

# An Apparent Contract Killing Snuffs the Life of a Prominent Russian Journalist

On Saturday, October 7th, Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead at her apartment in Moscow.

November 1, 2006

**A** correspondent for the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, she was considered one of the country's most prominent human rights advocates, according to the *New York Times*. Former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev is a part owner of *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the few remaining independent media outlets left inside the country. The rest have been bought out or taken over in recent years by Russia's criminally-minded oligarchs. These shadowy gentlemen are widely accused of stealing their way onto the *Forbes Magazine* annual list of billionaires.

Last year, the Russian bureau head of *Forbes* was murdered while investigating this influential underworld. His murder also remains unsolved.

*MosNews*, an internet site that compiles news from the country, reported that

when word of Politkovskaya's murder circulated, local residents



Anna Politkovskaya

converged around her home with bouquets of flowers. Others rallied in Pushkin Square to protest the government's role in the crime. Her newspaper is offering nearly a million dollars in reward money for information that will lead to a break in the case.

Politkovskaya's editors say she was preparing an article about torture and kidnappings in Chechnya to be placed in the following Monday's issue. Deputy Editor Vitaly Yerushensky told Ekho Moskvyy Radio "We never got the article, but she had evidence about these (abducted people) and there were photographs."

The photographs also have yet to be located.

In 2003, Politkovskaya published *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*.

*MosNews* says the book documents "her impressions of the war's unrelenting and often macabre cruelty, and

the manifest corruption of many of its participants. She wrote of torture, mass executions, kidnappings for ransom and to eliminate rebel suspects, and the sale by Russian soldiers of Chechen corpses to their families for proper Islamic burial."

According to many human rights observers, the Chechen patriots have likewise been implicated in committing atrocities against civilians during the course of the long war. An agreement by Russia to administer free elections in Chechnya has yet to be implemented.

A principle focus of Politkovskaya's reporting was Ramzan Kadyrov, the prime minister of Chechnya, who said in a statement that her murder forced "us to think about where things stand in this issue in our country," according to *Interfax*. "Politkovskaya's articles were not always objective, but it was her point of view," he said. "I am sincerely sorry about what happened."

Both Kadyrov and President Vladimir Putin are suspected of putting out the contract on Politkovskaya. She recently published a second book called *Putin's Russia*, which offers a scathing appraisal of the former KGB agent turned Russian president. However, Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin is generally credited with creating the quagmire in Chechnya.

Although the Kremlin has remained silent in the wake of Politkovskaya's murder, Putin has repeatedly promised to rein in the lawlessness consuming the coun-

*continued*





Russian President Putin.

try since the economic collapse of the 1980's.

Among other things, he's accused of rolling back democratic reforms instituted under perestroika. Borrowing a page from President Bush's campaign manual, he also now refers to the Soviet occupation of Chechnya as part of a war on international terrorism.

Back in 2004, at the height of the deadly school siege in North Ossetia,

Politkovskaya survived another attempt on her life when she was taken off an airplane after being poisoned. She was on her way to Beslan to act as a mediator in a hostage situation involving Chechen rebels who had capture 1,000 people, most of them children.

Speaking to the RTL Radio France about the episode, she said that she asked for a cup of tea while on the plane and fainted soon after having drunk it.

"In the hospital, a physician told me of a serious poisoning with an unidentified toxic agent,"

she said. "I suspect three FSB officials [government agents] who were on the same plane in business class of involvement in this vile act. One of them asked the air hostess a question, the other put a pill into the cup. It dissolves in a moment, and it is a miracle that I survived."

*The Guardian of London* reported that Politkovskaya also believed that FSB agents tapped her phone conversations prior to her flight to Beslan. The driver who took her to the airport admitted that he had been contacted by the FSB.

However, when the blood samples containing the toxins disappeared, the investigation of the incident ended.

Nana Lezhava, a Georgian

**"We are hurtling back into a Soviet abyss, into an information vacuum that spells death from our own ignorance. All we have left is the internet, where information is still freely available. For the rest, if you want to go on working as a journalist, it's total servility to Putin. Otherwise, it can be death, the bullet, poison, or trial - whatever our special services, Putin's guard dogs, see fit," Politkovskaya wrote.**

television reporter detained in Beslan during the hostage crisis, may have also been drugged by the authorities, according to the Associated Press. Traces of a tranquilizer were found in her bloodstream.

Politkovskaya's murder is the latest in a series targeting journalists in the country. Larisa Yudina, editor of the opposition newspaper, *Sovetskaya Kalmykia*, was stabbed to death and her body dumped in a pond on the outskirts of the regional capital Elista in 1998.

Two former government em-



Former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev.

ployees were caught and convicted of the crime.

Katrina Vanden Heuvel, editor and publisher of *The Nation* magazine, told *Democracy Now's* Amy

Goodman that 42 Russian journalists have been liquidated since 1992. "This is a terrible pattern," Heuval said. "And it's important that all weight be brought to bear, international journalistic weight be brought to bear, to bring her murderer to justice."

**A**nna Politkovskaya was born in New York in 1958, the daughter of Soviet Ukrainian parents who were U.N. diplomats. Five years later, the dictator Stalin died and Politkovskaya went home to Russia. In graduate school, she wrote her dissertation on the poet Marina Tsvetayeva, whose body of work had long been censored and forbidden as a topic of discussion.

According to the *Guardian*, Politkovskaya joined the journalism faculty of Moscow State Uni-

*continued*

versity, one of the most prestigious in the country, and later worked for the in-house paper of the state airline Aeroflot. "Every journalist got a free ticket all year round," she told the newspaper during an interview in 2004. "You could go on any plane and fly wherever you wanted. Thanks to this I saw the whole of our huge country. I was a girl from a diplomatic family, a reader, a bit of a swot; I didn't know life at all."

She would learn about it soon enough. Under President Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika began, and along with it came difficult times, as well as personal freedoms which Russians had not seen in decades. But while Gorbachev was courting western nations for much-needed private investment, inside the bloc, a wave of organized crime infiltrated every aspect of society.

The justice system fell apart, domestic violence spiked with the unemployment rate, and sexual coercion laws were no longer enforced. In Moscow newspapers, it became common to read ads for secretaries that included the phrase "no complexes". That was code to mean that sexual favors for the boss would be required.

The situation grew so desperate that hundreds of thousands of women began illegally emigrating from Russia and other former eastern bloc countries during the nineties. Many of them were lured by traffickers under false pretenses, then sold on an auction block, often smuggled into countries like Israel and the United States.

Then in 1996, an American human rights attorney named Gillian Caldwell infiltrated the Russian networks and secretly filmed transactions involving trafficked women. Called "Bought and Sold", the video prompted a segment on *NBC's Dateline* and more extensive reporting by *New York*

*Times* and other publication.

That led the U.S. Congress to pass several laws stipulating prison terms for the perpetrators, although it's unclear exactly how many prosecutions have taken place. Brothel owners rarely spend time in jail for holding trafficked women, whose status as illegal aliens commonly results in quick deportation proceedings.

Caldwell discovered in the course of her investigation that some victims were even being picked up by the traffickers at the airport on their return flight.

In addition to the organized crime wave pervading Russia and other eastern bloc nations, the aftermath of the breakup brought several armed conflicts to the region. The most grisly of these has involved Russian attempts to control the small region of Chechnya.

The first Chechen War ended 1996 with a peace deal and troop withdrawal, the result of intense pressure wrought by the media and public on the Kremlin. However, "When Putin invaded for a second time, in 1999," the *Guardian* writes, "He took steps to ensure that the media would not embarrass him with reports about the reality of Russia's brutality in

Chechnya."

The kidnappings, killings, disappearances, rapes and tortures she reported on in Chechnya convinced Politkovskaya that Putin's policies were actually breeding terrorists rather than eliminating them.

"To this day there's torture in any FSB branch in Chechnya," she told the *Guardian*, "like the so-called 'telephone', where they pass an electric current through a person's body."

Before Beltsan, Politkovskaya served as a negotiator in the Moscow theatre siege, also the work of Chechen rebels. "Yes, I went beyond my journalistic role," she said. "But it would be quite wrong to say that doing so was a bad move from a journalistic point of view. 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." ☺

**Copyright 2006**  
**The City Edition of San Francisco**  
**[www.thecityedition.com](http://www.thecityedition.com)**

