophical discussions of life and death and the ugly nature of war. Politkovskaia draws a portrait of morally disheveled people who “got out of luck” and could not flee: the poor, the single mothers, the orphans, the invalids who face the daily threat of being seized, raped, tortured and killed by the Russian forces operating in Chechnya.

Her description of the “Storm” mortar captures the caprice and misery of the conflict. “The mortar, the most terrible and treacherous weapon used in this war. If you can hear it whistle and turn, that means it missed, and although death was near, it has chosen someone else. So you laugh... the ‘Storm’ turns you into an inhumane animal, which has learned to laugh at someone else’s misery.”

She vividly depicts men, women, and children lying down low on the dirt road in a “fetus position” as the Russian planes hover close above their heads—so close “you can see their hands and faces.” Despite their fear, these people find the nerve to chuckle and make fun of a clerk from Achhoi-Martan, Vaha, who swears that his paper folder saves him from death every time. “I take the paper folder in my hands and pretend to write. Then they think I am not a terrorist, I am working. Works every time,” he tells those willing to listen as they are lying on a dirt road and his listeners laugh a “quiet laugh.”

Although Politkovskaia’s work does not offer many solutions beyond condemnation of the Chechen war, it does provide the kind of raw insight and unabridged critique unlikely to be found in the speeches of Western or Russian policy makers, journalists or analysts—especially now that Russia has renewed its vows as a U.S. partner in the global war on terrorism.

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