

## **Politkovskaya: A Life for Justice**

By Swanee Hunt

October 10, 2006

Everyone needs a hero. Anna Politkovskaya was mine. And others'. In addition to the 2005 Civil Courage Prize, she received the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation in 2002, as well as prizes from the Overseas Press Club and Amnesty International. In 2004, she was a joint winner of the Olof Palme Prize for her human rights work.

I met Anna in November, 2000, at Women Waging Peace, a network of about 450 leaders within the Initiative for Inclusive Security, which advocates for the full inclusion of women in peace processes around the world. That initiative was incubated at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. We try to protect and support women peace experts in part by bringing them to the attention of policy makers at the State Department, World Bank, White House, and other halls of power.

This past Saturday Anna was executed: shot point blank in the head with a revolver outside her apartment. The gun was placed by her side, indicating a contract-killing. She was 48.

Born in 1958, Anna graduated from Moscow State University and worked on the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiya* for more than a decade. In 1999, she joined *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the few newspapers to take on the Kremlin. She maintained a critical stance against President Putin even as the Russian media became more and more suppressed by the government. Politkovskaya authored several books, including *Putin's Russia* and *The Dirty War*. For more than six years, she was the strongest voice in the world describing the plight of Chechnya's civilian population, under military assault by the Russian government since 1994.

She told me once that because she was female, she was considered less threatening and could get behind the lines, where she reported on abuses the army was perpetrating against Muslim communities under cover of fighting terrorism. She described how, to avoid a military checkpoint, she'd made her way down to a river, then trekked through deep snow all night. Another time, she posed as a farm wife sitting on a pile of hay in a wagon; she smiled that without her wire-rims she couldn't see a thing. Another time she was apprehended by Russian forces but freed as night fell by a sympathetic major. In February 2000, the FSB (former KGB) confined her in a pit in Chechnya without food or water for three days.

Despite those dangers, like many of the women we have sponsored, Anna Politkovskaya kept working to expose the injustices around her. Fearless, but not naïve, she knew her life was on the line as she described the moral decay of 100,000 security forces, whose abuses only spawn more terrorism. Still, she continued to document *zachistka* ("mop-up"), where young men, or any others considered suspicious, are rounded up from their homes, sometimes tortured, and often executed.

Because of her standing with the Chechens, Politkovskaya acted as a mediator during the Dubrovka Theater siege in Moscow in October 2002. Russian special forces put an end to the two-day stand off when they gassed the theater, killing not only 40 Chechen terrorists but also

129 hostages. Then in September 2004, she was in flight to Rostov to cover the Beslan school hostage crisis when she lost consciousness after drinking a cup of tea. Just before she passed out, a flight attendant whispered to her that she had been poisoned by Russian agents on the plane. Doctors at the hospital in Rostov were ordered to destroy the test results. She believed the FSB was trying to prevent her from reporting on the siege, which resulted in 344 deaths, half of them children. Anna's suspicions were well-founded: Since 2000, at least twelve Russian journalists have been murdered in contract-style killings.

I last saw Anna in December. She and a small group were discussing the role of women in the security sector, as protectors of human rights, journalists, politicians, and leaders of civil society. They called for women's solidarity internationally to ensure peace and stability. Anna spoke about freedom of speech and how crucial it is for NGOs to challenge the government. Her words then bear the weight of her sacrifice now.

That day I took two pictures of Anna: the first, somber; the second, her head back, laughing. I think of those two images of her as we mourn her murder and celebrate her life. She understood that with freedom comes responsibility to work for those denied such freedom. As we grieve her death, forty years too soon, we must redouble our efforts and carry forward her legacy.

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