

COUNTERING FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS AND CULTURAL BELIEFS:  
THE REPORTAGE OF ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

By

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## Abstract

Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who reported for *Novaya Gazeta* about the Second Chechen War and the Chechen civilians who suffered as a result, was assassinated at her Moscow apartment building on October 7, 2006. While the Western world mourned the death of this reporter and publicist who was deemed “the conscience of Russian journalism,” the majority of Russians ignored the news and even expressed delight at her death; to them, she was considered more a Westerner than one of their own, and her factual but impassioned reporting seemed to irritate rather than inform. The polyvalence of her message can be explained in part through a close textual analysis of her stories, which shows that her writing countered numerous foundational Russian myths and ideas that undergird the culture. Much of what she wrote attacked the “Russian Idea” of exceptionalism, leadership, and heroism, and she compared the country’s new leader, Vladimir Putin, and the Russian army troops with the Nazis against whom the Soviet people fought during the Great Patriotic War (WWII). References in her reportage from 1999 to 2006 unraveled the very fabric of popular beliefs to which the Russians were clinging in the aftermath of the economic crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. This analysis shows that, in her desire to inform her fellow countrymen about the abuses and thereby constrain their responses to one of action against the government, she countered important foundational myths that instead led the Russians to retreat into their own ethnic identity and ignore her messages. The international community, however, not feeling its identity threatened, accepted her messages, although its members did not act to prevent the abuses from continuing.

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“There is not so much difference between the ideologies of capitalism and communism, you know. The difference is simple. Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man, and communism is the reverse.”

— John Gardner, *The Man from Barbarossa*

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## Chapter One

### Countering Foundational Myths and Cultural Beliefs

On October 7, 2006, four gunshots fired in a Moscow, Russia, apartment building elevator dramatically changed the face of investigative journalism in both the former Soviet Union and the Republic of Chechnya, and they alerted the world to a sea change in the course of democracy in a country that the Western world wanted on its side. The assassination of journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a reporter for the independent *Novaya Gazeta* [*New Gazette*], seems to have brought to an end Russia's experiment with a free press, and with the reporter went the hopes of Chechen citizens for a voice that would relay the stories of their suffering to the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Chechnya has long been problematic for the Russian people. This region in the Caucasus did not part ways gently with the former Soviet Union following the 1991 collapse. The ensuing 1994 Chechen War went on for nearly two years before Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed an agreement with Chechen leaders in August 1996 that suspended the conflict. Chechen warlords, however, resumed the rebellion in Daghestan in 1999, hoping to free the region from Russian rule. The Daghestani villagers recognized these warlords as Islamic extremists and did not welcome them as "liberators." Fighting between the warlords and the local population prompted Russia's new prime minister, Vladimir Putin (a former head of the Federal Security Service, or the "new KGB"), to order a violent attack on several Islamic villages in Daghestan as well as in Chechnya. The warlords retaliated in September 1999 by bombing the Russian army's military

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<sup>1</sup> Lebedev (2006) offers numerous examples of testimony from Chechens directly assisted as she was reporting about the country.

compound in Buinaksk. In return, the Russian army continued to push the forces of the warlords back to Chechnya and initiated a bombing campaign in and around the capital, Grozny. Bombings by extremists of four more apartment buildings in Moscow and Volgograd sealed Chechnya's fate: the Russians initiated the Second Chechen War.

At this point, the Russian government now easily linked the words "terrorists" and "international terrorism" to the bombings, and administrators began an immediate propaganda campaign to justify Russian actions in the Chechen region as a self-protective measure. The Russian populace broadly supported the insurgence into this Muslim region. However, as a result of Putin's anti-terror campaigns that destroyed Grozny, enormous numbers of Chechen civilians fled to Ingushetia and Daghestan, where their accommodations became refugee camps that, as expected, could neither safely nor adequately contain the masses.

Straight into this fray at the military "front" walked internationally renowned Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a fiercely determined and fearless reporter whose work regularly appeared in the independent *Novaya Gazeta*. Politkovskaya was unique in her time and place; as she makes clear, many in her country remained under the sway of Soviet propaganda at that time, so her writings posed a conundrum for Russian readers. Media sources that had been freed from governmental restraints during *glasnost*' and *perestroika* of the late 1980s and early 1990s had now returned like prodigal sons (or in some cases felt forced back) to safety and financial support as state-supported enterprises, and their readers were once again receiving only that news that the government issued or that self-censored publications were willing to print. From the beginning of the Second Chechen War, Vladimir Putin, who had assumed power on New Year's Day 2000, felt



the need to manipulate the media, particularly in regard to the reports about this latest incursion to regain control of the *de facto* independent Chechen Republic. Mereu and Saradzhyan (2005) have observed that

The first war convinced the Kremlin more than any other event that it needed to control national television channels — which most Russians rely on for news — to successfully undertake any major national policy. . . . By the time the second war began, . . . federal authorities had designed and introduced a comprehensive system to limit the access of journalists to Chechnya and shape their coverage. Reporters not only had to secure special accreditation to travel to Chechnya, but once they arrived they were required to stay within designated areas. (para. 5, 8)

As Putin tightened his control over print and television stations, the world witnessed Russia's return to state-controlled information, which continued to reinforce the idea that the Chechens were an evil "other." In fact, say Mereu and Saradzhyan (2005), "Federal officials received instructions on how to deal with questions about Chechnya, including a special glossary that required them to refer to separatists as terrorists, according to reports in the Russian press" (para. 10).<sup>2</sup>

But unlike the vast majority of her counterparts, who submitted to the Kremlin's official line and reported the war inadequately and from a very safe distance, Politkovskaya held to the belief that as a media representative, she needed to act boldly and lay bare the facts of these incursions, regardless of how unpleasant they might be or how much her own government might dislike it. She was not a stranger to such reportage.

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<sup>2</sup> Writing about Politkovskaya's funeral, Erofeyev (2006) indicated that the Russian public understood about state-controlled news: "Hundreds of people who came to say farewell to Anna looked not only crushed, but also helpless. The mourners were shown their real place, as people without rights, who will be told only what the authorities want them to know" (para. 8).

Hearst (2006) writes that at the time the Second Chechen war started, Politkovskaya had already been investigating and exposing problems related to the country's orphanages and elderly; he quoted her as saying, "I was interested in reviving Russia's pre-revolutionary tradition of writing about our social problems. That led me to writing about the seven million refugees in our country. When the war started, it was that that led me down to Chechnya" (para. 4). In addition, Hearst reported that although Politkovskaya said she thought the Chechen warlords had provoked the Russians and that it was appropriate for her country to respond, she also said, "But it was the way they did it. . . . It was clear to me it was going to be total war, whose victims were first and foremost going to be civilian" (para. 7).

And so Politkovskaya embedded herself in the war-torn region and wrote stories of the innocent Chechen victims who were caught in the destructive battles between the Russian army and the Chechen warlords, and among the Chechens themselves. She also wrote of the dysfunction within the Russian army and of the troops who suffered as a result. The majority of blame for the desperate situation in that region she laid at Putin's doorstep.

Politkovskaya's powerful and ably constructed writings provided her readers a much deeper message than simply the facts about a senseless war that seemed to drag on without goal or end for both sides of the conflict. Her narratives show an extremely insightful, cynical, well-researched, and critical view of the war and the government. Russia's leaders, however, had no tolerance for such writing, and Politkovskaya was well

aware that many who publicly opposed the government suffered the consequences.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Politkovskaya was neither recognized nor lauded as a hero in her own country. Varied political and business constraints kept her publications from being read by a larger audience within Russia's border, and a majority of those within Russia who did know of her work had little good to say about it or her. Her admirers and supporters came primarily from the West; they awarded her prizes for her efforts as an investigative reporter who worked ceaselessly to uncover crimes and abuse in the war-ravaged region.

The rhetorical sources of this split in her support — between Russians and the rest of the world — became the focus of my study; I chose to rhetorically examine selected writings and dispatches that she filed from the Chechen front, from the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999 until 2005.

### **Shots Heard 'Round the World**

Anna Politkovskaya was born Anna Stepanovna Mazepa in New York on August 20, 1958, to Ukrainian diplomat parents, and she held U.S. as well as Russian citizenship (U Anny Politkovskoi, 2006). Reared among other Russians at the embassy during the Cold War period, she returned to Russia in her late teens and earned her journalism degree from Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1980. Her thesis dealt with the Russian Revolutionary poet Marina Tsvetaeva. While at the university, she met and married Aleksandr Politkovsky, a fellow student. Politkovsky was better known to the

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<sup>3</sup> Within a country that holds a centuries-long history of controlled media and extreme privacy regarding political matters, Russia's independent journalists today work in one of the lowest paid, and at the same time one of the most dangerous, professions. Their work has been variously received by the public, but during the past 20 years the West has held it up as a hope for the construction of a true democracy in a land historically accustomed to authoritarian control.

Russian people than Anna because of his position as a late-night host of the television show *Vzglyad* [*Glance*], but she had other ideas for her career: Rather than use the connections afforded her as a member of the Soviet elite, she devoted herself to independent journalism. Between 1982 and 1993 she worked for *Izvestiya*, Parity Publishers, and Aeroflot, and from 1994 to 1999 she wrote and edited the crime section of *Obshchaya Gazeta* [*General Gazette*]. In June 1999 she joined the team at Moscow's *Novaya Gazeta* and went to work uncovering and reporting human rights offenses in Chechnya within months of the announcement of the second phase of the war against that former republic. It was this investigative reporting, resulting in several books about both the Chechen war and the abuses in Vladimir Putin's government, that earned her international attention and acclaim as well as the displeasure of Putin and his staff.

Having trained at Moscow State University, Politkovskaya understood the journalistic importance of doing her job well: "Journalists had a duty to report on the subject that mattered, she said, just as singers had to sing and doctors had to heal" ("Anna Politkovskaya," 2006, para. 9). She was unrelenting in her desire to expose the crimes and abuses of the Russian government despite the fact that doing so put her own life in jeopardy on numerous occasions. As a result of her at times activist reporting, Politkovskaya herself became a victim of threats and harassment from her government. She knew about the dangers that came with her profession, but she was, by her own admission, "obsessed with exposing the killings, torture and beatings of civilians by Russian soldiers in Chechnya" (Mainville, 2006). In addition to being captured and abused once in Chechnya, she went into exile in Austria in 2001 in response to death threats she had received. The Chechen terrorists responsible for the October 23, 2002,

siege of Moscow's Dubrovka Theater asked specifically for her to tell their story. This experience may have influenced her editor to send her to cover the September 2004 Beslan grade school siege, in which approximately 30 Ingush and Chechen terrorists took more than 1,100 hostages and killed 385 people, but she was poisoned while aboard the airplane that was taking her there, preventing her from covering the crisis. James Button (2006) of the *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted Toby Eady, Politkovskaya's London book agent, as saying that this tragedy "frightened her in a deep psychological way," and "Her optimism left her, she became fatalistic." During 2006 she had received another rash of death threats but this time refused to be driven into exile (Russia: Anna Politkovskaya, 2006). Button asserted that Politkovskaya's English publisher, Christopher Maclehose, believed "she began to turn herself into a martyr," and he quoted Maclehose as saying, "It was, in my conviction, absolutely deliberate. She calculated she had one chance in 10 of surviving but she said, 'Russia is more important than me'" (Button 2006).

Nevertheless, Politkovskaya undoubtedly was caught off guard as she stepped from the elevator in her apartment building on October 7, 2006, to retrieve a load of groceries from her car. There in the lobby, she met her assassin, who fired two bullets into her chest, one into her shoulder, and a final one into her skull. When authorities arrived at the scene, they found the pistol with its serial number removed next to her body. At her death, Politkovskaya, the mother of Vera and Ilya, was 48. Her father had died only nine days before, her mother lay dying in an oncology unit, and her pregnant daughter had just been hospitalized as a safety precaution during her pregnancy with Politkovskaya's first grandchild (Mainville, 2006; Ricchiardi, 2007; Schepp, Neef, & Klusmann, 2006).

Her death brought swift response from the international community, which had long lauded her work and applauded her efforts to report the truth about both the Russian government and its incursions into Chechen territory. She had been heralded by the West as a unique voice coming from Russia — one that sought truth in reporting and enacted a freedom of speech that the West considered critical to a fledgling democracy. Newspapers and websites worldwide immediately broadcast the story of her murder; Russian embassies in many countries saw collections of flowers, candles, and photographs in Politkovskaya’s memory laid at their gates; and journalists and actors participated in memorials from Paris and London to Denmark and beyond (Bekturganova-Andersen, 2006; Ostrovsky, 2006). World leaders, including Angela Merkel and George W. Bush, called on the Kremlin to conduct a thorough investigation and resolve the crime quickly. It was clear that much of the world viewed the violent death of this investigative reporter/advocate as a serious blow to democracy and freedom of the press in Russia.

Russian newspaper coverage about her after her death was mixed. Quotations from those who knew her best described her as a hard worker, a good person with high moral character, and someone obsessed with her reporting and willing to risk everything to get her story. They understood that her speaking publicly in her newspaper articles and in speeches internationally about government shortcomings and the suffering of the victims of war was in itself an act of extreme bravery, given the political climate in which independent journalists worked at the time. One article labeled her “one of the spiritual leaders of the democratic opposition,” even though “[s]he lived, trying not to draw excessive attention to herself” (Za chto ubili? 2007, para. 1, 2).

Shortly before her death, her editor, Dmitrii Muratov, had decided he would no longer reassign her to Chechnya because he wanted to do a “rebranding” of her. However, during one of his times away from the office, she “made use of his absence” to sneak back to the war front. “I’m going to fillet Politkovskaya!” Muratov had said when he found out what she had done (*Za chto ubili*, 2007, para. 17–18). Her closest friend at *Izvestiya*, “Elena,” said that she was “an amazing person. She was a very erudite person, interested in theater, literature. . . . She did not feel danger. ‘At my age there is nothing to fear,’ she said” (Perekrest, 2006, para. 15). But *Izvestiya* war correspondent Viacheslav Izmailov disagreed: “She was afraid, very afraid. . . . But she considered it her duty to overcome fear and continue doing her work.” (Perekrest, 2006, para. 17). Iasen Zasurskii, dean of the journalism faculty at Moscow State University, provided an extremely powerful comment: he “said with a shaking voice” that “What happened with Anna Politkovskaya — that is our Russian tragedy, because they executed the conscience of Russian journalists” (Perekrest, 2006, para. 5).

The rest of the country, however, took a much different tack. President Vladimir Putin made no public comment until three days after the event, during a joint news conference with Merkel in Germany. At that time he downplayed the importance of Politkovskaya’s work. Echoing what many in the mainstream Russian media were saying, he asserted, “I must say that her political influence was insignificant inside the country and she was more noticeable in human rights and media circles in the West. In this regard — as one of [the] newspapers rightly stated today — the killing of Politkovskaya was more damaging for [the Russian] authorities and the Chechen

authorities in particular, than her publications” (Ostrovsky, 2006).<sup>4</sup> Both Putin and the majority of Russian newspapers suggested that the murder had little to do with her writing and much to do with enemies (specifically oligarchs who had fallen from favor in Russia) intent on embarrassing the country. “We have information, and it is reliable, that many people hiding from Russian justice have long been nurturing the idea of sacrificing somebody in order to create a wave of anti-Russia feeling in the world,” Putin said (“Aftermath of a Murder,” 2006).

Most Russian citizens seemed to embrace this belief, and the general attitude toward the crime within the country ranged from complete indifference (Ostrovsky, 2006; Roudakova, 2009) to outright pleasure. Many citizens were not happy with reporting that attacked the very man who had brought the country through its economic crisis of the 1990s and made it once again a world power with the trappings of a modern culture.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Meier (2007) agrees that, however unfortunate, Putin was right: “She seems eerily moved by a desire to leave a testament. Following a long tradition of Russian truth-tellers — be it Pyotr Chaadayev in the 1830s or Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s — she has recorded testimony not for domestic consumption, but for export” (para. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Even the country’s young people have come to view Putin as their savior. On the one-year anniversary of Politkovskaya’s death, the *New York Times* (“In Moscow,” 2007) offered a Reuters report on both the memorial to Politkovskaya held in Moscow’s Pushkin Square that attracted about 2,000 people, and a party in honor of Putin’s birthday along the Moskva River that was attended by about 5,000, many of whom were members of the Nashi [Ours], the country’s largest pro-Kremlin youth group. Reuters interviewed one 19-year-old woman, Daria Morina, who said, “I was 12, a young girl when Putin became president, but now our country is once again strong.” The article noted that she “wore an orange neck scarf, reminiscent of the Soviet-era Pioneer movement” and said that “the government had paid for the Nashi event.” When questioned about the Politkovskaya memorial, she responded, “I don’t know anything about Anna Politkovskaya. I’m not interested” (para. 14–16).



Kiselyov (2006) said that “The criticism that Politkovskaya expressed in her articles drove many to distraction, including the authorities in Moscow and their appointees in Chechnya, as well as many ordinary people who did not enjoy hearing unpleasant news. This frustration grew into hatred” (para. 7).<sup>6</sup> Eismont (2009) wrote:

While the world was shocked by the words of Vladimir Putin, who said that Anna’s murder “causes much more harm [to the Russian authorities] than her publications did,” Russian blogs and forums were filled with such gloating over her murder that Putin’s words sounded like praise in comparison. “Discussions of the death of Anna Politkovskaya on Internet forums is evidence that the reserve of human vileness is indeed inexhaustible,” wrote Andrei Babitsky, a Russian journalist famous for his coverage of the Chechen war.

The gloating over others’ misfortune, expressed with a clear conscience by thousands of ordinary citizens, who were far from being fanatic patriots, shows how little the country has strayed from the days when Soviet citizens could sincerely rejoice at the death of another “enemy of the people.” (128–129)

Similarly, Simonov (2009) said:

Some reports about the murder of Anna Politkovskaya were outrageously mean and cynical. While the rest of the world was holding memorial rallies to mourn her death and awarding the most prestigious journalistic prizes to her posthumously, some Russian newspapers whispered maliciously that Anna had held US citizenship – as if that made her less dead or less brutally murdered. (71)

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<sup>6</sup> Politkovskaya herself knew that she was not favored by Russian citizens. In an essay she wrote shortly before her assassination, she stated, “Of course I don’t like the derisive articles about me which constantly appear in other newspapers and on internet sites which have long presented me as the madwoman of Moscow. I find it disgusting to live this way, I would like a bit more understanding” (Popescu & Seymour-Jones, 2007, 222). For a small sample in English of the vitriolic responses to her death, see the commentary of Russian readers below Preston’s (2010) review of the latest collection of Politkovskaya’s work.

Even fellow journalists working for mainstream newspapers hesitated to show concern; guilt and shame may have compounded the problem for them. “The reaction [to her death] showed that there was no solidarity in the journalistic community, let alone in Russian society,” said longtime broadcaster Vladimir Pozner. “Many of her colleagues were very defensive because, deep down, they understood that they did not have the courage and principles that she had. The fact she stuck to her guns was a source of envy and shame and a kind of repudiation of what she did” (Ostrovsky, 2006). Kiselyov (2006) agreed: “Politkovskaya was a silent rebuke to many of her fellow journalists, who accepted the rules of the game as laid down by the authorities, rules that have cowed journalists into looking out for themselves, their careers and peace of mind above all else while subjecting themselves to relentless self-censorship” (para. 8).

These callous reactions to the murder suggest that Politkovskaya’s writings showed a distinct polyvalence. According to Condit (1989), “Polyvalence occurs when audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations” (106). Indeed, the ideas that Politkovskaya promoted and the stories she told were certainly considered by her countrymen to be inappropriate at best and dangerous to the administration at worst. In this situation, Politkovskaya’s writings were unmistakably about the Chechen war, but whereas the majority of Russians felt alienated by them, the international community embraced them as a body of work that performed a service to the people about whom she wrote. The Russian responses to the writings and to the person herself lead the world to suspect that something different must be at work in the Russian mind.

## **Roots in Russian Consciousness**

The Russian mind is, in fact, a critical component of how the Chechen War was understood. Any understanding of the Russian response must take into account the context of the country's historical and cultural consciousness. Tradition strongly influences how we learn within our respective cultures. In Russia, that tradition runs deep; as Downing (1992) stated, "the inheritance of 70 years of Soviet governmental, economic, and cultural (including media) traditions, together with centuries of Tsarism before that, will not vanish in a puff of perestroika" (155). What any public consciousness has learned previously creates the context for how it approaches what is current.

Context is a critical component of culture but one that is difficult to define. O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) tell us that "It refers to the entire array of stimuli surrounding every communication event — the context — and how much of that stimuli is meaningful" (54). More specifically, the filters learned during our early years teach us how to perceive our environments and how to interpret what is meaningful in the communications in which we take part. On a cultural level, O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) say:

High-context cultures assign meaning to many of the stimuli surrounding an explicit message. Low-context cultures exclude many of those stimuli and focus more intensely on the objective communication event, whether it be a word, a sentence, or a physical gesture. Thus in high-context cultures, verbal messages have little meaning without the surrounding context, which includes the overall relationship between all the people engaged in communication. In low-context cultures, the message itself means everything. (54; see also Hall & Hall, 1990)

In a high-context environment, then, “isolated events” do not occur; rather everything that happens is connected to all other events in time in a rich weave of context.

Carlson (2007) places the Russian culture into the high-context end of the cultural scale devised by Copeland and Griggs (1985), and she notes that, like members of other high-context cultures, Russians “not only keep in touch, they keep score — often over centuries. . . . [They] are obsessed by their past and often make an idol of their history” (5). She stresses further that to understand Russians and their culture, we cannot ignore their history, because “they themselves do not view any single event in their personal, communal, professional, or national lives as an isolated event; everything is contextualized by shared history, shared experience, shared kinship, shared friendship, shared enmities, and/or shared prejudices” (5).

The combination of these shared experiences, relationships and prejudices form what has been labeled “Russian exceptionalism.” Beissinger (1997) observes, “The issue of Russian exceptionalism arguably has been the dominant theme of Russian political discourse over the past two centuries and has been central in Western scholarship on Russia, as well” (477). McDaniel (1996) has written extensively on this metanarrative, which he refers to as “the Russian idea.” He defines it as “the conviction that Russia has its own independent, self-sufficient, and eminently worthy cultural and historical tradition that sets it apart from the West and guarantees its future flourishing” (11); it would be difficult, he says, “to find a complex of values that are more hostile to the logic of Western institutions among other leading civilizations” (26). Its government regimes and

tyranny, he says, “give to Russian history a distinct rhythm: a pattern of repeated social breakdown, with little capacity to build upon past failures” (17).<sup>7</sup>

Because Russia has always been an autocracy that has often imposed severe penalties even for suspected or perceived opposition, people have learned to adapt so they can communicate among themselves. Carlson (2007) observes that in their communications, “Meaning comes through context, so *direct* or *precise* communication is not particularly important. High context cultures communicate ‘between the lines’ (especially in those high context cultures where ‘direct’ communication might easily result in imprisonment)” (5). Simonov (1996) concurs, saying that, “In Soviet culture, the text itself was seldom the only or the definitive source of information. . . . People shaped by this history show little aptitude for sifting contradictory facts” (161). In addition, Simonov (1996) notes the continued preference of both Russian journalists and readers for “emotive rather than informational or ‘objective’ styles of reporting. Once they settle upon the ‘angle’ for a given story (whether they select it themselves or have it chosen for them by an editor or client), most journalists with roots in the Soviet era tend to ignore any facts that might contradict it” (161). Modern Russian journalism, according to

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<sup>7</sup> Erika Niedowski captured the intricacies of the Russian people in a note she sent to colleagues as she was permanently closing the Moscow bureau of the *Baltimore Sun* in 2007: “There is a saying: The more time you spend in Russia, the less you understand it. I still marvel at the contradictions: how Russians are at once sticklers for rules and adept flaunters of them. They will uncomplainingly stand in three separate lines to select, pay for and pick up an ice cream, yet they drive on the sidewalks and embrace a casual recklessness with such vigor that it’s actually driving life expectancy down. They admire strength and a strong hand — witness Putin’s popularity — but believe that their own fate is beyond their control. They love things vast and colossal, but speak in a language filled with diminutives. They can seem dismissive and cold on the surface, but are generous and warm to the core” (para. 5–6).

Sosnovskaya (2002), “has inherited a love of style and beautiful style for its own sake — interest in the form, instead of in the contents. In the Soviet period it was not necessary to check and recheck facts and/or the given information” (81).

Cultural influences, then, may leave Western news analysts in confusion, often forgetting that U.S. news reporting as we know it today developed within a democracy, whereas Russian reporting during approximately that same time period developed at the end of a tsarist rule and came of age in a Soviet regime. Wilson (1995) cautions us to consider that such Western influences as CNN and ABC news “may have predisposed Russians to look toward broadcast media for ‘objective’ Western-style reporting of news and information and created an entirely different role in that society for the press, a more culturally consistent role” (para. 5). The stories that the newspapers carry, then, will be expected to enact this “cultural consistency” as they create the stories and report on the news that the people share among themselves and with the rest of the world.

### **Constraints on the Stories**

Although she was an investigative journalist, Anna Politkovskaya created other stories with her writing, at the risk of personal peril, as she went head-to-head with Russia’s leader about the war and about his methods of governing. This fact indicates that she had intentions beyond simply relaying stories of the events unfolding in the Caucasus. The writings she produced not only in her regular reporting beat but also the books she published (e.g. Politkovskaya 2001, 2003, 2004) moved the world and reported on a different war and government than the one being shown to and understood by her Russian compatriots. Gould (2007) and Derlugian (2003) placed her “in a literary tradition extending from Tolstoy to Chekhov, in which the belletristic writer functions as society’s

conscience” (Gould, 2007, 17), making her first and foremost a publicist, which Isaiah Berlin described as such:

In Russia, social and political thinkers turned into poets and novelists, while creative writers often became publicists . . . no Russian writer was wholly free from the belief that to write was, first and foremost, to bear witness to the truth: that the writer, of all men, had no right to avert his gaze from the central issues of his day and society. (265–266)

Politkovskaya’s works also stood as a testament to her commitment to a free press — producing the story she believed in while risking personal safety both during the reporting and after the articles were published. Her actions embodied the beliefs she held, which, though running counter to the many myths that form the idea of Russian exceptionalism, were nevertheless sufficiently important to her that she relayed them in hopes of influencing a more democratic Russia.

Within the context of Russian culture, however, this was not an easy task. The newspaper for which she chose to work meant she had a limited audience from the start. Independent newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* have a fairly small circulation. Bessudnov (2008) explains that in Russia today,

The tabloids and nonpolitical monthly magazine sector has developed rapidly and a clearer distinction has emerged between broadsheets and tabloids. Independent broadsheets are read mainly in the big cities by a limited number of people; tabloids, in general more supportive of the Kremlin, enjoy a much wider circulation. Another trend is the formation of big media holding companies that may own several publications at the same time. In the 1990s, media ownership was seen as an instrument for political pressure. Now this model hardly works any more, and media has become a business. (185)

The difference in readership between the mass circulation newspapers, which enjoy a large following, and the considerably smaller readership numbers of the “serious” publications, “underlines the struggle of the independent media to make any meaningful

impact in politics and society” (Arutunyan, 2009, 16–17). By writing for a newspaper with a limited audience that was more educated and globally conscious than the majority of citizens, then, Politkovskaya was limited in the number of people she would influence.

Another factor limiting her Russian audience was that, as a writer, Politkovskaya wore two hats. She was an investigative journalist, dedicated to free speech rights and to reporting the truth she saw, who strove to uncover the activities within the Putin government that were moving the Russian people away from its new democratic form of government. She rooted out these stories, listened to her sources, and followed her leads to their ends. But in addition, she was a human rights advocate who embedded herself among the people about whom she was reporting, becoming emotionally involved in their plights and working to educate the world about the abuses that the Russian government was perpetrating on both the Chechen people and on Russian soldiers.<sup>8</sup> While some sources applauded her skills, others suggested that her work was biased and deceitful and that “despite a brave and sincere commitment to unraveling corruption and atrocities wherever possible, Politkovskaya’s priorities as a journalist focused more on accusing and less on reporting” (Arutunyan 2006).

Politkovskaya also may have lacked an audience because that audience was also limited by the reality that throughout Russian/Soviet history, and especially since the

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<sup>8</sup> Meier (2007) notes that this was a label Politkovskaya wore proudly: “Politkovskaya’s first job in journalism, envious colleagues snickered, was in the Otdel pisem — the letters department. True or not, she reveled in her reputation. Politkovskaya practiced advocacy journalism. For more than 20 years her beat remained the same. Her subjects were the forsaken — frostbitten Russian conscripts, Chechen refugees, orphans, prisoners, drug addicts, the ill, the infirm. In short, in the age of Putin, the nation at large. Her writing made her more than a reporter; when she died, she was a crisis mediator and Russia’s most prominent human rights advocate” (para. 7).



beginning of the Putin administration, reporters who have opposed the government or held strong opinions have been censored, either outright or by being relegated to fringe media. Of Politkovskaya, Chivers (2006) said, “Her commentary on Russian television had long ago ceased, as dissenters were forced from the air by Mr. Putin’s brand of message management. And her books, translated into several languages, are almost impossible to find here, echoing the days of samizdat. . . . They had done what they could to push Ms. Politkovskaya and her lot to the margins” (para. 12–13). Ostrovsky (2006) concurred: “The Kremlin worked hard to shelter the Russian public from Politkovskaya’s work and to render her life irrelevant: she was barred from appearing on Russian television and quoting from her articles could land a reporter or a publication in trouble.” Babchenko (2008) further noted that, “One of the leading information agencies has two thick catalogues listing forbidden themes, banned individuals and words. Among these are ‘Chechnya’, ‘war’, ‘fighter’, ‘Beslan’, ‘Nord-Ost’ [the play *North-East*, referring to the Moscow Dubrovka theater siege in 2002], ‘hostages’, ‘Politkovskaya’ and so on” (119).

Politkovskaya in fact found it difficult to contend with these constraints, although to the Russian government’s way of thinking, they were justified. To put in perspective just how far Politkovskaya stepped beyond the boundaries drawn by the mainstream journalists, Babchenko (2008) offered the following about media in Soviet times:

the state did not just keep track of information, it also produced it. No other view was allowed to exist. Those who dared to think differently ended up in prison or were forced into psychiatric hospitals.

Censorship in Russia today is of a far worse, far more dangerous form: an information vacuum. By information vacuum, I mean something that is neither a straightforward lie nor the withholding of facts. It is an oblivious state of mind, not unlike a reality TV show, bearing no

resemblance to the truth. The murder of Anna Politkovskaya is a plain example. (116–117)<sup>9</sup>

Politkovskaya's was not the only murder. Statistics vary, but Morin and Samaranayake (2007) assert that "Twelve journalists have been killed since Putin came to power in 2000, and most of the cases remain unsolved" (para. 14).

Threats and punishments such as these could serve not only to prevent some of the voices that echoed Politkovskaya's, but also to warn those who read such materials, making it easier for the average Russian to turn from such writings and remain unwilling to entertain their content. After all, Putin's narrative had the audience advantage, being the one most prominently published by the "big business" of media, which strives to remain in the Kremlin's good graces. The administration's stories provided a tidy package of facts that were easy for the public to understand, and it offered all the information the people needed — or perhaps wanted.

It was left to media in the rest of the world to translate Politkovskaya's work and

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<sup>9</sup> In her report on the November 2010 beating of journalist Oleg Kashin, Barry (November 6, 2010) illustrates the hatred that some Russians continue to hold for journalists who, like Politkovskaya, continue to support and give voice to anti-government ideas:

In August, after Mr. Kashin published an interview with an activist who had attacked a government building in Khimki, a column headlined "Journalist-Betrayers Should Be Punished" appeared on Molodaya Gvardiya's Web site.

Representatives of Molodaya Gvardiya were not available for comment on Saturday.

The article calls Kommersant's reporters "not only enemies of the entire Russian people and all decent and law-abiding people, but—genuine traitors," and calls on Mr. Kashin to identify his source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The article is illustrated with Mr. Kashin's photograph stamped with the words "will be punished." (para. 15–17)

disseminate it to the broader international audience.

### **How the Popular Press Sees Her**

The global community beyond Russia's borders remembered the days of the Cold War and did not adhere to this same "cultural consistency" as the former Soviet state. To readers across the globe, Politkovskaya's writing told a discrete, factual story of the Chechen debacle. It was clear that, as a professionally trained journalist, Politkovskaya was dedicated to free speech and to uncovering the truth from wherever she was reporting. Her critiques of the Putin administration and of the atrocities being perpetrated on the Chechen people by the Russian army and Chechen warlords won her accolades and awards around the world, especially in the West, which hoped to see Russia follow in the tracks of its own democracies. The Chechen dispatches earned the world's praise in part because of Politkovskaya's writing talent and willingness to thrust herself into dangerous situations and war zones; in part it seemed to be because her writings supported and verified the beliefs of those governments that opposed Russian incursions into territories whose sovereignty remained in question.

The very existence of the diametrically opposed views — Russia versus the world — of one journalist's writings points to the need for further study of this rich body of work. Yet while the historical, political, and contextual factors bearing on these writings contribute to explaining Politkovskaya's lack of influence within her own country, no one to date has examined the contents of her writings beyond generally labeling them as one-sided; the popular press has offered analyses in tidy summaries that label her work as inflammatory, anti-Putin, or pro-Chechen. Typical is the comment by Hearst (2006), who refers to Politkovskaya's writing as an "excoriating series of articles and two books

baring Russia's soul to the atrocities committed in its name" (para. 8). Danilova (2006) said that the reporter "chronicled the killings, tortures and beatings of civilians by Russian servicemen in Chechnya in reports that put her on a collision course with the authorities but won her numerous international awards" (para. 6), and that "She also wrote a book critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his military campaign in Chechnya, documenting widespread abuse of civilians by government troops" (para. 8).

The fact that Politkovskaya attacked Putin so often and so openly is the central theme of much that has been written about her. For example, Mainville (2006) said, "She wrote, often in harrowing detail, of topics that have become off-limits for nearly all other journalists in Russia and broke the biggest taboo of all by criticizing Putin himself" (para. 4). Button (2006) added,

Although Politkovskaya never wrote anything that directly implicated him in abuses, no one did more to expose the brutality of his war against Muslim separatists and the wider population in Chechnya. She hated him, she wrote, "for his cynicism, for his racism, his lies, for the massacre of the innocents that went on throughout his first term as President. (para. 6)

Politkovskaya's editor, Oleg Khlebnikov, was more blunt: "Politkovskaya was permanently criticising the Kremlin," he said (Smith 2006, para. 4).

On the surface, these brief summaries of her writings may be true. Her readers on both sides of the Chechen issue recognized her work as having a specific agenda, and they knew that any article she produced would shed light on "inconvenient truths" about the Russian government and about the seemingly endless war with the Chechens. This superficial explanation, however, does not offer a complete understanding of the influence and purpose of her writing for readers both within Russia and worldwide. Communication scholars have not sufficiently weighed in on the matter.

## How the Academics See Her

To date, little critical work has been done *about* Politkovskaya's work to explicate why it failed to influence her fellow Russians (beyond the previously discussed conjectures that addressed the structure of news in Russia and the general disregard for opposition writers and independent media). No English-language biography has been written, and summary analyses are as common in the academic press as in the popular works. Finkelstein (2008), for example, said simply that Politkovskaya was an "outspoken critic of Putin and his policies" (133). Of her work *A Russian Diary*, Meier (2007) offers a bit more on the topics of her reporting:

She gives us a near-stenographic record of her country's descent: the emergence of a petrostate fueled by rising oil prices, as well as a willingness to sacrifice civil liberties along with, when necessary, its own citizens. She has left us, at her best, a C-Span reel of the dismemberment of the Russian body politic. The set pieces read like an unfiltered newsfeed that reveals the greater malaise: Putin at a Kremlin roundtable encircled by cowed former dissidents (an unseemly display of mutual false admiration); the meltdown of the liberal politician Grigory Yavlinsky (once the Great Russian Hope of Westernizers in Moscow and of the Clinton administration) and the rise of Ramzan Kadyrov, the "deranged" and "virtually brain-dead" "lunatic" warlord Putin tapped to rule Chechnya. There's also a reprise — running eight pages — of a Putin telethon phone-in, his "virtual dialogue with the country" that has become an annual fixture, the equivalent of a sweeps-season special on state television. (para. 4)

This, however, is little more than a book review, and offers no specific insight into Politkovskaya's content. He further suggests that she "has given us, and her compatriots, a gift — a new Russian journalism. Her insightful black humor will come as a relief to readers of the weighty tomes that have charted the Putin years" (para. 5).

Preston (2010), offering a review of the most recent collection of her dispatches

— *Anna Politkovskaya: Nothing But the Truth, Selected Dispatches*, translated by Arch Tait — referred to her writing as “conversational, direct” (para. 3), and said that in her writing, she “never relents, never holds back. Her revulsion for the wild men of the Red Army . . . is constant and corrosive” (para. 4). In reviewing the U.S. release of the same volume — *Is Journalism Worth Dying For? Final Dispatches* — Garner (2011) said that Politkovskaya “wrote sentences that fit her subject: her prose was mostly hard and balefully direct, wormy with unpleasant truths” (para. 2) and that “Her warmth and gregarious humanity flood the margins of this volume, placing the horrors she witnessed in an even more appalling light” (para. 3). While she was “devoted to facts” (para. 13), he says, she also “was capable of surreal distinctions” (para. 16).

After the assassination, Azhgikhina (2006) addressed Politkovskaya’s content broadly by placing her within the category of women writers:

there is a separate sector of the media, the women’s reporting; which continues, at some point, rehabilitation of our profession, reminding us of principles of civil service, of conscience, responsibility and sympathy for those who are poor and weak. Generally, editors get tired of these kind [*sic*] of reporting, which goes beyond the limits of genres and editorial policies, and ignores the principles of political expediency. These women reporters show to an average reader some non-traditional priorities, like a baby’s tear or a personal responsibility of each of us for the developments in the country. These strange women cover war in their own way, noticing people’s faces and the details that remain invisible to the majority of war reporters: ill children, lost and forgotten olds [*sic*], captured soldiers, broken-hearted parents of peaceful victims and other. It happens not only in Russia, but practically in the entire world, where women reporters write on the tragic events. Their view on these events is not liked by everyone; but without this precise and intent women’s look the picture of the today’s world would not be full. (3)

Again, however, this author does little more than place Politkovskaya’s writing within a broader genre and attempts to explain her caring attitude.

In 2007, Michaela Pohl wrote in the academic journal *Problems of Post-Communism* of Politkovskaya's obsession with the corruption of Ramzan Kadyrov during the last years of her life. Her opinion was that "Politkovskaya's reporting was not objective. She took the side of civilians, of families, of the weak and orphaned" (32), but also that she was "one of Russia's brightest and most dedicated citizens and one of the worlds' most courageous writers" (38). This article, however, was more a remembrance and dedication to her, explaining the problems of Kadyrov, Politkovskaya's subjective reporting, and the unfavorable opinions of her expressed by Russians and Chechens alike.

Rebecca Gould (2007) also examined Politkovskaya's representation of war as coming from an "engaged outsider," providing "a counterexample to the borrowed ethnographic authority of Western journalism. Her explicit goal as a journalist was not simply to provide objective documentation but to incite political change" (15). Gould suggests that Politkovskaya employed three strategies in her reporting: the naïve reader who took what she heard literally; the fighter of euphemism, whose words indicated "that a hazy relationship between rhetoric and reality is a precondition for a popular war" (19); and a dialogic writer, who "assumes the position of an engaged outsider in her writing, and thereby brings her subjectivity into the public sphere along with the subjectivities of those she writes about" (20). This analysis, however, speaks more to the *way* Politkovskaya wrote rather than to the actual weight of the content itself.

Natalia Roudakova (2009) also stepped away from the content of the writing to suggest that the Russian indifference toward Anna Politkovskaya is embedded in the "specific history of media-political transformation in Russia" during the past 20 years. This, she said, required approaching Soviet journalism "as a unique nexus of ethics and

politics” (413). In Soviet times, she explained, it was ultimately the journalists’ responsibility to react to situations of social suffering brought to their attention and to use their resources and skills to put an end to that suffering,” but that “these particular ‘emergency measures’ were carried out by journalists *without* the writing of articles” (416). When media privatization occurred in the 1990s, the journalists were caught between the centrifugal forces of expanding their reach, counteracted by the centripetal pull of Putin in reining them in. The resulting tension and fragmentation resulted in “the emergence of a powerful and widespread discourse of journalism as ‘prostitution,’ and a collapse of trust in journalism among readers, listeners, and viewers” (422). In part, it was this distrust, Roudakova suggests, that kept the Russian readers from caring about the loss.

Taken together, these academic and popular treatments acknowledge the Politkovskaya who wrote often-inflammatory pieces and informed the world about a crisis in her country being perpetrated by her government. These writings, however, do not provide a full understanding of the work as a whole. One critical piece of the analysis is still lacking in the literature.

### **Theory: The Missing Piece**

Any study of what Anna Politkovskaya attempted to accomplish as a journalist and advocate and why her writings proved so divisive and ultimately ineffective is incomplete without examining how the content of the texts themselves may have been limiting. A rhetorical analysis of her writings can explain why her stories did not resonate with the general Russian reader; such analysis is appropriate because Politkovskaya was a storyteller as much as a reporter. As Tuchman (1976) observed, “Being a reporter who



deals in facts and being a story-teller who produces tales are not antithetical activities”

(96). In addition:

To say that a news report is a story, no more, but no less, is not to demean news, nor to accuse it of being fictitious. Rather, it alerts that news, like all public documents, is a constructed reality possessing its own internal validity. As selective reality, rather than a synthetic reality as in literature, news reports exist in and of themselves. They are public documents that lay a world before us. (97)

How, then, did her rhetoric contribute to the world’s understanding of the Chechen situation and the Putin administration in general, and why did her own countrymen, who could have been the most enlightened by what she had found, reject her story and her messages?

The answers to these questions may lie in the deeper content of her stories, which challenged the people and their beliefs, especially the metanarrative of Russian exceptionalism and the foundational myths that created it. Ettema and Glasser (1988) explain that:

Investigative journalism defends traditional virtue by telling stories of terrible vice. The value of justice, for example, is affirmed in stories of outrageous injustice. Like a number of other story forms, investigative journalism maintains and sometimes updates consensual interpretations of right and wrong, innocence and guilt, by applying them to the case at hand, though it seldom analyzes or critiques such interpretations. (11)

Further, these authors explain that “the moral force brought to bear” in the investigative reports are largely “the result of skillfully crafted stories of victimization” at the hands of a system over which they have no control. Innocence, they say, “must be painstakingly *made real* through narrative” (13). An analysis of a journalist’s rhetoric, then, may tell us whether the Russian readers recognized that her writing ran counter to their own beliefs

of innocence and righteousness; the work may in fact place blame or place shame on the people who allowed it to happen.

In the current international political climate, with Russia's form of government remaining a question mark and its commitment to standard Western democratic principles just as uncertain, it is important to analyze, from a rhetorical perspective, the messages being delivered by those who both seek a different system and desire justice for the disenfranchised; this can contribute to a clearer understanding of the types of journalistic messages and stories that prove most successful in achieving desired goals. To better elucidate Politkovskaya's messages and meanings during a time of fear about the very "terrorist" culture that she sought to help, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of several collections of her work to understand why her message failed to attract the attention of the Russian people — and in fact often antagonized them — while it earned accolades throughout the rest of the world. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of the type of rhetoric that affects the Russian cultural consciousness specifically, and how this type of reporting might play out in the future as the Russian people work to build a stronger journalistic tradition that might help them address any weaknesses they might see in their country.<sup>10</sup>

This research offers a new perspective on this journalist's writings by contributing to the scholarship of three different areas. *First*, it shows how, in her attempt to influence her Russian readers to demand a more humane course of action, her narrative actually distanced her readers and turned them against her narrative and ultimately against her because she countered the myths that formed their identities and their beliefs in Russian

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<sup>10</sup> Tapper (2011) is a good example of how concern for a free press is already expressing itself in the country's top journalism school.

exceptionalism. *Second*, it confirms the power of foundational myths, cultural beliefs, and history by illustrating how deeply embedded these beliefs are in that culture and way of thinking. *Third*, it contributes to a better understanding of how foundational myths should or should not be used in journalistic writing that attempts to effect change by constraining audience responses.

Because Politkovskaya wrote from a humanitarian perspective rather than from a specifically Russian one, and because she wanted change in Chechnya regardless of how it came about, she clearly intended from the outset to reach both national and international audiences. For example, when she wrote about the deplorable conditions in Chechnya, she blamed not only Putin directly, but often she spoke to the rest of the world. In *Small Corner of Hell*, she chastises the international community for the continually deteriorating conditions in the Caucasus region:

How could this have happened, in front of the whole world? Under the “supervision” of international observers, the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, Doctors of the World, the Salvation Army, human rights advocates — our own and foreign? Even in the presence of Putin’s presidential special ambassador for the observance of human rights in the zone of antiterrorist operations? (43)

Any of her dispatches, then, would have been valuable to analyze; any could be read and understood as polyvalent texts, although she intended through that writing to create one desired outcome: public outrage and demand for an end to the abuses.

To best represent her writings, I chose first to analyze *Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (2003), translated by Alexander Burry and Tatiana Tulchinsky. This volume includes some of her earliest reporting from the region, beginning in late 1999. It offers insight into some of her earlier impressions of the

conflict and her earlier attempts at war correspondence. The second work I analyzed was the more recently published *Nothing but the truth: Selected dispatches* (2011), translated by Arch Tait. This volume not only offered the interpretations of a different translator (a British citizen rather than a Russian national), but it also covered dispatches written much later in the war, through 2005. This provided a collection of texts from a time in her career when she had become more brazen in her attacks against the Russian government and the world.

In the chapters that follow, I offer first a brief biography of the reporter and responses to her assassination; a history of Russian journalism and the context of the developing Russian media, especially the 1990s and 2000s; a discussion about how the Chechen War developed and played into the troubles during the immediate post-Soviet era; and a discussion of the importance of history and the foundational myths in the Russian culture. Background of the “Russian Myth” or the “Russian Idea” was also necessary for understanding the specifics of the Russian culture. I then devote a chapter each to the selected volumes, providing in each a thorough analysis with significant examples of each of the primary myths and ideas represented and how these might have been perceived. Finally, I provide a discussion of the results, implications for this work and the contributions it makes to the field, and suggestions for further research.

This research is significant to those in areas of international communication; it illuminates the misunderstandings of mass communication that can occur when cultural contexts are ignored or misread in an attempt to effect specific actions. Mass communicators also need to take note of these aspects of national identity if they hope to be successful with their messages or to encourage and influence change in behaviors in

both their own and other countries. Technology and social media have helped speed up the process of globalization, but in many ways communicators are not ready for the backlash of problems that develop in this integration when cultures fail to understand or plan for the exigencies of the cultures with which they are communicating. The best way to work within these constraints is to understand the cultural context.

## Chapter Two

### Cultural Context and the Russian Mind

History, culture, and journalism in every society share a tight bond, and aspects of each influence the others. Cultural behaviors, religious beliefs, and past experiences vary from country to country and have different influences on the expected role of the press and the journalists reporting the news.<sup>1</sup> Researchers who ignore the cultural and historical differences that are the foundations of the societies they study do these societies a great disservice. Lotman and Uspenskii suggest that culture,

a system of collective memory and collective consciousness — is at the same time a unified value structure for the group. A culture's need for self-description, coupled with the necessity, at a certain stage, for a unified structuring of its values, has a strong effect on the culture being described. (1985, 30–31)

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<sup>1</sup> Some of Michael Schudson's observations, aimed specifically at the West, hold true for any country. Journalists, he says, "live in the public eye. They are uninsulated from public scrutiny – they have no recondite language, little fancy technology, no mirrors and mysteries to shield them from the public. There are strong reasons for journalists to seek publicly-appealing moral norms to protect them from criticism, embarrassment, or lawsuits, and to give them guidance in their work to prevent practices that would provoke criticism or even lawsuits, and to endow their occupation with an identity they can count as worthy" (2001, 165–166). Nevertheless, he also notes, "A variety of moral norms could achieve the ends of providing public support and insulation from criticism. Journalists work in Germany or China or Cuba or Argentina with norms that differ from the objectivity norm. To understand the emergence of a norm historically, it is necessary to understand not only the general social conditions that provide incentives for groups to adopt "some" norm but the specific cultural circumstances that lead them to adopt the specific norm they do" (2001, 165–166)

Therefore, it is critical for researchers to understand how these norms in the country under study are constructed in order to determine whether a journalist has acted in a manner appropriate to these constructed beliefs and expectations.<sup>2</sup>

For this study, then, the norms of journalism in Russia and journalism's function in that culture should be expected to differ from what we see in the West, and the journalists there should be expected to follow these norms in order to be protected from certain types of criticism, and, at the extreme, physical danger from the people about whom they wrote. Within Russian journalism, the normative form of writing and reporting that has predominated developed from the country's rich and unusual history. Although many in the West have expected a free press to develop spontaneously within the new "democracy" (Koltsova 2006, 5; Carlson 2007, 3), Russia, in many respects, is still struggling to find its way as a "new" country while retaining deep-seated beliefs. Therefore, those who hope to understand the country and why certain forms of journalism are accepted while others are not need to understand three aspects of news coverage there: (1) why media coverage is expected to proceed in a specific way, (2) why, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian media have not evolved as might be expected

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<sup>2</sup> Dahlgren (2009) describes news media in terms of constructionism, saying, "[Media] are shaped by internal organizational, economic, and technical features as well as by external societal conditions" (3). Most researchers agree that our histories shape our concepts of and relation to journalism. Coronel (2008), for example, notes that, "Since the late 17th Century, Enlightenment theorists had argued that publicity and openness provide the best protection from the excesses of power. The idea of the press as Fourth Estate, as an institution that exists primarily as a check on those in public office, was based on the premise that powerful states had to be prevented from overstepping their bounds. The press working independently of government, even as its freedoms were guaranteed by the state, was supposed to help ensure that this was so" (2). How journalists view their work also varies by culture, although some commonalities exist.

of a burgeoning democracy, and (3) why the population may respond to certain news stories as it does.

### **Coverage of Media Events**

Media reporters in Russia work within the confines of specific limitations. Although the degree of constraint varies with the times, journalists there have been, for the most part, expected to accept and forward to the people the government's spin and facts on situations without overtly questioning them. Media's purpose is less to uncover news than to announce what the government says is news, and to reassure the people that the government has control of the situation, whatever that may be. As such, it is not for the media to probe too excessively nor is their job to criticize too harshly; if they were to do either, they would be shut down or eliminated as outlets, because so much of Russian media is supported with government funding. Media merely serve as the conduit from the government to the people. Such action, rather than being viewed as censorship as it is in the West, has historically been accepted as simply the right course of action; the Marxist-Leninist theory of journalism is based on the premise that the government knows best what is right for the country's development.

Although journalism in the West developed differently, it is simply a different human construct of how such a system should work. Therefore, in order for Westerners to fully understand this system, they need to appreciate how deeply embedded and widely accepted the concept of publishing and censorship are in the country. The two have gone hand-in-hand in Russia since 1551 with the Orthodox Church's Stoglav compilation, which not only "dictated Church affairs" but also "established rules for book printing and manuscript editing" (Arutunyan 2009, 58). In the seventeenth century, religious



repression became even more severe following the schism in the Church, and priests felt the need to censor even some of the folk literature. The Church retained this tight control over the printed word until Peter the Great initiated his Westernizing reforms in 1701 and showed his determination to bring Russia out of what he considered its “backwardness.” In the course of his plan to finally separate Church from state, he successfully wrested control of publishing from the Orthodox Church, only to situate this power within the government, from which it has since never really left. This move resulted in a backlash from the Church, which Peter resolved in 1701 with a decree denying the religious leaders the right to “wield pen and ink” (Arutunyan 2009, 59).

With this power over publishing, Peter now needed a forum for his ideas. Like much else that is Russia, newspapers were an idea borrowed from the West, and Peter created Russia’s first newspaper, *Vedomosti* [*Register*; later came to be used generally for “newspaper”] in 1702. The top-down structure of this publication meant that from the start, the government retained tight control over the content. Peter, as did many of the leaders after him, personally edited much of the content (Arutunyan 2009, 59). Although she refers to Peter’s westernizing efforts, including newspapers, as “messianic,” Anna Arutunyan notes that “Russian journalism in its early years was characterized not by what it had, but by what it lacked: the idea of information as commodity, of facts being valued in and of themselves” (2009, 4). As such, Russian news agencies, as they developed, could not even begin to compete with those in Europe, and in 1870, Europe’s three largest agencies — Reuters, Havas, and Wolff — divided the world into “colonial” territories that they would cover; Russian news fell to the German Wolff agency. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, under the direction of finance minister

Sergei Witte, that Russia began to take the role of journalism more seriously in the hopes of better controlling its media content apart from what Wolff reported about the country (McReynolds, 1990, 48–50). Only under Nicholas II, then, were Russians finally beginning to consider the role of the press in an industrialized society and the importance of being able to self-determine how the country was presented internationally.

Hanno Hardt (2001) has evaluated the functions the press usually serves in a society by examining early social theories of the media. He calls the press:

an original, powerful medium for exchanging ideas and advancing the time- and space-binding activities of society in conceptualizations of Western civilization. But newspapers, as technologies of dissemination, are also instruments of political power that play a major role in defining the social and political realities of everyday life; they supply identities, articulate public opinion, and enhance industrial and economic progress as indispensable organizers of public sentiments. (4)

It was this concept of newspapers as instruments of political power that Vladimir Lenin focused on as he was borrowing from Karl Marx. When the Bolsheviks swept into power with the Russian Revolution of 1917, Lenin told the Communist press that it would become “an instrument of propaganda, agitation, and organization” (Hardt 2001, 38). He expressed a fear of the bourgeoisie — a worldwide class that he claimed was much stronger than the Soviet Union. Therefore, he believed, “Freedom of the press in Soviet Russia, surrounded by enemies around the world, is freedom of political organization for the bourgeoisie”; given that fear, Lenin believed a free press was a “means to facilitate the work of our enemy, to help our class enemy. But we don’t want to end in suicide, and that is why we will not do it” (Arutunyan 2009, 68). From that point forward, the concept of a free press was embedded in the culture and the language as an evil that could potentially bring down the Soviet system; this is how generations of Russians and

journalists were raised, and for all of them alive at the time of the fall of the Soviet government in 1991, it was what they knew. The government and its media were tightly linked for the good of the citizens, and during some regimes (for example, the Stalin era), restrictions and propagandizing occurred more frequently than others.

Nevertheless, the profession of “journalist” during Soviet times was an honored one, and it was considered to have some power connected with it. As Anna Arutunyan has stated:

When we look at the origins of Russian journalism, developing in a nation with a remarkably low literacy rate and deep social chasms between the educated class and the rest of the population, it comes as no surprise that the role and the image of the journalist was forged from the start as something between a pedagogue and a demagogue. (2009, 103; see also Roudakova 2009, Wolfe 2005)

In Soviet history, then, journalism resonated with the citizenry, and it served a specific function in relation to the government. In describing the link of political and moral components within Soviet governance, Roudakova (2009) says that most Soviet people “accepted socialism as a legitimate form of government, particularly where it came to the state’s promise of adhering to modernist ideals of equality, rationality, and human self-realization,” but concurrently “the practice of ‘actually-existing socialism’ often left much to be desired, and this experience of a ‘disconnect’ between socialist ideals and their implementation” provided the opportunity for Soviet journalists “to ‘repair’ those disjunctures” (414–415).

The Soviet press did, in fact, have a connection with the people and a power to intercede on their behalf. Throughout the Soviet period, Simon (2004) says, “the print media dominated the scene with the two major national dailies, Pravda and Izvestiya,

enjoying enormous circulations. Local and regional newspapers were also read by large sections of the population” (170). Citizens wrote to these journalists about a wide variety of personal grievances with state agencies; the party tolerated this, Roudakova (2009) says, because of “Lenin’s dictum that the Soviet press must maintain ‘a healthy amount of criticism and self-criticism’ as part of socialism’s self-regulating mechanism” (415). Often journalistic intervention made a difference:

Trusting neither the courts nor Soviet organizations, [the citizens] often appealed to newspapers as a last resort for help in establishing the truth. And the newspapers were often able to help — to get people their jobs back, to have them released from jail, or to re-establish justice in situations where people suffered injustice. . . . Journalists were respected.  
(Azhgikhina 2007, 1250)

Roudakova supports this contention with a selection from a Russian journalism textbook that lists 28 categories of problems that journalists solved for citizens *without* the use of a written article; these included such activities as finding jobs for people; reinstating job contracts, college enrollments and college stipends; providing apartments; helping with hospitalization; and sending alcoholics to rehabilitation centers (2009, 416). Similarly, Wolfe (2005) describes a personal interview with Aleksei Shliapov, a columnist for *Izvestiya* who had worked in newspapers since the early 1960s. According to Wolfe, Shliapov

described a journalism that had been *useful*, although in ways that appeared unfamiliar in comparison to the capitalist press. The difference was not only that the Soviet press served as a means of acting . . . on behalf of the “Soviet little man,” as a kind of moral agency above society and apart from the state, one that descended whenever possible to help put a life back on track. The newspaper was also a never-ending almanac where Soviet persons would be tutored into socialist consciousness, and journalists explored the problem of socialist conduct. (xix)

This idea in the Soviet consciousness — and of the press working for the good of the people — mirrors the Western ideals of the press serving the public, albeit in a different way. Roudakova (2009) notes that Soviet journalists held a unique social and cultural position in society: Although they were effectively the party-state, history also connected them with the *intelligentsia*, “that elusive social and cultural category that in Eastern Europe has always connected impeccable *moral* integrity and a perceived duty to put one’s education and social and cultural capital to use for the betterment of society” (417). Therefore, it was from this vantage point that journalists entered the period of *perestroika*, and, in an interesting twist, “the Soviet press . . . [was] leading the processes of *perestroika*” (Vachnadze 1992, ix). Their experiment with an open press, however, proved to be short-lived.

### **Media Evolution Since the Soviet Fall**

When speaking of the state of Russian journalism today, Moscow journalist and professor Nadezhda Azhgikhina (2007) said, “The shame and the pride of contemporary Russian journalism are both direct consequences of our recent history — a history so accelerated and contradictory that it is hard to believe it all happened in such a short space of time. Everyone’s personal recollections are contradictory as well” (1249). The changes in that country in the past 25 years have in fact been monumental. Pasti & Pietläinen (2008) suggest that most analyses divide this historic time just prior to the fall and everything afterward into three categories: up to 1995, 1996–1999, and from 2000 on (109). Zassoursky (2002) sets the beginning date in spring of 1986, during the Gorbachev years and the introduction of *glasnost*, and says that throughout these time periods, media “transition from an administrative-bureaucratic model toward the market and

democratization has been closely connected with the transition of Russian politics from Soviet authoritarianism to democratic pluralism” (89).

For most Russians, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 seemed to mark the turning point from strict Soviet rule to greater freedom of expression. This was the first year the Russian government allowed Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s critical *Gulag Archipelago* to appear in print (Benn 1996, 471). Azhgikhina described the period as:

a wonderful time, full of hope, joy, potential, infinite romanticism, reality indivisible from illusion and inexhaustible enthusiasm. The country was discovering the truth about the past and the present, beginning to breathe more freely and acknowledging the vast world that was leaping out from under the rising Iron Curtain. (Azhgikhina 1999, 33)

During the next few years, journalists took advantage of their ability to question the government, often to the dismay of government officials and certainly to the dislike of those still devoted to Communism. Maria Eismont (2009) relates a specific story about the overturn of the government in August 1991:

When the State Committee of the State of Emergency seized power in the early morning of 19 August 1991, in a dramatic attempt to stop President Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform of the Soviet Union, one of its first actions was to take control of the media. Tatyana Malkina, a 24-year-old reporter from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, pointedly asked Gennady Yanayev, the chief conspirator, ‘Could you please say whether or not you believe that last night you carried out a coup d’etat [*gosudarstvennyi perevorot*]?’ Many analysts and observers later referred to this question as the tipping point of the news conference.

The whole press corps contributed to transforming a show of political force into comic farce and a PR disaster: reporters asked Yanayev about the state of his health and cameramen took close shots of the conspirator’s trembling hands. (123)

This scene illustrates the extent to which Soviet government officials were unaccustomed to dealing with a press corps that was free to question their moves and motives.

The new government that followed the fall of the Soviet Union seemed committed at first to maintaining this freedom for media reporters. In September 1991 the government created the State Inspectorate to Protect the Freedom of the Press and Mass Information (Richter 2002), and December 1991 saw passage of the Law on the Mass Media, which first introduced the idea of press freedom. This was followed by Article 29 of the Russian Constitution, which prohibited censorship and guaranteed free access to information, freedom of thought, and “the right to seek, receive, disseminate, produce or distribute information by any legal means” (Simon 2004, 171).

In the freedom of *perestroika*, journalists were encouraged to uncover the country’s past and present truths, says Roudakova, and as members of the *intelligentsia*, they began to assert their “right not only to *moral* but to *political* leadership as well”; however, she says, as members of the Fourth Estate, they were less the well-known watchdogs of power and more leaders in the sense that Carlyle meant: as heroic modern men of letters to whom the public would pay heed (2009, 418).

With the fall of the Soviet government in August 1991, the Communist Party’s holdings were nationalized. The new leadership gave local administrations greater autonomy, and national newspapers began to lose readership to regional papers as local issues became increasingly important to the Russians. Different political parties began publishing their own papers, but “In a climate of political apathy and distrust of politicians, it was hard to expect growth or stability in the political parties’ press” (Richter 2002, 8–9). Soon, sharply rising costs of newsprint and printing meant papers were losing money as they attempted to keep up runs on presses with technology at least 50 years behind that used by the West (Richter 2002, 13).

During this time, Western influence crept in as a new market opened in business and financial publications. Economic reforms within the country and new business practices meant that owners and investors needed guidance and information in the new market economy. Western-style advertising, which did not exist in Soviet times, now appeared, and influential media sources such as *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* provided guidance in the media professions (Koikkalainen, 2008).

By 1993 and 1994, however, privatized media were already showing signs of strain in Russia's shift to capitalism and democracy. As the well-documented economic collapse began, Russian citizens had less and less income, and businesses struggled with hyperinflation, meaning that the advertising rubles and formerly strong circulation numbers upon which print media depended were disappearing (Roudakova 2009, 418). Some of the larger papers invested their money or entered into contracts with foreign newspapers. A few mass circulation newspapers — *Komsomolskaia Pravda* and *Trud* — that provided “common information space,” and were coincidentally favorites of Boris Yeltsin, received large grants by the government to keep them running. Although a few publications insisted on remaining free of government subsidy, many others now turned to the state for assistance with the extraordinary fees they faced, thus once again providing the government control over the editorial pages. The ministry of press and information insisted that subsidies to the local presses — only one in each area — were to last only one to two years, after which they would be on their own, and market rules would determine whether they remained profitable (Richter 2002, 12).

Beginning in 1993, but also most noticeably during the First Chechen War, most people within the former Soviet Union now had television sets to which they turned for



news, and much as in the United States, several billionaire oligarchs also held sway over the television stations. Not only did this provide a challenge to the government, but newspapers discovered that television was now the preferred means of obtaining news and entertainment. This put a further strain on newspaper sales. Those that could not survive on their own often found themselves purchased by oligarchs, who swept in during the privatization and bought up businesses that provided them power and control; they, too, began to seek political positions, and “After 1996, the new financial power seemed to participate directly in the media and have influence over various decision making activities” (Zassoursky, 2002, 89). This often led to a system of self-censorship on the part of the editors and managers to keep the owners happy. Other papers turned to financial institutions for help. However, this brought the print media face to face with yet another problem: Russia’s steadily increasing crime rate. Benn notes that:

Pavel Gusev of *Moskovskii komsomolets* expressed the widespread belief that the majority of banks or financial institutions in Moscow are directly or indirectly linked with the criminal underworld. Therefore when insolvent newspapers turn to the banks for financial help, this can provide opportunities for the criminal underworld to gain control over the media. . . . Furthermore, fears are also sometimes expressed that rising crime could produce a populist authoritarian backlash, which could then be exploited so as to clamp down on the media. (1996, p. 476)

Nevertheless, journalists on independent newspapers, most of which were primarily supported by the intelligentsia, continued to assert their independence and engaged in fierce investigative reporting. During the first Chechen war in 1996, the government faced uncomfortable press conferences with these reporters who did not trust “official” versions of the news. Government officials also came to realize that “Official efforts to conceal or suppress information have fueled society tension. They have generated

widespread public concern that Russia is moving in an authoritarian direction towards a police state” and that

Government propaganda on Chechnya has also proven counterproductive. . . . independent eyewitness accounts have repeatedly contradicted official statements, revealing their distortions, inaccuracies, and blatant lies.’ According to January [1997] polls only 14% of the Russian audience trust government reporting on Chechnya. (Foster, 2002, p. 115)

The official government word, then, put a positive slant on a war that was not going as well as hoped, but the Russian people had developed an understanding of government spin as opposed to factual reporting.

The 1996 presidential election proved to be a difficult one for the media, and it brought print and broadcast news sources together in a common goal: They realized that if the frequently drunken and buffoonish Boris Yeltsin were not re-elected, his Communist opponent, Gennady Zhuganov, “represented the only realistic alternative, with all that this could entail for the country’s future as a liberal democratic state” (Simon, 2004, p. 176). The choice was clear. Abandoning objective reporting for the good of the country, the media saw to it that Yeltsin made it through to another four-year term. But after 1996, says Simon (2004), “the media never recovered their independence. They became more and more tools of their owners in the pursuit of their owner’s narrow interests. . . . [The oligarchs] began to engage in battles over the division of remaining profitable sections of Russia’s state-owned media” (178). Among the players in this game during the next few years were Finance Minister Anatoly Chubais and rival media barons Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky. As Markus Soldner (2008) has noted,

The so-called financial crisis of August 1998 further darkened Russia’s prospects of improving social and economic welfare; The rouble was devalued, stocks fell rapidly, inflation rose, ordinary people lost their

savings and many banks collapsed, unemployment rose, and often the state and the companies paid wage and salaries several months late. (155)

In media, newspaper circulation rates were declining, production and distribution costs continued to rise, and the newly developing advertising industry was strained (Soldner 2008, 156). Needless to say, both the economy and the government Yeltsin represented at the end of his term were essentially in shambles; the new democratic government clearly was not working, people were beginning to speak with fondness of the Soviet years, and the once powerful nation now seemed reduced in the eyes of much of the rest of the world.

It was therefore with no small amount of relief that the citizens cheered the election and installation of Yeltsin's prime minister, Vladimir Putin, as president in 2000. Oleg Panfilov observed that "the older and middle-aged generations, brought up in the Soviet ideological tradition, were happy to accept any political leader who, firstly, would be younger than the previous inhabitants of the Kremlin geriatric home, and, secondly, would promise radical changes to the country which was suffering from the liberal reforms not only in politics, but mostly in the economy" (2005, 1–2). Journalists at first fully supported Putin, who in 1999 and early 2000 had offered public statements of full support of a free press. This honeymoon period, however, was short-lived; government concerns began building about how the liberal publications had portrayed certain unfortunate events such as terrorist activities in various Russian cities. August 2000 saw coverage of the tragedy of the submarine *Kursk*, which Putin handled poorly, and the initial sympathetic coverage of the Chechens during the second Chechen War did not play well with the government. Albats (2000), for example, reported that the state-owned Radio Russia canceled the radio program "Democracy, Freedom, Human Rights," which

had enjoyed a nine-year run, because it featured “harsh criticism of the war in Chechnya and generally [advocated] the concepts in its title” (para. 3). Additionally, she said, “The last straw came with a program that was devoted to violations of the basic rights of refugees in Chechnya and Ingushetia” (para. 5). This show was not the only victim; Panfilov notes that, “In the first months after [Putin's] presidential inauguration in March 2000, the authorities started to name loyal and disloyal journalists and to closely monitor the press community” (2005, 6).

In September 2000, Putin issued the Doctrine of Information Security, which offered guidelines for the national interests in the Russian Federation; it noted, among other problems, that “The external threats to Information Security in the Russian Federation of the worst kind are: dissemination outside Russia of false information on Russian home policies” (Panfilov 2005, 10). It was around this time that reports began appearing about journalists in various regions of the country being assassinated; often they had been reporting on events critical of the Putin administration (see, for example, “Getting away with murder,” 2010). Western sources began reporting a turn-about in press freedoms in this still-developing “democracy” (see, for example, Obermayer, 2000; Ricchiardi, 2007; Simons, 2006; Simons & Strovsky, 2006), and some researchers refer to a return to a Stalinesque “cult of personality” (Panfilov 2005; Simon 2004).

This return to past ways of thinking has been viewed with dismay by much of the West, which had little understanding of such an attitude. In reality, however, this turn of events was not only unsurprising, but it might in fact have been predicted. The turnabout falls in line with the resistance that many Russians have shown to Western ways of thinking, and with the observations about Russian culture and history encompassed by

Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii's (1985; see also Kelly, 1998; McDaniel, 1996) binary model of Russian thinking. These all contribute to the general concept of the historically embedded "Russian idea," which refers to how the deeply embedded sense of the country's history and culture directs the people there to view the world and their place in it.

### **Public Response to the News: The Russian Idea**

Russian history is a long and turbulent one, and as with any country, the people take pride in the myths and victories of their past. Citizens of Kievan Rus' endured several centuries of repressive Mongol rule across their vast territory beginning in 1237–40. This intrusion played out in their customs as well as in their language; aspects of Mongol culture appear in both. It was not until 1380 that the Russians were able to begin to throw off this Tatar yoke with the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 under Prince Dmitry Donskoy, and finally free themselves of it, in 1480, under Grand Prince of All Rus' Ivan III, or Ivan the Great. During this time, Orthodox Christianity, which had become the Russian religion in 988, found a safe haven in Moscow, which became known as the "Third Rome" following the fall of Constantinople in 1453; this transformed the Russian Orthodox Church into what the people considered the final protectorate of the Orthodox tradition (Billington, 1970; Figes, 2002; Vernadsky, 1948). Still, unlike most of Europe, Hingley points out,

Russia never formed part of the Roman Empire and inherited neither Roman law nor Roman Christianity. Nor did Russia's adoption of Christianity in its eastern, or Greek, form involve any consequential influence of classical Greek civilization. . . . Greek civilization, together with Roman, was to become the creative basis of the West's — not the East's — cultural heritage, and to play its role in the Renaissance. For that development no parallel is to be found in the evolution of Muscovy, which

was still struggling with the Tatar menace in the days of Michelangelo, da Vinci and Erasmus. Nor did Russia even undergo any phase comparable to Europe's Reformation. (Hingley, 1977, 32, 33)

In this respect, then, Russia's development was unique both in culture and in philosophy.

With the ascent of Peter the Great as sole ruler of Russia in 1696, Russians faced new challenges as their tsar looked to import European ideas to modernize what he considered his backward country that ran largely on a feudal-like system and comprised peasant communes throughout the land. Primary among Peter's reforms were the construction of the city of St. Petersburg on what was basically a swampland, the creation of a naval force, the control of the Church by the state, and the mandate that the upper classes and military shave their beards and adopt European-style clothing (Riasanovsky, 2000).

The image of a "new Russia" and a "new people" became a distinctive myth, which arose as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century and was bequeathed to the subsequent cultural consciousness. The idea that the eighteenth century constituted an utterly new stage, separate from previous development, became so deeply rooted that it has, in essence, never been subject to doubt. (Lotman & Uspenskii, 1985, 53)

These European customs, overlaid on the Russian people, initiated what came to be known in the 1840s and beyond as the "Slavophile/Westernizer" debates, in which the *intelligentsia* argued over which of the cultures best defined Russians as a people. These debates resulted in a strong split between Moscow, which was the protectorate of things native and Russian, and St. Petersburg, which continued to consider itself more modern and European (Billington, 1970; Figes, 2002).

Lotman and Uspenskii (1985) have carefully considered this problem of dual identities, showing convincingly that Russian thought (through the eighteenth century, in

their study) and reaction to new ideas in history have proceeded in that country in a binary fashion. In short, they argue, “The basic cultural values (ideological, political, and religious) of medieval Russia were distributed in a bipolar field and divided by a sharp boundary without an axiologically neutral zone” (31–32). For example, they say, Western Catholicism developed with the concepts of heaven, purgatory, and hell, whereas the Russian system in medieval times was constructed on an “accentuated duality”: a person was either sinful or holy, but never strictly neutral. In the medieval West, the presence of a neutral sphere “led to the appearance of a certain subjective continuity between the negated present and the awaited future. . . . The neutral sphere of life became the norm,” whereas “Russian culture of the medieval period was dominated by a different value orientation. Duality and the absence of a neutral axiological sphere led to a conception of the new not as a continuation, but as a total eschatological change” (32). Under these conditions, say Lotman and Uspenskii,

The dynamic process of historical change has a fundamentally different character: change occurs as a radical negation of the preceding state. The new does not arise out of a structurally “unused” reserve, but results from a transformation of the old, a process of turning it inside out. Thus, repeated transformation can in fact lead to the *regeneration* of archaic forms. (33)

In this way, the authors argue, new ideas in the culture are actually not as much *new* as they are “an ‘inverted’ structural plan of the old culture” (54) — essentially a 180-degree turn from the previous system that thereby reintroduces aspects of an earlier system.

Other researchers have observed this binary model as well, and they have noted the problems that have arisen from the absence of the “axiologically neutral zone.” Janack (1999), for example, noted the tension between nostalgia and dystalgia during

Russia's 1996 presidential elections as the candidates struggled to navigate the best and worst of the Soviet and then-current models of government. He observed,

By insisting that the past was either a complete failure or an unequivocal success, and not allowing for aspects of both, the politicians forced the electorate to choose between two incomplete versions of history. The unresolved dialectical tension denied Russians closure and has failed to provide Russian politicians a settled foundation for their deliberations about the future. (35)

The binary model has also appeared in particular in regard to Russia's relation to the West. From the beginning, says McDaniel (1996),

It was not an organic reaction of the leaders of a traditional culture against Western values on the basis of that culture but was itself largely a rejection of Western values. . . . because of the relative weakness of an independent national culture and because modernization was identified with Europe and the state, ideas of national identity had a distinctively "anti" character in Russia. (27)

This attitude, he continues, carried into the twentieth century: "Until Gorbachev it was always a convincing argument for Communist orthodoxy that, if it was done in the West, it must be bad" (96), and that the rejection of things European "was not based on a fair and balanced view of Western culture, but on a schematized view of the West fully in accord with the logic of binary opposition" (28).

The concern within the country over whether the people identified as more Slavic or more European led to recognizing a distinctly "Russian idea," or Russian way of thinking and of perceiving the world. The term "Russian idea," according to McDaniel (1996), originated in a speech given by philosopher Vladimir Solovyov in 1889 and finally introduced to the Russian public in a French article published in 1909. As McDaniel elaborates,



the dual use of the term to encompass, first, what is seen to be most distinctive about Russian culture and institutions, and second, the ideal model of society based on and extrapolated from these elements, continues to the present time. . . .

Yet the two meanings are inseparable, for the ideal model was held to be based on an interpretation of Russian history and institutions; and the latter, in turn, were often seen to embody the ideal model of society. . . . although the “Russian idea” *is* a set of ideals, it is not only a phenomenon of culture. As a meaning given to, at times imposed upon, practices, institutions, and historical change, it was also made flesh in economics, politics, and society. (24)

From the beginning, then, the Russian idea was less about culture than about ideology (McDaniel, 1996, 28).

Following Solovyov’s use of the term, other Russian philosophers picked up and elaborated on this concept of a specifically “Russian idea.” Gulyga (1995) presented the beliefs of 13 different philosophers who recognized some form of this concept, and although they varied somewhat in their perceptions of it, “it is fair to say that all these thinkers insist on the specificities of Russian culture and history and posit for Russia a separate and potentially higher form of modernity” (McDaniel, 1996, 11). Combining the country’s history, its uncertainty about its position between Asian and European, and its tendency to respond in a way consistent with Lotman and Uspenskii’s binary model, McDaniel defines the Russian idea this way: “In the broadest sense, [it is] the conviction that Russia has its own independent, self-sufficient, and eminently worthy cultural and historical tradition that both sets it apart from the West and guarantees its future flourishing” (11). McDaniel admits, of course, that “in modern society the state cannot simply embody some mythical will of the community, for the community is always multifaceted” (45), but nevertheless,

Social practice, interpretation, and action together formed a complex of distinctive traits that were associated with each other and then identified as part of a certain general view of Russian society and social change. This general view generated polar opposition to it, which in turn helped give coherence to the loose configuration of elements. (31)

In this respect, every aspect of the culture and thought can be considered to be imbued with this “Russian idea.” But most important for the purposes of this study, McDaniel elaborates that, “Undoubtedly the three key institutional features associated with the Russian idea were the Orthodox Church, the tsarist state, and the peasant commune” (31).

It is also important to note that the concepts of the Russian idea and the uncertainty over its identity have long been discussed and have yet enjoyed no definitive resolution. As Beissinger (1997, 477) pointed out, Russian exceptionalism has been a dominant theme of Russia for the past two centuries. Urban (1998) observed that “the pronounced tendency in Russia today for political expression to take the form of intense moral-cultural struggles for the ‘soul’ of the nation reflects longstanding practices particular to that country’s political class, the intelligentsia” (970) and referenced “the (alleged) peculiar nature of Russian society — for which faith, conscience, truth, morality and other virtues associated directly with religion count for so much more than the material world as to make Russia unique” (971).

The question of this uniquely Russian nature arose during Yeltsin’s presidency, at a time when the experiment in democracy was failing along with the economy. As Smith (2002) observed:

The notion that Russia was suffering from an identity crisis came as no surprise to the politically aware in 1996. The simultaneous collapse of Communist rule and the Soviet empire in late 1991 had given new life to the centuries-old intellectual debates on the nature of Russia’s national interest and the proper identification of the nation. (158)

As a result of this concern, Yeltsin initiated an “Idea for Russia” contest, to be run by the editors of *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, that would serve as “a stimulus for democratic opinion makers to debate the appropriate content and form of Russian patriotism. It also spurred Yeltsin’s advisers to take stock of the state of the nation’s collective memories” (Smith, 2002, 158). The contest proved a failure; it “had tapped new and old conceptions of national character. Lists of virtues, however, lacked the resonance of collective memories, especially those polished into dramatic narratives by years of Soviet propaganda” (Smith, 2002, 178–179), but it showed that the public was still willing to try to define itself and recognized its unique “Russian-ness” that set the country apart from all others. This attempt even carried through to the Putin era, when, in 1999, just a month before he took over as president, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin “put the concept of a national vision for Russia back on the political agenda, arguing the need to fill the current ‘ideological vacuum’ in the country. . . . the prime minister told the academics he believed reform had left Russia without a unifying theme. He said to fill this void, a new national idea should be constructed, one based on ‘patriotism in the most positive sense of the concept’” (Larina, 1999, para. 2–3). He ultimately helped the cause along by adopting the Soviet national anthem, with new lyrics, as the country’s national anthem (Tyler, 2000); although this was not a totally popular decision, it satisfied the Communists who remained and allowed the country to move forward without turning its back on most of the previous 80 years of its history.

And yet it was this very history that resonated with the majority of the Russian population at the turn of the new century, when Vladimir Putin stepped into the presidency and the Second Chechen War was raging in the Caucasus. Most of the

country's population alive at the time, especially those serving in the Federal army, had known nothing but Communist rule and the difficult first decade that followed its collapse. The people had an ingrained pride in their history and in themselves as a people, but this pride was fragile and tentative, because they still had no sense of where the country was headed. They desired to be the strong power they once had been, and they were not in the mood to hear any more about their nation's weaknesses, because they as individuals had personal experiences with all of them.

A small handful of journalists, however — Anna Politkovskaya foremost among them — continued to have other ideas about what the Russian people needed to hear, and clearly Politkovskaya touched a nerve that displeased the Russian public. She was critical, especially of the president, and her criticism played against the norm for journalists at that time. Zolotov (2000) revealed the prevailing attitude in his coverage of the state human rights ombudsman:

In what some human rights activists described as an artificial narrowing of his powers, state human rights ombudsman Oleg Mironov said over the weekend that complaints against the president were not welcome in his office.

“According to the Constitution, [the president] himself is the guarantor of citizens' liberties,” Mironov was quoted by Interfax as saying Sunday. “We do not allow any critical remarks regarding the president.”  
(para. 1, 2)

Therefore, given that the country was still holding to its history and to the “Russian idea” and had spent several centuries debating the concept of identity that still was unresolved at the beginning of Putin's presidency, it was hardly surprising that when Politkovskaya was assassinated, the international community commented on it as such: “Russia wants to see itself as big and beautiful. And it resents those who, even out of sober love for the

country, prevent it from giving in to illusions” (Erofeyev, 2006, para. 13).

What is left to understand then, with this country’s rich and prideful history, is why Politkovskaya’s words offended. And to understand this, it is necessary to look to at the specific foundational myths and beliefs that this journalist’s work confronted. Some of the most important of these became apparent in the book she wrote based on some of her early experiences in the North Caucasus. Armed with her reporter’s skills and a deeply humanitarian bent, she demanded nothing less of her readers in *A small corner of Hell* than what she herself gave to the cause.

## Chapter Three

### *A Small Corner of Hell*

In 2002, Anna Politkovskaya published the book *Vtoraya Chechenskaya* [*The Second Chechen War*], which drew upon her experiences in the various war-torn regions of the North Caucasus and detailed the suffering and cruelty perpetrated against Chechen civilians during the first several years of the Second Chechen War. In her prologue to the English version, which was issued by the University of Chicago Press in 2003, Politkovskaya directly addressed the problems that she already knew would plague her readers:

People call the newspaper and send letters with one and the same question: “Why are you writing about this? Why are you scaring us? Why do we need to know this?”

I’m sure this has to be done, for one simple reason: as contemporaries of this war, we will be held responsible for it. The classic Soviet excuse of not being there and not taking part in anything personally won’t work.

So I want you to know the truth. Then you’ll be free of cynicism. And of the sticky swamp of racism that our society has been sliding into.

And of having to make difficult decisions about who’s right and who’s wrong in the Caucasus, and if there are any real heroes there now. (26–27)

Although this section was not included in the Russian version of the book, it nonetheless accurately conveyed Politkovskaya’s concern about the war and what she hoped to accomplish with her staggering accounts of the tragedies occurring there. She worried about the present, and she worried about the future.

Unfortunately for her, Russia was a country in which, by 2006, 74 percent of citizens turned first to television for their important news, 84 percent had high levels of

trust in their national television, and only 9 percent looked to newspapers for news (BBC, 2006). In addition, 58 percent at that time expressed trust in media “to operate in the best interests of society,” and 54 percent felt the same about their government (BBC 2006). The majority of media outlets, however, were by that time offering followers the news that the government provided, which usually was less than factual. For Politkovskaya to tell her audience, then, that the sources they trusted were in fact deceiving them would have served to put these readers on the defensive from the outset.

More than this, however, Politkovskaya’s writings — the specific stories she selected for this volume, her word and metaphor choices, the subjectivity with which she sometimes wrote, and the personal commentary she interjected — would have been problematic for any Russian audience member reading them. Her adult audience of Russian citizens would have lived a minimum of half their lives under Communist rule and been reared in the Russian way of thinking; writing and attacking as she did, she prompted her audience to view her and her stories as attempting to undermine that society’s way of understanding the world; she was essentially a traitor. Only those readers who were willing to see the Second Chechen War as an issue of human rights abuses and propaganda — primarily her international readers — would have embraced her stories and her stance.

In her reporting, Politkovskaya acknowledged and agonized over the abuses and what she termed “genocide” being perpetrated by her government on the Chechen people. I argue that she intended to make the Russian public aware of all of this as well, thereby holding these Russian citizens accountable for knowing the nature and extent of the abuses. In doing so, it would not be unreasonable to expect Russian citizens to demand

that the Russian government take humane and responsible actions to correct the problems, because failure to address the manifest atrocities would put them at risk for criticism for failing to act responsibly and honorably as citizens of the world. She intended to strike hard at the Russian mind and soul to get her message across, and so she employed, either purposefully or simply because of her own Russian upbringing, images, metaphors, and appeals from Russian mythology and history that she could reasonably expect her readers to recognize and respond to emotionally.

What her writing produced, however, was much the opposite of the outrage and action she had hoped for. These stories upset her Russian readers' sense of order of their world at a time when they needed clarity and pride rather than uncertainty and shame. The myths and histories of which Politkovskaya reminded them spoke to their "Russian minds," their culture and upbringing, enabling them to more strongly embrace their deeply embedded senses of self and unity rather than to recognize the facts, reconsider the problems, and seek or demand new courses of action from the government. Much like Kenneth Burke's "trained incapacity," the Russian people's "past training has caused them to misjudge their present situation. Their training has become an incapacity" (1935, 10). Despite the facts that Politkovskaya presented, the people were unwilling, because of their own "training," to see the Second Chechen War for the crisis it was for the Chechen people, or if they saw and believed it, they were unable or unwilling to break from their foundational myths to act on the problems and help correct the situation; their myths and their "Russian minds" were too powerful and critical to their own identities. By challenging the "Russian minds," Politkovskaya risked criticism for actions contrary to core aspects of Russian identity; she put Russian readers in a position to say with



impunity that she was a traitor to the Russian people and consequently enabled them to dodge the force of her reports of atrocities. In short, her Russian readers' claims to Russian citizenship outweighed Politkovskaya's call to them to act as citizens of the world. But this same call to act as citizens of the world accounts for why, instead, the members of the international community, freed as they were from the constraints specific to the Russian culture, could see the force of Politkovskaya's arguments. To her dismay, however, they did almost nothing to help either, but in the minds of Russian readers, the West's avid support of her thrust her more deeply into the "Westerners" camp and showed her to be "disloyal" to her own Russian roots.

Within this volume, Politkovskaya most frequently promoted four categories of concepts related to the Russian culture and mythology: the concept of *svoi/chuzhoi* ("us" and "ours" versus "others"); history; soldier-heroes; and *khoziaeva / khoziaistvo* (patriarchal family heads / "all of the tasks required to maintain a household"). Her numerous references to these concepts were readily visible and could have served to unite people, but instead they enabled readers to lash back. In the following sections, I will provide examples of each and show how these references countered what the Russian people would have considered properly Russian, and more, how Politkovskaya's writing about such things made her appear less than Russian.

### ***Svoi, Rodnoi, Sem'ya and Chuzhie (Ours, Own/Native, Family and Others)***

Vincent Della Sala has asserted that "The subjects and objects of a great deal of modern political mythology are both the nation and the state, each with its own foundational myths that were interwoven into a tapestry that justified centralized political authority on the basis of stories of belonging and order" (6; see also Cassirer, 1974;

Smith, 1992). The most important aspect of this sense of “belonging,” of defining a people or a culture, is determining who its members are and who they are not. In Russia, the basic concept of “family” is the term *sem'ya*, which would indicate a family unit with parents, children, and perhaps grandparents or in-laws. This would be the everyday word used in conversation. A broader sense of belonging that unites groups of people is referred to as *svoi*, a possessive adjective meaning “one’s own,” which could indicate a link among members of the family, village, or country. This is closely related to the concept of *rodnoi*, an adjective literally meaning “related by blood” but carrying notions of “very dear” and referring to extended family or “clans.” Paxson (2005) refers to *rodnoi* as “Perhaps the deepest form of being *svoi*” (84), and she states that, “the rod, or family line, provides a model for group belonging that goes beyond the world of the living and into the realm of the dead ancestors”; in addition, the term “carries with it a sense of deep and ancient belonging” (59). This sense of belonging, whether to blood lines, to a community or nation, or to life itself, is so critical to Russian thinking that the root appears in such words as *rodit'* (to give birth), *rodich* (relation or relative), *rodiny* (native villages), *rodina* (motherland), *narod* (people), and *priroda* (nature). These two concepts of *rod* and *svoi*, taken together, are powerful in the Russian psyche. There is a sense of *svoi*, says Paxson, that “surrounds being a villager as opposed to a city dweller, or of being a Russian as opposed to any other nationality. The *svoi* of the *rodina* sends people to near-holy battle” (2005, 82–83).

Because this sense of what is sacred is so critical to Russian identity, it makes sense, during a time of war, to consider who would be labeled “not *svoi*.” That term, *chuzhoi*, translates to “someone or somebody else’s; foreign or strange.” The term carries

with it a strong sense of distrust; in Russia's many small villages, especially in Soviet times, administrators were considered *chuzhie*, and they were usually "hated and feared as outsiders" (Paxson, 2005, 76). Although we are now more than 20 years past the times of the official Soviet *kolkhoz*, it is nevertheless important to heed Paxson's reminder that "language, metaphor, and narrative are powerful (and omnipresent, and unavoidable) carriers of social memory" (90), and to consider that the denotation of the word will continue in the culture. Therefore, people who are *chuzhie* to the native Russian people will be suspect and distrusted.

It is on such foreign soil, however — in the land of *chuzhie* — that Politkovskaya had to tread to report about the effects of the war in the Caucasus. The majority of her book *A Small Corner of Hell* dealt with how the Chechens — *chuzhie* to the native Russians — were affected by the war. These were people of another land, despite their connection under the multi-ethnic country banner of "Russia," and they embraced the Muslim faith, so different from Russian Orthodoxy. Yet with her stories, Politkovskaya called on her readers, who were being instructed by government-run media to view the Chechens as terrorists, to instead view and understand them as simply other human beings who were suffering the effects of a war that was not of their choosing and was being waged on them largely by the Russian government that nevertheless claimed them as their own in a political sense. Politkovskaya was attempting to make them *svoi* for her readers by stressing their common humanity.

One way she accomplished this was by making frequent reference to "family," by referring to family relationships, and by using the names, and often the patronymics, of each of the people about whom she wrote. This specificity allowed these people to

become more real — people who existed — rather than remaining simply random Chechen foreigners. The majority of these references appeared in the first section of the book, which elaborated on Chechen life, and often she used the term *sem 'ya* to indicate familiar relationships among husbands and wives, sons, daughters, parents, and grandchildren. Her first story, for example, centered on Vakha, who was one of an enormous group fleeing to Ingushetia from the bombing in Grozny in September and October 1999 — “a trail of people many miles long following the main highway of Chechnya, the Rostov-Baku Federal Route.”<sup>1</sup> Politkovskaya was walking with the group when Federal soldiers in helicopters began to bomb the area. The refugees hit the ground face down as “automatic weapon fire whistle[d] in the air around us” (33). During the half hour they were pinned down in the open by machine gun and Katyusha rocket fire, they tried to converse. She wrote about Vakha, a land surveyor from the village of Achkhoy-Martan:

Ignoring the helicopters, he suddenly turns over onto his side. And in a normal, human way, without earth in his mouth, he begins to talk about his family [*o svoei sem 'e*] — his six children, who had left Achkhoy a week ago for Ingushetia along with his mother, wife, and two unmarried sisters. They're the ones he's trying to make his way to. (36/17)

Russian readers would have understood this description of family, using the more familiar term *sem 'ya*, as Vakha's loved ones, or those immediately related to him, and

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<sup>1</sup> Politkovskaya, 2003, p. 32. For the remainder of this dissertation, page numbers following the quotations will refer to this English edition, and any references to the specific language used in the Russian edition will follow a slash after the English-edition page number.

they could identify with someone trying to keep his family together in a wartime situation.

However, Politkovskaya was careful to use a different term for “family” in another part of the story. A day after this helicopter attack, as the members of this refugee group were lined up at a military checkpoint, Vakha stepped out of line into an adjoining field and was blown up when he stepped on a landmine. Here Politkovskaya writes of Vakha, “The line to the passport checkpoint was too long. It consisted mostly of us jokers, the new family [*iz “rodstvennikov”*] he’d been prepared to die with the day before lying on a different field” (35/16). The use of the noun *rodstvennik* returns the reader to the concept of *svoi*. Here the family to which she refers is the group of refugees, all Chechens who were being driven from their homes by Russian army bombing, and together taking their lives in their own hands by traveling in the open, where helicopter forces could easily eliminate them for no good reason. Russian readers would understand that they were united — they became *rodnye* — not only because they were from the same region, but also by virtue of their common unhappy circumstance as refugees.

These words appear again in “Scene Four” of the section “Makhkety: A Concentration Camp with a Commercial Streak.” In this section, one of the main characters is Isa, who was among the men of Selmentausen who were abducted and tortured by the Federal soldiers. In one short paragraph, Politkovskaya explains that the residents of Selmentausen have gone to a checkpoint to try to learn the fate of their family members. Before the men are released, in exchange for ransom money, she writes:

But first, the soldiers also had a good time taunting the relatives [*rodstvennikami*], who had gathered by the detachment command checkpoint hoping to find out something about their dear ones [*svoikh*] who had been taken to the pit. (51/36)

The term *svoikh* here gives a stronger meaning than the word “sem’ya,” which just describes their immediate relationship to each other, as when she said that “[Isa’s] family [*sem’ya*] is terribly poor” (51/36). *Svoi* places those loved ones in a broader context; it indicates that the townspeople wanted *all* of their loved ones back, and that *all* the abducted men had value to that village. These men belonged to them, to their village structure, and they were “theirs.” With this language, Politkovskaya has attempted to lead her Russian readers to sympathize with the Chechen villagers, thereby making the Federal (Russian) soldiers *chuzhoi*. In other words, she is asking the Russians to see *their* own barbarous soldiers as outsiders, not only to the Chechens but to themselves as well, inasmuch as the soldiers have become something apart from righteous army heroes; she is asking them to abandon their concept of their own sons as *svoi*.

One interesting metaphor Politkovskaya used to insert the concept of “family” into her narrative came in her description of Aishat Suleimanova, a 62-year-old Grozny resident who had been shot with five 5.45-caliber bullets, while lying in her bed, by “a young fellow in a Russian serviceman’s uniform. . . . These bullets, weighted at the edges, have been forbidden by all international conventions as inhumane” (84).

Politkovskaya had gone to the Ninth Grozny Municipal Hospital to report on civilian casualties, and the doctor there had taken her to see Aishat; the woman was barely alive, her naked body covered by only a blanket that the doctor removed. Politkovskaya wrote:

Aishat’s eyes express complete indifference to the world, and it’s beyond one’s strength to look at her naked body. She’s been disemboweled like a chicken. The surgeons have cut into her from above her chest to her groin. The postsurgical incisions are not straight but forked like a family tree [*genealogicheskoe drevo*].” (84)

This use of a metaphor that employs the word “genealogical” is strongly weighted. She might have chosen instead to describe the incision with such words as “jagged” or “uneven,” but instead she inserted an image that brought her readers back to “family connections.”

She embedded this even more deeply in the paragraphs that followed, however, by describing a member of Aishat’s immediate family and elaborating on such distinctions as “us” and “ours” [*nashi*] versus “you” [*vas*]. In describing Aishat’s son, who is sitting with his mother, she notes that he “hasn’t shaved for a long time — this means that there has been a funeral in their family [*v ikh dome pokhorony*, literally “in their home a funeral”]” (84/79). Politkovskaya continues:

He looks at me with an alienated expression of undisguised hatred. And when he is about to say something, he suddenly stops short, as if to say “it’s not for you to feel sorry for us” [*ne vam nas zhalet*]. (84/80)

In these sentences, Politkovskaya’s aim is unmistakable: She has created a split between “us” and “them,” with a distinct hero and villain. The funeral “in their home” circumscribes Aishat’s family domain: The suffering is “theirs,” and how they acknowledge the death is “theirs.” Similarly, the son’s “undisguised hatred” of Politkovskaya as a representative of all Russians who did this to his mother indicates a stark delineation. “It’s not for *you* [*vam*, the dative case of the formal, polite *or* plural *vy*, “you”],” he says, implying not only the reporter but the whole nation of ethnic Russians, “to feel sorry for *us*,” meaning not only his family but all the Chechens who have suffered at the hands of the Russian army. Again here, Politkovskaya has led her readers to a situation in which a continued willingness to accept the Federal soldiers as *svoikh*

indicates an alignment with those who commit evil deeds. She wants them to disconnect from the Russians who commit such atrocities.

Politkovskaya provided numerous other stories about this intense dislike of Russians in general by Chechens, particularly when it came to the abuse of Chechen families and their communities by the Russian soldiers. One story Politkovskaya chose to include in her reportage that would have given great pause to Russian readers contained a direct affront to Russian mothers by the women of Tsotsan-Yurt. In this instance, the Federal Army had conducted an attack on the village on New Year's Eve 2001, theoretically to eliminate some 100 militants who had been driven from the mountains and blockaded in that village. What actually took place was total destruction of everything that the soldiers were not able to steal, and in the process they desecrated the local mosque:

Soldiers, or maybe officers, came into the mosque. And they took a shit there. First, they piled together the carpets, mosque plate, books, and the Koran, and then they shat on top of the whole thing.

“And they call themselves civilized people? And say we're from the Middle Ages or something? Russian mothers, your sons behaved like animals here! And there was no stopping them!” the women in kerchiefs slid askew yelled. Six days after the Tsotsan-Yurt pogrom, these women cleaned up the human shit from the mosque. “Damn you Russians! We'll never forget this! What mothers gave birth to these monsters?” (93)

In this instance, Politkovskaya needed no special words or word roots to convey the concept of separateness of “us” versus “them”; the women's epithets were sufficient. But worse, in this instance, Russian mothers begat the inhuman “monsters” who destroyed and defiled, and the women of the Chechen village banded together to right the wrong that “they” had perpetrated. The condemnation and shaming by the Chechen women are sufficient to relay the split; for Politkovskaya to write about and publish this attack on



Russian mothers was unlikely to result in the soldiers' mothers turning on their sons, but it created an opportunity for them to turn on Politkovskaya, who had published the shameful act and supported the view of the Chechen women.

This “us” versus “them,” “Chechens” versus “Russians” split was apparent and especially emphasized in the section of the book labeled “Victory Day.” Here Politkovskaya introduces the readers to Pyotr Grigorevich Baturintsev, “a retired border guard captain and a veteran of World War II” who now sits “in this ruined house at 142 Ugolnaya Street, in the Starpromyslovsky district of Grozny” (108). Her detailed description of Baturintsev is imperative for the criticism that will follow:

An old man sits on a wobbly stool with bullet holes, barely holding his uncooperative body in balance. He is exhausted, pale and gray, almost blind. His skin looks like a rag — he’s obviously starving. His legs are visible through his shabby pajama trousers with faded hospital stripes, which provide very little warmth. His thick lenses in a silly pink ladies’ frame are tied together above his nose and to his ears by strings. Big buttons on his ladies’ coat, of the same pink color, complete the image of a crushed man struggling not to fall off his stool. (107)

Baturintsev, the readers learn, has been abandoned by his son and granddaughters, all of whom live in Russia but care to know nothing about his condition. His situation, Politkovskaya says, is not unusual:

I have seen so many tragic stories like this of the Russian elderly living in Grozny during this war. Their Russian relatives [*rodstvenniki, zhivushchie “v Rossii,”* literally “relatives, living “in Russia”] (that’s what they call them in Chechnya) don’t want to take their family out of the war region [*ne zhelaiut zabirat’ “svoix” podal’she ot voiny,* literally “not wishing to take “their own” away from the war]. As you travel around this horrible city, you see many forgotten people. (110/120)

Once more, she employs the word *rodstvenniki* to talk about Russian blood relations who have turned their backs on their suffering *svoi* — their own, their family. This use of *svoi*

is particularly stressed by being placed in quotation marks to indicate sarcasm — people who are in fact “their own” but with whom they do not choose to associate. Yet again, Politkovskaya has made it clear that the Russians are the people behaving badly by refusing to treat their family members, their own, with any sense of love, respect, or responsibility. And yet again, she is forcing readers into a position of either condemning this behavior of the ethnic Russians, or instead aligning themselves with the unfortunate deserving Chechens who, to many Russians, are not *svoi* in any sense of the word. This writing creates tension, because she is indirectly asking the readers to decide on the group with which they will align themselves: Will they remain Russian and align with evil, or will they see themselves in the broader context of humanity, which happens to include the “enemy”?

Politkovskaya then proceeds to bring some of her most direct condemnation back to the *sem'ya* version of “family.” After relating this story and another equally disturbing one about the Levchenko sisters, who were also abandoned by Russian family members, Politkovskaya says:

The healthy Russians don't want the sick Russians, and although the stories of the Levchenkos and Baturintsevs are family [*semeinaya*] tragedies, they are also a modern Russian national tragedy, thrown into bold relief by the war. . . .

This is real fascism, like Hitler's infamous idea of destroying and discarding the weak and sick as ballast on the road toward a better future. It is a kind of state fascism that has successfully taken root in family [*v semeinye*] relations: the very type of fascism that Pyotr Grigorevich spent his younger and healthier years fighting against.

I am often asked by Grony Chechens, “Why do you treat your own people so badly [*tak plokho otnosites' k "svoim"?*]?” (111/121)

With these paragraphs, Politkovskaya has accused her Russian readers of perhaps the worst action that could be imagined: She is telling them that they have become the very

people against whom their hero-soldiers fought in the Great Patriotic War — World War II, in which Russia fought against Hitler in the name of *Rodina-Mat'*, or the Motherland.<sup>2</sup> She is accusing her readers of allowing fascism to invade their own *sem 'ya*, thereby affecting their relations with the Chechen people, who live nevertheless as fellow Russian countrymen. She is again forcing the readers to confront the question of who is *svoi* and who is *chuzhoi*, and the answer in Politkovskaya's terms is unquestionable: their "own" have become that very evil "other" they so hated.

This instance of linking a specific era of history with a current-day issue was just one of many that Politkovskaya employed in this volume. History and the meaning of history, as noted previously, is embedded deeply in both the culture and thinking of the Russian audience, and Politkovskaya was able to link circumstances and make powerful arguments by exploiting the black-and-white binary Russian thinking that Lotman and Uspenskii outlined. By drawing on easily recognizable references to significant periods in Russian and Soviet history, she was able to lead her Russian readers to uncomfortable juxtapositions in the present war that they would have to mentally resolve, usually with answers that would run counter to their cultural mindset. References to history, like

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<sup>2</sup> "The myth of World War II is used, in part, to inspire respect for the armed forces. Much of the literature produced in conjunction with the fortieth anniversary of Victory Day stressed the importance of the armed forces, particularly literature for children" (Tumarkin, 1987, 71). Tumarkin notes that the blending of the commemoration of World War II into Russia's foundation story took place on May 8, 1967; Leonid Brezhnev's decision to transfer the eternal flame of Leningrad's Piskarevskoe cemetery to Moscow "to a new monument symbolizing twenty million heroes, or twenty million martyrs, or twenty million victims was a considered one. The war was now regarded as an ordeal crucial to the foundation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" (1987, 70). Further, she adds, "The idealized memory of World War II is used to raise national self-esteem. It addresses directly that massive inferiority complex so strikingly evident in Soviet culture" (Tumarkin, 1987, 71).

family, then, became another strategy that Politkovskaya used to attack the Russian belief system in order to make her point.

### **History**

The Russian people have long taken great pride in certain people and events of their cultural and historic past: war victories, military heroes, and literary figures who are heroes in their own right. This common pride in national success, and references to these historical people and events, help the Russian people cultivate bonds; it unites them as nationals. As an educated Russian citizen herself, Politkovskaya knew which historical references would resonate with her readers and how they would be received. Such references could reinforce her point more eloquently than anything she might write herself. She understood how strongly past events were embedded in current thinking.

Because certain historical events provided such powerful myths and mythical figures, Politkovskaya also knew that the Chechen War of the present would someday become a specific memory, and its history would remain on the books. She provided her readers an uneasy reminder of this at the end of her story about her visit to the suffering townspeople of Komsomolskoe, a village in the Urus-Martan district:

Everything will be written down in the history of the second Chechen war. Poverty, hunger, illness, homelessness. General Troshev. President Putin. Everyone who destroyed a living organism and did not even try to fix things later. (83)

In light of the stories she had relayed to this point in the book, this statement served as something of a cautionary tale; very little that was honorable was happening in the Caucasus, yet as with any other war in Russia's history, this one, too, would be remembered and passed on to future generations.

But even before her readers arrived at this point, Politkovskaya had planted the seeds of her opinion about the Chechen war in her prologue, again employing a historical reference. Here she stated,

The army and police, nearly one hundred thousand strong, wander around Chechnya in a state of complete moral decay. And what other response could one expect but more terrorism, and the recruitment of new resistance fighters? Who is to blame [*Kto vinovat*]? (28/6)

This single question — *Kto vinovat?* — is a powerful one in the Russian mind. *Who Is to Blame?* was the title of Alexander Herzen's 1847 book, described by Joseph Frank (1985) as a "withering account of the corruption, cruelty, and stupefying spiritual stagnation of life in the Russian provinces" (66). Further, says Grenier (1995),

The reader of *Who Is to Blame?* witnesses three good people being destroyed — apparently through no fault of their own. Not only do the events in the story result from a whole panoply of distant and proximate causes, but it appears that the individuals involved were never in a position to make a moral choice. The reader feels helpless before a vision of a tragic reality where an individual human being is not more than a "chip of wood floating on a river," having no influence whatsoever over the course of his or her life. (14)

Although discussions of this fictional work usually agree that the answer to this pointed question is most frequently "No one is to blame," Politkovskaya's use of the question would have set in motion in her readers' minds, whether consciously or not, the ideas of corruption and helplessness, which she then illustrated throughout the book with disturbing examples of how the Federal army stripped Chechens of their rights and often of their agency. As far as answering the question with regard to the Chechen War, she is straightforward with her own answer, both here and on a later page, where she asks "Who is to blame for this national disgrace?" (44): "Of course, the greatest blame falls on Putin,

and the government that is carrying on this war, ignoring the fact that its inevitable result is these crowds of hungry, sick, homeless people” (44). Once again, she strips her readers of the comfort that comes from beliefs embedded in culture; Politkovskaya disabuses them of the idea and attempts to lead them to opposite conclusion, rather than the one that would help them to understand their place as being in the right in this conflict.

These calls to a memory of much earlier times, however, are considerably fewer in number than her abundant references to more recent Soviet, specifically Stalinist history. Numerous stories tell of Federal troops entering Chechen villages at night, abducting men and boys from their homes and herding them into armored vehicles that disappear into the dark; if the victims were fortunate enough to be found alive, they invariably carried the scars of beatings and torture. For the Russian reader, these descriptions would ring familiar. “Human substance,” Politkovskaya wrote, “disappears overnight, without a trace, à la 1937” (27), and then, “Informers are everywhere, and their sole aim is to survive, even at the price of others’ lives” (47). She continues with her personal encounter with a Federal Security Serviceman, the present-day equivalent of a KGB agent: “a wet-behind-the-ears senior lieutenant, with the nasty smile of his professional predecessors of 1937” (47). Aina, a widow from Makhkety, told her,

We have so many informers now that we don’t know what to do. The Feds corrupt our people; they pay them for the deaths of their neighbors. I myself, coming to this meeting, feared the informers most of all, not the Feds. The soldiers come to the villages to follow up on tips. Eventually, the informers get killed too. (60)

And again:

On the night of September 17, Grozny was rocked by terrible purges. Men were grabbed from their homes, and the howls of women for their abducted sons, husbands, brothers, and neighbors rang out over the whole

city, mixed with rounds from automatic weapons and the thunder of mortars. (65)

These are but a sample of the references that point to or are reminiscent of Stalin's devastating purges of 1936–1938, in which, by most accounts, an estimated 1.5 million people died.<sup>3</sup>

Such images and memories were not ancient history to the Russian readers. They were relived in numerous films and serials after the collapse. As recently as the mid-1990s, when Margaret Paxson was conducting her ethnographic study in a village northeast of Moscow, she noted:

Indeed, if there was little remembered resentment against the supposed *kulaki* for their relative wealth (they were still part of a village-level *svoi-*formation), there was a great deal of resentment against the Party representatives who sometimes betrayed co-villagers, and against town officials whose duties were dictated by the centrally organized Party. Many narratives reflect this resentment. There are very concrete reasons for this, as many people lost family members to the purges. (76)

These memories were still vivid for the Russian people at the time Politkovskaya was writing, even though her readers may not have been alive during the purges. Few families were untouched by the Terror, and the family stories would have remained, and the numbers of people arrested and killed would have been present in the minds of the readers, given that not even 10 years earlier then-president Boris Yeltsin had opened

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<sup>3</sup> According to Robert Conquest's (1990) *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, "a Soviet historian tells us that 90 percent of those who went to camp [a gulag] before the war perished, while Academician Sakharov notes that only 50,000 of the more than 600,000 party members sent to camp, rather than executed, survived. A million would be an outside figure. Of the other 7 million-odd, the number who died either by execution or in camps during the actual two-year Yezhov period may be taken as about 3 million" (339).

some of the previously secret Soviet archives “to help discredit the just-toppled Communist regime” (Donadio, 2007, para. 2). Many of the long-held secrets about those purges had finally been revealed to the people. By reminding her readers of those painful exterminations, but juxtaposing them with the same types of behaviors now being conducted by Federal soldiers, Politkovskaya was forcing her readers to acknowledge that the country had not moved past such behaviors and that their sons who were fighting on behalf of Russia were now conducting such purges themselves. The Party members, who had been the enemies in the past, had been replaced in history by the noble servicemen that the country had sent to rout out the terrorists but who, in the process, had become terrorists themselves.

Politkovskaya took full advantage of the cruel and disturbing events of this war to remind her readers of another war that was close to their hearts and which, according to Nina Tumarkin (1987), had become significant in the culture: “the myth, or rather the idealized memory, of the Soviet experience of World War II” (70). This war was a bitter fight for the Russian motherland, and those who participated and survived were strengthened and united by that common cause. The Soviet Union, like so many other countries, suffered massive casualties, and the Soviets did indeed eventually join the fight against Hitler when the Germans brought the battle to Russian soil, but in the end, the facts of that war today do not read quite the same in Russia as elsewhere. Russian mythology has recast the events in such a way that, today, the story is that in this war, the Soviet Union was the savior who “freed the world from fascist enslavement and did so with its own blood and with little help from anyone else” (Tumarkin, 1987, 71). But further, says Tumarkin,



The myth of World War II is used, in part, to inspire respect for the armed forces. . . . At the same time, the myth of World War II is successful in giving the USSR the image of a peacemaker. There the argument is: we were invaded; we lost twenty million in the war; we know what war is; we could never precipitate a war; not coincidentally, we are the leaders of the world peace movement. (1987, 71)

With this type of pride embedded in the Russian mind, Politkovskaya found it easy, as she relayed the horrors of events in Chechnya, to trigger, with just a few words, reminders of specific significant and comparable events from World War II. In her story, however, the roles of the aggressors/enemies and the innocents/heroes are undeniably reversed — a significant turn of events for the average Russian reader and one that would counter the belief in the Russian soteriological myth.

Throughout the book, for example, Politkovskaya offered examples of the murders that were being committed in the Chechen villages by the Federal soldiers. Again and again, she provided commentary and stories of random and senseless civilian deaths; “[t]he ‘purges’ never stop; they resemble mass autos-da-fé,” she writes (27). Soldiers, as described previously, shot and killed refugees as they fled to Ingushetia. In Goity, formerly a town of some 40,000,

Now there are no more than fifteen thousand. Everyone left if they could, to save their children. And there’s nothing here for those who remained, except for the infamous Chechen “package”: Federal raids, night purges, marauding, morning discussions of who was taken away this time and what was stolen along with them, regular burials, stories about the ways those who survived were tortured, and whose corpses looked like what. (116)

“Chiri-Yurt, a beautiful, cozy little village in the foothills of the Caucasus, has turned into a cold, unpleasant settlement point, where bullets fly around like the wind” (44), she

writes, and “The destruction of Duba-Yurt was shocking even for the soldiers of the military unit that was stationed there after this fiery pogrom” (46).

All of these tales are grim and horrible war stories, but then, for those who may not have made the connection, Politkovskaya says:

The second Chechen war has added a few new pages to the country’s history, comparable to both Guernica and Khatyn in terms of the number of victims, and the ruins, bloodshed, and consequences for the whole world. And it is not at all important that no one has recognized this yet; the time will come when everyone will speak of it. (78)

The warning here was a one-word reminder of a single city in Russia’s past. On March 22, 1943, Germany’s 118<sup>th</sup> Schutzmannschaft battalion literally incinerated the citizens of Khatyn, a village in present-day Belarus, by locking innocent people in a shed and setting it on fire in retaliation for the death of a Nazi officer near the town. According to the memorial website sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus (2005),

None of the adults managed to escape. Only three kids — Volodia Yaskevich, his sister Sonia and another boy Sasha Zhelobkovich by name — were able to hide from the fascists. When all people were finally in the shed, the door was locked and the Nazis covered the shed with straw, spilt benzine over and set fire to it. In a moment the wooden shed was ablaze. The children were crying and suffocating in the smoke. The adults were trying to rescue them. The doors of the shed could not bear the force and the pressure of the dozens of people and so they crashed down. Horror-stricken people in their burning clothes took to heels. But the fascists with their machine guns dispassionately killed those who tried to escape from the flames of fire. 149 people, including 75 children under age were burned alive. The youngest baby was only 7 weeks old. The village was then looted and burned to the ground.

This crime was remembered in Soviet history and memorialized by the government:

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus made a decision in January 1966 to build a memorial complex Khatyn in memory of the hundred [*sic*] of Belorussian villages, destroyed by Nazis during the years of the Second World War, and also in memory of the great tribute and numerous lives sacrificed for the victory by Belorussians. (Ministry, 2005, “Memorial Complex ‘Khatyn’” link)

Russians recall the Khatyn massacre of Russian innocents with outrage,<sup>4</sup> but by invoking this memory, Politkovskaya essentially reverses the question “How did history remember Khatyn?” by leading her readers to ask themselves, “How will history remember the Chechen massacres?”

The answer to this lies, in part, in one pointed example in which she talks about the months-long artillery bombardments of Duba-Yurt in early 2000 and what the innocent civilians suffered. “Under bombs and hail,” she wrote,

without any safe passage, they filed toward Chiri-Yurt. Some fell down, killed; others picked them up and carried them to give them a burial in Chiri-Yurt, but they just kept walking. . . .

On February 6, when not a single person was left in Duba-Yurt, the Feds started to burn down the houses that had survived the bombing. Why? Out of revenge and bitter sorrow for their perished comrades. (45–46)

Similarly, a citizen tells this brief story from the purge of Tsotsan-Yurt on New Year’s Eve 2001, in which people’s houses were torn apart and all their belonging broken or

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Davies (1996) asserts that the Soviet government specifically selected the village of Khatyn as a memorial to Nazi aggression. At another point in the war, the Soviets had been accused of a similar incident in the nearby town of Katyn (different spelling). That incident involved the NKVD massacre and mass burial of some 12,500 Polish officers and NCO’s who had been taken as prisoners of war (Grey, 1967, 371). The Khatyn site and story, because of the similar name and location, would have helped to overwrite the memory of the massacre of the Polish officers.

stolen by Federal soldiers: “I had two hundred sacks of hay in my shed. . . . The soldiers brought a guy from the other end of the village there, put him between the sacks, and burnt it all.” (92) With these examples, Politkovskaya has taken a historical instance of united national grief against fascists and turned it inside out, showing the Russians that their own army has committed these same atrocities. Again, she has invoked a historic memory that was one of honor for the Russians to opposite effect in an effort to jar her readers to action.

Similarly, Politkovskaya speaks repeatedly throughout the volume about blockades of Chechen cities and in particular describes in great detail “The Hundredth Grozny Blockade.” In each case, the city or village has been bombed and lies in ruins; the citizens are denied access even to the streets in front of their own homes for fear of being shot on sight or, perhaps worse, abducted and tortured. But hunger is also a constant in these areas that is brought up again and again; she describes the situation in the Makhkety region:

Everyone here knows that you can’t go to the forest, the lifesaver for the villagers. You can’t cut wood or gather wild garlic, the local source of vitamins.

But people go there anyway, even though they know that many of those who decided to cut some wood were shot dead and are now buried at the village cemetery. (56)

In her interview with a newlywed couple, she notes, “it’s still a long time . . . until the new Grozny day will begin, and then they’ll have nothing but problems: what to eat, where to get water” (73). For many of the people she interviewed, the problem of food was critical:

For the first time (except in the movies), I saw an old woman who was swollen from hunger, and nothing will ever wipe this image from my memory. . . .

Woodcuts, as everyone knows, are drawn in one color. Khazimat Gambieva, a withered old refugee with swollen joints and an inflated stomach, looks exactly that way — as if she had been drawn in black and white, with her black wrinkles standing out on her parchmentlike skin. Her tightly drawn nose is just another line of blackness; so are the dark circles around her angular cheekbones. (40)

When speaking with Aishat Junaidova, the head of the Shali regional migrations services outside a food ration distribution point, she says, “To tell me about the starvation, Aishat has to shout over the howls of some women who are out of their minds with hunger and are cursing and ripping a three-day ration out of each other’s hands” (42).

Images such as these, and especially the words “blockade” and “starvation,” cue images in the Russian social memory of the historic Siege of Leningrad, a blockade by the Nazis that lasted nearly 900 days, from September 8, 1941, until January 27, 1944. This blockade, say Barber and Dzeniskevich (2005) “was expressly aimed at starving the city into surrender in order to achieve a major strategic advantage in the war” (5). During this siege, the civilian forces rallied to help Soviet soldiers stave off the attack, but the Germans bombed Leningrad’s factories, hospitals, and food warehouses, and they succeeded in preventing supplies from entering the city in an attempt to starve the people. And Politkovskaya, fairly early in the volume, is absolutely direct in linking Chechnya with the Leningrad blockade. When further describing Khazimat, the woman who looked like a woodcutting, she says:

She looks like a victim of the siege of Leningrad, only this is taking place at the turn of the millennium, in a Europe that is more concerned with luxurious centennial celebrations than with Chechnya, one of its territories. (40)

This direct linkage of the attacks on Chechnya and the attack on Leningrad would have been a stinging blow to readers; the blockade period was a particularly difficult memory, and Russian pride in the survivors is enormous. Salisbury (1969, 516) estimated the loss of life in the city during that time at between 1.3 and 1.5 million. Barber (2005) asserts that

Devastated though other cities were in the course of the war — Dresden and Hamburg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stalingrad and Warsaw — none saw death on such a scale as Leningrad. And unlike these, Leningrad did not suffer its huge loss of life in the course of military action. It was not combat, bombing or shelling which caused the massive number of deaths. The great majority of those who perished in Leningrad died directly or indirectly of hunger. (1)

Much as was done with the memorial to victims of Khatyn, the city of Leningrad created a memorial to these victims with a museum and with its Piskarevskoe Cemetery, which is a mass burial site for those who perished during the blockade.

Starvation during the siege was so severe that many historians speak of the blockade as part of a Nazi genocide plan against the Soviet population. Rolf-Dieter Müller (2009), for instance, says:

The victims of this plan were not unavoidable casualties of war but martyrs of a deliberate policy on the part of the occupational authorities, who set about implementing the first phase of their plan to colonize and germanize the lands of the Soviet Union. It was the beginning of a premeditated genocide on a colossal scale. The population was divided into racial categories, with “undesirable” elements or “superfluous mouths” being left to starve or simply murdered. (284)

The word “genocide,” then, would also spark memories of World War II for the Russian readers, and in fact Politkovskaya uses the term *Natsional'naya Likvidatsiya* [literally “(Ethnic) National Liquidation”] as the heading for one of the sections of this book in

which she describes her meeting with Chechens she had interviewed in the past; this time she learns that many of them had been killed by Federal troops simply because they had spoken with her on a previous occasion (60/47). She also uses the actual word “genocide” in her retelling of the pogrom conducted on March 28, 2001, in the Moscow suburb of Khimki against young “students from the national theater studio Nakhi, which was formed by the Moscow State University of Culture and Art to train a nucleus for a future Grozny theater troupe” (124).<sup>5</sup> These 25 students and their director, who had been asleep in their dormitories, had found themselves awakened at 5:30 that morning by a group of masked men from the Moscow Regional Department for Organized Crime Control and the Moscow District Special Emergency Detachments. The students were beaten and their belongings destroyed for no apparent reason other than that they were Chechen. One member of the group told Politkovskaya his story, and she observed:

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Center on Law and Globalization (2012), “In genocide, the enemy is not a competitor that must be conquered. In the mind of the perpetrator, the enemy is a wholly alien “other” — the sinister force behind society's ills — that must be utterly destroyed. In genocide the enemy is diabolical. That this demonization by the perpetrator has little or no grounding in reality is quite beside the point. What is critical is that, in the collective mind of the perpetrator state, the victim is all powerful and poses an immediate and future threat” (Center of Law and Globalization website). The 1948 United Nations “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” reads in part: *Adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948.*

Article 2: In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

What is shocking is that there is no trace of amazement in his story. Only a statement of fact. Their emotions have been spent back in Chechnya. Students for the Nakhi studio have been chosen from refugee camps in Grozny, and unique people live there, people who are more accustomed to genocide [*genotsidy*] than to breakfast. (125/147)

This genocide came from the Federal army, just as genocide in World War II came from the Nazis.

Just as disturbing in this particular story, however, is a statement by the Chechen theater students that cuts to the core of another Russian myth: that of the hero soldier, which grew out of the myth of World War II. Although the commentary about this is lengthy, it is critical in understanding the charges Politkovskaya is leveling against the mythical heroes:

In the course of the [Khimki] purge it became clear that most of the masked men had just returned from military assignments in Chechnya. Naturally, they hadn't undergone any rehabilitation after battle. And this is the result: they were trigger happy, mentally on edge, full of pent-up emotions and demanding an excursion for a purge, the way a drug addict craves a needle.

"We realized that they just had to go off at someone," says Anzor Khadashev, from Grozny.

"In Chechnya they're the bosses. They came here, and they want to be the bosses here too. We're the best material for that," continues Anzor. "And to be serious, they're simply nuts. . . . I notice that they're afraid of everything. When we were being picked up off the floor to be taken to the Regional Department of Organized Crime Control for questioning, I saw that as soon as you look them in the eye, they shout, 'Don't look! Want to remember me? Turn around!' They're afraid even when they're in masks. Is this any way to live in your own home?" (126–127)

Fear and absence of control: these qualities do no credit to the Russian soldier, and Politkovskaya backs up these charges repeatedly with tales of reprehensible behavior on



the part of the Russian military men serving in the Caucasus. Any reader of her work must confront the truth about the Russian soldier-hero myth in the Chechen conflict.

### **Historical and Present-Day Heroes**

During World War II, the defense of the Motherland was everything; it stood above all else, and the servicemen were held in high esteem. Beginning in 1945, the Soviet government established a tradition, which continues today, of honoring those who served in that war; annual Victory Day parades incorporate marching bands, military equipment, and thousands of veterans.<sup>6</sup> Each celebration is an opportunity for these former service members to dust off their medals and accept the thanks of a grateful nation. “Those who visited the Soviet Union before the perestroika period will recall with what pride veterans, both men and women, displayed their chestfuls [*sic*] of medals,” McDaniel wrote (1996, 8). These former soldiers are also given special consideration by and are, in theory, watched over by government military offices. This image of an almost mythic military hero-protector of the country has continued in Russia.

What Politkovskaya does with this book, however, is provide evidence to the contrary with regard to the myth of the heroic Russian soldiers and asks her readers to put aside this myth in favor of the truth. She provides numerous examples of all the reprehensible behaviors committed by the Federal army troops. In fact, she says:

In Chechnya, the marauding and racketeering routine masked as searching for bandits works nonstop. All that has changed in the second war are those who commit the crimes. The activities that the antiterrorist operation has sought to eradicate — violent hostage taking, slavery, ransoms for “live” goods — are now being performed by the new masters, the soldiers.  
(51)

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Chaykovskaya (2011).

Bribery, racketeering, ransom of living people and of dead bodies — the concept of commerce is woven throughout these stories as Politkovskaya shows the soldiers' endless desire to accumulate goods and money. "The air is poisoned with the lies of the military higher ranks, the lawlessness of the lower ranks, and the rotten stench of money that the soldiers take as compensation for their leaders' deceit," she wrote (105).

Indeed, basic human decency seemed to find no home among the Russian soldiers in this war, as Politkovskaya demonstrates in the previously mentioned story of Vakha, the man from Achkoi-Martan who was blown up by the landmine. After his body parts had been collected in the familiar black body bag, his fellow travelers debated about where the body should be taken:

Reason prevails — the body should be brought to Achkoi, of course. It will be buried there anyway, in the family cemetery. So why waste money lugging it to Ingushetia? You need to bribe a lot of people to get there. At the Kavkaz checkpoint, the border between this war and the rest of the world, you need to pay twice, once each way. And you'd have to pay two or three times as much for a corpse, depending on the commander's mood that day. (36)

Stories about bribes or ransoms demanded for dead bodies appeared repeatedly throughout the text, and soldiers showed a particularly insidious reasoning that would guarantee them the cash they demanded; she states this after explaining the bribery/ransom business for both living and dead "goods" that had become common knowledge for all involved:

But not everyone is able to come up with the money, since Chechnya is impoverished. Not everyone makes the deadline set by the officers. And in such cases the arrested men disappear without a trace. Or the middleman announces that the ransom is now for a corpse. And the dead cost more than the living. That's how the military has arranged it, knowing that there

is no greater torment for a Chechen than not to observe the funeral rites.  
(68)

This practice of bribery and ransom had become so widespread that in some areas, “it has become traditional to collect ransom money from the whole community” (49), and she writes frequently of entire villages pitching in to raise the ransom money for a few individuals — again, “their own” — who had been abducted. Nowhere in Chechnya were the civilians safe. In Grozny, she wrote, “Many soldiers have turned into bandits too, or work together with [Chechen bandits],” and she quoted a woman who lived there: “I don’t understand how all this happened. We were waiting for the army to bring us relief, but it brought total slavery instead” (72). This was now an entrenched system, Politkovskaya says: “It’s an old story: purges with the goal of catching militants end with a primitive trade of goods for money and money for goods” (67).

Furthermore, age made no difference in this dirty business, making the downfall of the “hero” even more painful to observe. In one instance, the federal soldiers locked an elderly woman in her basement and held her for a 500-ruble ransom; in another instance, in Tsotsan-Yurt on New Year’s Eve, 2001,

They left anyone who paid the ransom of five or six thousand rubles per family alone. There was a smaller ransom of five hundred rubles per person not to be arrested. They didn’t touch the militants at all. Then a bus drove up. They forced everyone in, including the children. They put grenades into the children’s hands and screamed that they’d blow up the children if the parents didn’t give them money. The Feds kept a young woman with a one-year old baby from the Soltalatov family outside while her mother was running from one neighbor to another collecting the ransom that they demanded. (92–93)

In addition, the soldiers based their ransoms on what the market would bear. In Starye Atagi, where “commerce ruled,”

Ransom for living goods ranged from five hundred to three or four thousand rubles, depending on the age — the younger, the pricier — and on the soldiers' visual appraisal of the home.

This time they also took money for women. . . . As is customary in these places, prices for women were much lower than for men. And you paid for something different too: to avoid rape. The Feds took three hundred rubles from one family not to rape their young daughter, and five hundred rubles from another. (105)

As shocking as these punitive bribes and ransoms were, however, the soldiers' abuse of the Chechens went far beyond to include horrible physical punishment, and Politkovskaya did not spare her readers those stories, either.

Torture was a frequent theme in the reportage. "I've heard dozens of horrible stories and seen the exhausted faces of people who have experienced torture from soldiers accomplished in the fine art of harassment. My pen simply refuses to move from all the horrible things that I have to record" (47), she wrote. In one case, a grandmother was tossed into "the pit" — a hole dug in the ground in which captives were thrown together, often standing in freezing water and with no appropriate clothing or opportunities to use a bathroom. The grandmother was removed only when the soldiers sought to torture her: "Soldiers young enough to be her sons . . . connected bare wires to the fingers of both her hands and threw the wires across her neck, from behind" (48).

"I really screamed when they switched on the current. But I took all the rest silently. I was afraid to anger them any further."

The FSS men kept saying, "You're dancing badly. We need to add a little more," referring to Rosita's convulsions. And they added some more.

"What did they want?"

"They didn't ask me anything." (49–49)

This was similar to the case of Mohammed Idigov, "a sixteen-year-old tenth-grader at the village's High School No. 2, [who] has the eyes of a grown-up man" after having gone

through beatings and tortures, at the hands of Federal soldiers, that left his kidneys and lungs permanently damaged; “I was glad when they took us to be shot,” he said (97). In Starye Atagi the reality of abductions for torture was so extreme that “Finally, the residents went out into the streets, lit fires, and stayed there every night. They hoped that being among other people could save them from death and rape. It did not save everyone” (105).

Perhaps the most disturbing torture described happened during the twentieth purge of Starye Atagi to Liza Iushayeva, a young woman who, on the morning of January 29, “in the last month of her pregnancy, began to give birth. This often happens unexpectedly, and does not depend at all on the purge deadlines set by General Moltensky” (101). Politkovskaya’s description of the event, although again lengthy, employs both the concept of *svoi* and the direct attack on the extreme cruelty of the “hero-soldiers”:

Liza’s relatives ran to ask the soldiers standing at the cordon to let a woman in labor into the hospital, but the soldiers took a long time to reach a decision. The women reproached them loudly, asking them, don’t you have mothers, wives, sisters. And they answered that they had no family [*bezrodnye*] and were from orphanages. And also that they had come here to kill the living, not help those being born.

When the soldiers took pity, Iushayeva could not walk the three hundred steps to the hospital. The relatives started to make arrangements again, this time about a car. Finally, Liza was driven to the hospital. But a completely different cordon was standing there, and different soldiers. Without going into details, they stood both the driver and Liza against the wall, as they always do, in the pose of a captured militant with their hands up and legs spread apart. Liza held this pose for some time, but then began to sink down. Soon the baby appeared, stillborn. (101/100)

A story such as this needs no more help in driving home the point that the hero-soldiers behaved, in fact, as perverse monsters, yet Politkovskaya adds her own personal

statement as well: “It’s possible to understand a lot, but what could the soldiers have been thinking at that moment” (101). Readers could come to no other conclusion than that their soldiers were acting as heroes in no sense of the word; they would have been forced to face the inaccuracy of their myth in this instance; to be a responsible citizen of the world, the readers would have had to acknowledge that the soldiers serving in Chechnya were no credit to the army or to Russia.

Regarding Federal soldiers, Politkovskaya even removes the *hope* of finding heroes among the Russians. She mentions several times that identification numbers are often obscured on military vehicles used by the soldiers who commit the violence and destruction. After one violent purge, she writes that the local citizens

saw license number E403 on the last armored vehicle in the column. The vehicle drove up to the Kadyrovs’ former house, now blown up, and the masked soldiers jumped out and told the residents to be careful: “There might be mines inside.” “So some of them are normal people,” the residents said to one another. But then they saw the E403 soldiers stop by some other empty houses and take a few more things from them. (106)

Here she has given readers the hope of a few individual good men, but in the end she pulls even that hope back from them.

A similar story takes place in Grozny following one of its purges. In this case, several family members repeatedly approach a soldier for information about three men who had been abducted. The soldier is “Sasha,” who “doesn’t reveal his last name, title, or position. He feeds you with promises for a couple of months: just wait a bit, I’ll find them tomorrow, or at least their grave” (133). Sasha then hints at some things that he’s seen and would like: a new suit, and a banya “for his various bodily needs” (133). The family, desperate for information, supplies these goods, and Sasha then gives them the

name of a brigade base where their loved ones will be found. This, of course, proves to be a lie, and when the family returns, “Sasha” is gone, “having squeezed everything that he needed out of the suffering families” (133). He knew his service time was up and simply wanted some last-minute fun and a new outfit for his departure.

Politkovskaya’s stories include commentary on the government’s complicity in the problem. This story of Sasha is followed by information that “The officers in Chechnya, like the undercover intelligence agents, have three or four IDs with different last names. And there’s no one you can hold responsible” (133). She explains that the soldiers are allowed to use pseudonyms “so that militants won’t take revenge on their families,” and this, she says, “has gradually become one of the major causes of the crimes and monstrosities in Chechnya.” (133)

Further, she writes, after two years of war, “it is clear that Chechens everywhere have been robbed blind, and that the robbers have turned on their own [*za svoikh*]. She relates the story of Zhenya Zhuravlev, a Federal soldier who spent eight months on duty in the mountains with no communication with his family. His mother, Valentina, finally received a letter from him at the end of his service, asking her to come get him from the town of Vladikavkaz. Valentina’s village collected money for the trip, and she and his aunt went to Dachnoe to retrieve him. There they found him in a hospital, his legs festering from improper care during his time on duty. The other soldiers in charge, however, would not release Zhenya to his mother, saying that they would let him leave only if he would give them a portion of the war money he had earned participating in antiterrorist operations. Zhenya refused to let his mother pay the money, and so she was forced to stay in the village near the hospital with the other mothers whose sons were in

the same situation; together, these women sought help from higher officials.

Politkovskaya writes that, “All of these unfortunate victims of the second Chechen war sent Vassa Nikandrovna, the aunt, to Moscow, and she went to one official after another. And only then did things move forward. The soldiers were allowed to go home. But the officers weren’t jailed” (135).

The story of Pyotr Grigorevich Baturintsev, the former soldier who wore a pink woman’s coat because he had no other clothing and whose family had abandoned him in Grozny, offered further evidence about the military’s lack of concern for its elderly heroes, and therefore its complicity in failing to honor them for their service: “Not a single military official visited him, a retired army officer, to see if he was alive after the attack, if he was hungry. They would not have had to walk very far, either; his house is only six hundred feet away from the Military Command” (111). She observes that Baturintsev’s neighbors ask, “How can we believe that the new government is here to help us, if even an old Russian man, a retired officer, is even worse off under the newly established ‘Russian power’ than he was under Dudayev and Maskhadov?” (111). This message was driven home at the beginning of this vignette with her ironic use of a Soviet song: “And that’s the way he li-ives, the bravest Russian he-ero . . . The he-ero who has fought for Mo-otherla-and.” (108)

The distinction between who is now considered a hero and who is not was provided in an in-depth piece about Colonel Mohammed Yandiev, an officer of the Ingush Ministry of the Interior, whom Politkovskaya interviewed. As she observes:

As a result of a criminal blunder of the Moscow bureaucracy during the storming of Grozny in December 2000, someone had to risk his life to save eighty-nine elderly people from a Grozny retirement home that was abandoned under the bombing. No one wanted to brave the firing for their



sake. Colonel Yandiev was the only one of the hundreds of Russian colonels and generals gathered on this small area near Grozny to say “yes.” And with six of his officers whom he had personally asked about this, he crawled for three days — this was the only possible way — along the streets of Grozny to the neighborhood of Katayama, to Borodin Street, where the lonely, hungry elderly were dying in the care of a government that had forgotten its duty to them. (146–147)

In his interview, Yandiev is modest about his actions, but Politkovskaya states that, “I am a citizen, and for this reason I want to know why the colonel still has not received the title of Hero of Russia that he was nominated for early in 2000 for his deed” (147). In her investigation, she finds the two-part answer for the colonel’s having been overlooked:

First of all, he is “one of them” [*iz “etikh,”* literally *he — (is) of “them”*]. In translation from their Moscow bureaucratic language, that means that Yandiev is an Ingush, and Ingush in the army aren’t trusted much, like Chechens. Yandiev, I was told, is “practically a Chechen,” and “who knows just what was going on in Grozny then — he might have made arrangements with militants. (147)

But her conversation with the government worker goes further:

It turns out that we are only supposed to give the title of Hero if the person “killed a bandit.”

“And if they saved someone’s life?”

“That’s not quite what we’re looking for.”

“So do you give it for rescues or not?”

“Who would admit that they don’t?” (147–148)

Politkovskaya here refused to reveal her sources for this information, but she did note that, “They know which documents the president *won’t sign*. And Putin *won’t sign for rescues*. . . . The way things are, *you need to kill to become a Hero*.” (148). Again, the myth of the hero has been countered, and the readers are being asked to lay down their belief in it to embrace the current reality: Heroes don’t save; they kill.

Nearly all of the stories provided in this volume stand as a counterpoint to the embedded myth of the soldier-hero in Russian culture. Politkovskaya has shown, through detailed narrative, that soldiers in this war have become corrupted and embraced the very Western greed that the Russian people thought they opposed. Their victims are the thousands of Chechens who “search for their kidnapped relatives and, in the best case, ransom their corpses from those who defend the Motherland from terrorism”(112). The abuse of Chechens has become, Politkovskaya implies, its own new market system:

*It may seem strange to some, but in the final analysis, the war has proved profitable for all participants. Everyone has found a niche. The mercenaries at the checkpoints get bribes of ten to twenty rubles around the clock. The generals in Moscow and Khankala use their war budget for personal gain. Officers of the middle ranks collect ransom for temporary hostages and corpses. Junior officers get to go marauding during the purges.*

*And as a team (soldiers and some of the militants), they take part in illegal oil and weapon trade.*

*And there are also ranks, awards, careers. . . (161; italics in original)*

And what comes after this war proved problematic on both sides, she observed: “After this unrestrained lawlessness, they leave for their homes, all over the country. Chechnya as a mode of thinking, feeling and acting, spreads everywhere like gangrenous cells and turns into a nationwide tragedy, infecting all strata of society” (134).

But further, and perhaps more insidious, was the damage being done to the Chechens. Here, to edify her readers, Politkovskaya once again reaches back and provides historical context — specifically Hitler’s era, and the problem of nationalism.

Here’s a tiny bit of national history. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in Russia, there was a wave of state-sponsored anti-Semitism that differed very little from today’s widespread

national anti-Chechen frame of mind. The Pale of Settlement zones were developed. Children grew up knowing that they were forbidden to move freely unless they had permission from the police and weren't allowed to study in many educational institutions. They created an inferiority complex and ultimately crowned many Jewish youth as martyrs. They were prepared to avenge their desecrated childhood, because they didn't want their grownup years and old age to be desecrated the way their parents' and grandparents' had been.

The whole world knows the result. Most of the big-name Bolsheviks who carried out the October revolution came from among the shtetl Jews. They did not just want to stop living as outcasts, but also aimed to get revenge on their offenders. And did they ever get revenge. It's strange how yet again we've forgotten what we should never forget under any circumstances. . . . In the third year of war, we are already meeting too many young Chechens with sparks of hatred in their eyes and one single dream: to punish those who have offended them. (88–89)

The children are the ones who will suffer, she observes in several different vignettes, and they will carry with them the stories from these “modern European ghettos, mistakenly called ‘an antiterrorist operation zone.’ The children of this ghetto will never forget” (99).<sup>7</sup>

In all these stories, something was clearly wrong; a natural orderliness of life in Chechnya had been disturbed, and it was not being righted but instead was being perpetuated. This is in contrast to the historical orderliness found in the constructs of serfdom and the peasant communes as well as in Soviet villages; in those situations, someone or something was in charge, so that the people had some form of recourse, usually in the form of a patriarchal leader who was both kindly and punishing, and who could set things right. In the region where the Second Chechen War was fought, however,

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<sup>7</sup> Her predictions are already playing out. *See* Brooke (2011) for an article about Chechen youth who have come to Moscow and begun publically creating nationalist controversy that mimics what they saw in their own war-torn region.

this usual order had broken down, and it was going unpunished, but perhaps not for long. Paxson recognized the link between the living and the dead in the Russian culture, and she noted, “God is far away, but the deeds that tie you to your ancestors are in the fiber of your being” (248). The deeds being perpetrated by the soldier-heroes in Chechnya were not honorable; where, then, were the *khoziaeva* — the patriarchal spirits or leaders or heads whose job it was to maintain order, to set things right? Russian mythology and culture say they must exist, but as Politkovskaya showed in her writing, these patriarchs upon whom the people relied were not properly fulfilling their duties.

***Khoziaeva / Khoziaistvo (Patriarchal family heads / Household maintenance)***

Russian tradition holds that order is kept in any familial unit by a *khoziain* (his wife being the *khoziaika*), who “bear[s] the brunt of the moral responsibility to keep the *khoziaistvo* [household]”; these figures understand that “fulfilling these tasks is not only a pragmatic issue, but also a moral one. . . . When obligations are not fulfilled, it is they who must answer to the dead ancestors, who can show their displeasure in a range of ways” (Paxson, 2005, 56). While such beliefs might seem antiquated to citizens in most modern Russian cities today, Paxson discovered this thinking in the village she studied during the mid-1990s, and it was prevalent in the smaller villages throughout Russia.

But in addition, this belief is buried historically in other ways of thinking that affect the entire culture. The duties of a *khoziain* have become central to the people’s view of the duties of the country’s leaders.<sup>8</sup> Paxson says that historians have shown that

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<sup>8</sup> In Russian culture, this leader would be an authoritarian figure, much like the patriarchal heads of household but one distinctly more significant than any Western counterparts. Hingley (1977) observed that “While authoritarian rule has, however unevenly and sporadically, steadily declined in the West over the centuries, a marked contrary trend is to be observed in Russia from the fifteenth century onward. . . . The

throughout Russian history, “the attitude of villagers towards the tsar was a warm one; he was a fatherly khoziain-figure — a protector and bearer of otherworldly powers” (75) as opposed to the boyars, who were members of the hated administrative level below the tsar. Similarly, she says, “villagers will, today, say that it was not Stalin who devastated the Soviet Union with persecutions, but those under Stalin”; this need for a father-leader figure shows how deeply embedded in the culture is the need for a paternal structure and distinction between the “us” and the “them”:

The khoziain-figure is understood to intercede on behalf of the “narod” (the people) to his administrators: in early centuries, those administrators were the boiare (and more local ones such as *zemskie nachal’niki*, or land bosses); in this century, they became the *kommunisty*. A three-tiered organization is here evident, filled by the roles of the khoziain-figure, the administrators, and the narod. The narod and the khoziain-figure are *svoi* to one another and have a synergistic relation one to the other. The administrators are *chuzhie*. And can be hated and feared as outsiders. (75–76)

Further, Paxson notes,

the most common use of khoziain outside of the familial unit and the metaphysical sphere is that of the nation-khoziain. This was apparent again and again in the radiant past — that Stalin had been the khoziain and that without him, the people were left in a state of terrible chaos. This khoziain-like quality of Stalin’s was often contrasted to the lack of that quality in Boris Yeltsin. . . . In a similar vein, the state itself is held up as, ideally, the khoziain. The term for state, *gosudarstvo*, is derived from *gosudar’*, the patriarchal lord of the land. In the context of the radiant past,

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introduction of totalitarian rule under Lenin, and its consolidation under Stalin, did nothing to reverse the trend. It has never possessed a politically influential upper, middle or any other class; never any powerful corporate body able to exert irresistible pressure on central authority. Thus Russia has presented its sons and daughters with features markedly different from those conditioning their Western brothers and sisters” (33).

says Mikhail Alekseevich, “The state was *khoziain*. Took care of everyone.” (235–236)

It is apparent, then, that embedded in the culture, even in present times, has been the image of a fatherly figure, sometimes referred to as *dedushka* [*grandfather* — a term also used to refer to the *khoziain* of the forest, the *khoziain lesovoi* or the *dedushka lesovoi*]. Stalin was himself often referred to as *dedushka*, and this is an image that the culture has preserved; as Paxson observed, “Whether the *khoziain* is known as grandfather or God, his powers embrace communities of *svoi* of various sizes and dimensions” (238). The country’s leader, then, must possess the wisdom and kindness of a *khoziain* in order to be effective in protecting his *svoi*.

Politkovskaya, however, dismantles in her writing the images of people who have been raised up as *khoziaeva* in the eyes of the people. These father-leaders hold the strength and wisdom to make Russia strong again; they also hold the power to punish. The people had finally seen this type of leader again in Vladimir Putin. Many of the people at that time similarly had remembered the strength and kindness attributed to Stalin. In the history that they had lived,

Stalin and figures like him have two roles: first, to keep order with a strict/severe hand; and second, to bestow bounty from unseen sources. These figures are separate from the local leadership and are aloof from their machinations. Like any *khoziain*, the nation-*khoziain*, as I will call him, is a requisite of social life, but his function is attached to the national *rodina*, as distinct from any various local ones. In narratives of the past, he shows up prominently in two cases: first, in terms of his role as a protector against social chaos, and second, in the nationwide trauma of his death. These two roles were often linked — his death being seen as literally unsurvivable by the *narod*. The narratives of the death of Stalin are interesting in this discussion because they mark a trauma of national scale that scars the landscape of the radiant past. Although the radiant past is not always located during the time of Stalin’s life, it is almost always located

under the hood of that nation-khoziain's protections and grace. (Paxson, 2005, 110)

For Politkovskaya to now produce writing that undercut this similar strength that the Russian people believed they saw in Putin meant that she was, in a sense, attempting to remove their protector and to thrust the country once again into the “unsurvivable” from which they felt they were just emerging after the national and economic collapse that followed 1991. She hoped that they would see Putin for his weaknesses and corruption, but in reality she was attacking the one mythical figure whom the Russians needed at that time.

Politkovskaya made many attacks on Putin and those in power in Moscow throughout this volume. Early in the book, when she is reporting on the starving people waiting for rations from the government, she is asked by the starving Chechens to “Call Moscow’s attention to the fact that this government handout is not enough to live on. Many of our refugees are for all intents and purposes condemned to starvation” (42). All she can do, she says, is nod and mumble, because “It’s hard to tell the condemned that, first, the Kremlin doesn’t give a damn about my report and, second, the situation in Moscow regarding the war in the Caucasus is very complicated, and no one knows anything about it, because they don’t want to” (42). Such an accusation about those in power indicates that the people who need to keep the country running are neglecting their duties as *khoziaeva* for the people because they are disinterested in the area in which they are conducting a war. Rather than demonstrating to the Russian readers here that the leaders are inept, she is creating tension by taking away the confidence they had in their leaders to control the situation.

A similar accusation appeared in the story related by Malika Yunusov, whose husband, Said-Ali, was killed as he tried to save the family cow after the shed had caught fire following Federal Army shelling. The army blamed Said-Ali for his own death, essentially saying his activities around the vicinity of a burning structure had looked suspicious, which is why he had been shot. The senselessness of such reasoning and the overall lack of control over events in the Vedeno area are captured in Politkovskaya's condemnation of the entire situation: "The men in epaulettes have nothing to be afraid of and no one to have scruples about. There are still no trials or prosecutions in Vedeno — they are not needed in the zone — only irrational lawlessness, and whoever turns up at the wrong place at the wrong time is the one at fault"(59). In other words, she is saying, the leaders are not doing their jobs.

This same lack of order is noted only a few pages later, in the story of the Grozny blockade, where she comments on Prime Minister Stanislav Velentinovich Ilyasov, the chairman of the government of the Chechen Republic who was appointed by Putin in 2001 as a strong leader. The morning of the blockade, Ilyasov was at the government complex, where most workers had not shown up for duty because they could not get through the Federal Army checkpoints. Beside him in his office stood a young lieutenant general, and Politkovskaya noted that it looked "very strange: the general and the prime minister, important people here, are unable to cope with the army anarchy" (64). What has happened here, she implies, is that even the strong *khoziain* who was placed by Putin, himself the *khoziain* of the entire country, could not overcome the problems of the army over which Putin and his selected leaders were supposed to have control.



Given the suffering of the Chechen people at the hands of a corrupt army, Politkovskaya can come to no other conclusion than that:

We live in gloomy times. The air is poisoned with the lies of the military higher ranks, the lawlessness of the lower ranks, and the rotten stench of money that the soldiers take as compensation for their leaders' deceit. That's the way the Chechen system works. (105)

This, however, is not the way any system should work if a true *khoziain* were in control of the situation. It may be true that the people could blame the country's failings on the administrators *under* Putin, just as they blamed Stalin's underlings, but Politkovskaya pins much of the blame on the president himself, both directly and indirectly.

One example of Politkovskaya's accusation of Putin for his complicity in the problem comes in her description of Yury Budanov, "a colonel with two Orders of Bravery on his chest"; his experience, she notes, "has clearly shaped the new face of Putin's promilitary and neo-Soviet Russia, where the ends once again justify the means" (39). This slap at Putin's style of governance is a direct link with history, to the Soviet times from which the country had recently been struggling to separate itself.<sup>9</sup> She makes

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<sup>9</sup> Budanov was a particular sticking point in the press because of allegations against him for having murdered Elza Kungayeva, an 18-year-old Chechen girl whom he blamed for the death of a close military friend. Budanov was charged with kidnapping, sexually assaulting, and beating the girl before he murdered her; he confessed to the killing but asserted that at the time he had had good reason to believe she had been the sniper. Budanov was sentenced to 10 years for the murder but served only a portion of that. His trial deeply divided the Russian public; "Nationalists claimed that an honest Russian officer had been unjustly condemned to please the Chechens. Liberals and human rights activists said Budanov was a war criminal who symbolized everything that was wrong with the war in Chechnya, the army and the state" (von Eggert, 2011, para. 4; see also "Budanov gunned down," 2011). Politkovskaya devoted several pages to the story of Budanov's crime as an addition to the English-language version of this book, but this piece did not appear in the Russian version.

this connection yet again when she discusses the problems with Ingushetia, which originally had willingly taken in Chechen refugees under the leadership of President Ruslan Aushev. This humanitarian effort continued for three years “despite attacks from the Kremlin-controlled media and the unprecedented pressure and blackmail from Moscow” (118–119), but this changed with “the establishment in April 2002 of FSS General Murat Zyazikov, a protégé of the Kremlin and Putin, as president. It also resulted in the increased power of the national secret services, which by that time had taken root in all government nooks and crannies of the country, just like in the Soviet era” (118–119). Politkovskaya here again implies that *khoziain*-like wisdom is not being used in leading the country.

As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, Politkovskaya blamed Putin directly for this “national disgrace” that was Chechnya (44), and his failings as a leader were enumerated throughout the volume. At one point, she raised the question about who shouldered the greatest blame for the Chechen problem:

What about Putin? He’s in the Kremlin, enjoying the respect of the world community as an active member of the international “antiterrorism” VP club, the so-called coalition against terror. It’s May 2002, and Bush is in Moscow . . . fraternization . . . a “historic visit” . . . but barely a word about Chechnya, as if the war didn’t exist. (28)

Further into the work, she quotes Chechen Isa Dudushev, who

wants to know why Putin announced a moment of silence to honor the victims of the American tragedy while never saying a word about the innocent Chechen victims. Why is there so much talk about the flooded city of Lensk, with [permanent minister of the Ministry for Emergency Situations] Shoigu personally giving his word to Putin to rebuild it, but no one says a word about ruined Chechnya?” (81)

No one in the Kremlin, Politkovskaya suggests, is willing to step forward to stop the crime and help the victims. When speaking of the soldiers who bribe and cheat the citizens who simply want information about their missing loved ones, she asks, “Who will stop these ‘Sashas’? Their supreme commander-in-chief Putin? No, he’s shown no such desire — he’d rather just hand out awards.” (133) These Chechens, she observes, “all have identical eyes . . . not just by grief over a loved one who will never return home, but also by an absolute disbelief that their nation cares about its citizens” (153). Had the leader-*khoziain* been doing his duty, these problems would be addressed, she is telling the readers, and to put the ultimate exclamation point on her belief, she offers what could be taken by a Russian as the greatest insult of all:

As if it weren’t bad enough that your mother or child has been taken away and their bodies haven’t been returned — they also have to mock your pain! Who can stop this? Putin? The minister of defense? The attorney general? No. These gentlemen aren’t trained to think about details. Only the West is the people’s big advocate. Therefore they appeal to the West for the sake of survival. (132)

The leader — Putin — she says here, has done so poorly in his job as the patriarchal head of the country, that the people who need him most must turn to Russia’s enemy — the West — to address their most basic needs. This is shameful, she is telling her readers, and something needs to be done.

### **The Message**

With her volume *A Small Corner of Hell*, Anna Politkovskaya chose to use a storytelling style of writing to convey the dire situation of the Chechen people. She relayed the stories based on her notes and personal experiences from the early years of the Second Chechen War, when she was herself involved in the horrors and found herself

in life-threatening situations, just as did the people about whom she wrote. She clearly aligned herself with the suffering masses, and she made no secret of her opposition to the Kremlin and the majority of the Federal troops who were turned into abusive murderers rather than professional soldiers sent to rout out the real terrorists. With her writing, she hoped to rouse the Russian people to action so that the abuse, and the war itself, would be stopped. She had provided the information; her readers could no longer consider themselves innocent of the situation. It was time now for them to act responsibly and humanely to stop the suffering.

Yet not only with her words, but by her very actions, Politkovskaya found herself violating one of the basic precepts of the “Russian mind”: she blurred the distinction between *svoi* and *chuzhoi*, forcing her readers to question their own allegiances and familial ties based on the criminal activities of their own people. However, this blurring of who was evil and who was *rodnoi* or *svoi* suggested that the Russian people had no sense of distinct national identity; this insult would have enabled them to avoid accountability for knowing about the atrocities and therefore acting to end them, because it allowed them to retaliate. Rather than responding to pressure to act as responsible citizens of Russia and the world — *rossiiskii*, a civic obligation — they chose instead to act “Russian,” or *ruskii* — a national identification — and to suggest that Politkovskaya herself was the problem. By trying to confuse these identities and by showing an unwillingness to be fully “Russian,” Politkovskaya had made herself *chuzhaya* in the eyes of her readers; she had given preference to those who were considered by ethnic Russians to be the enemy *because* they were not Russian nationals but foreigners —

Muslim Chechens who by chance fell under the umbrella of the government of the Russian Federation.

Politkovskaya also offered little comfort to the people who looked to their country's proud history and its young soldiers as heroes defending their country from terrorist activities. By using unhappy historical memories, she created scenes that showed her readers that the Russians were not chosen saviors, but rather they had become cold-hearted killers and torturers of the same stripe as the fascists against whom their own fathers and grandfathers had fought in World War II. Politkovskaya's writing showed that history was repeating itself, only this time the enemy was actually the Russians themselves, who had become that which they hated most. Their mythical soldier-heroes and special history, she was showing them, were a farce; the soldiers were unethical and immoral, and history would remember them as such. For the readers to support these activities, she suggested, they would also have to be immoral and unethical. They were now disabused of the notion that their soldiers were heroes; it was up to them to take a stand. Yet this stand failed to materialize, because Politkovskaya had underestimated the strength of the foundational myth and the cultural pride that her readers had in the idealized soldier and the idealized society that had been created in the culture.

Finally, she attacked the concept of the wise, kind, and firm paternal leader in Vladimir Putin himself, whom the Russian people had come to view as the one who would return Russia to its former greatness. Having grown suspicious of Gorbachev with his radical changes and Yeltsin with his drunken follies, the people had rallied behind the dapper younger man with the aggressive stance who seemed to have all the right answers for pulling the country out of its economic mire and the shame of failure to which had

sunk in the previous 10 years. Now, Politkovskaya was telling them that this was all a ruse — this wise *khoziain* in fact offered none of those things, and by turning a blind eye to the crisis in the Caucasus, he was actually perpetuating it. This leader, she had proved, was not a good *khoziain*. This conclusion could raise only concern and consternation among her readers. The myth states that the leader must be strong, or the consequences for everyone would be dire. Their belief in the foundational myth of the kind and all-knowing leader, however, was stronger than the reality of the facts the Politkovskaya presented, and again her criticism of him and of his chosen administrators showed her as someone who simply did not understand the Russian way.

These stories, so difficult for the Russians to face, were only the beginning of her attacks against the Russian idea, culture, and mythology. Politkovskaya continued to publish heart-rending stories and scathing attacks in her newspaper pieces; these later articles were brought together by *Novaya Gazeta* and published under the title of *Nothing But the Truth*, translated by Arch Tate and released in 2010 through Vintage Books of London. These stories — sharper and still more critical — added fuel to the fire, and those who scorned her work had still more to become defensive about. Their “trained incapacity” tested further, they continued to return to their foundational myths and beliefs instead of opening up to and addressing the bad news that Politkovskaya brought. She continued to fail to shake them loose from their cultural mythologies.

## Chapter Four

### *Nothing But the Truth*

Immediately following Anna Politkovskaya's death in 2006, colleagues at *Novaya Gazeta* decided to create a tribute to her by assembling and publishing a collection of her articles along with reminiscences from family members, friends, and coworkers. Sections of this original volume, which was issued in 2007 under the title *Za Chto*, were translated into English by British editor and translator Arch Tait and issued in 2010 under two titles: *Nothing But the Truth: Selected Dispatches* (Vintage Books, London) and *Is Journalism Worth Dying For? Final Dispatches* (Melville House, New York). The English-language versions differ slightly in pagination and in American- versus British-English usage, but they are otherwise identical in content.

This volume, while not organized by the author herself and therefore not indicative of the writing samples that she would necessarily have chosen, nevertheless offers an interesting and readily accessible selection of her work and shows the breadth and depth of her reporting on the Chechen conflict. It also provides samples of her other, lighter types of writing, and some insights into her personality, provided by those with whom she was closest. Those who compiled the book organized Politkovskaya's writing by theme, with individual topics spanning as many as seven years' worth of her articles that were written as the events in each major theme unfolded over time.

The majority of the volume was dedicated to her coverage of Chechnya and terrorist acts that occurred in both Chechnya and in the Russian Federation. The collection includes reports from the frontline, articles about a few of the major players in the war (one chapter in particular dealing only with "Kadyrovism" and another with the

sadistic federal officer Sergey Lapin, known as “The Cadet”), and a chapter each for the two internationally known terrorist actions that occurred during this time: the *Nord-Ost* siege at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow in October 2002 and the Beslan massacre at School Number One in Beslan, North Ossetia, in September 2004. The book also offers a chapter containing some of her views on Russia in general, another on the West, a random selection of more personal and travel pieces — including a delightful piece on the family dog — and finally the incomplete final article she had been working on at the time of her death.

Analysis of this volume required particularly close scrutiny in that some of the chapters, in order to make the chronological progression of the theme more clear, included entries written by the editors of *Novaya Gazeta*. This happened, for example, when Politkovskaya was *en route* to a story or was being held captive by the army and was unable to file her own work for a certain edition of the paper. It was not always immediately apparent, therefore, whether the section was written by Politkovskaya or by an editor, particularly because of the regular use by both the journalist and her editors of the plural “we” to indicate the general editorial stance of the newspaper. In addition, Tait did not always include dates on the entries. Finally, some of the articles that were direct interviews simply took the form of Politkovskaya’s posed questions in italics, with the bulk of the article being the transcription of the subject’s answers. In these instances, the content and direction of Politkovskaya’s questions were often telling in and of themselves, and they encouraged the direction of that particular story.

Despite these difficulties, the volume offered a great deal of what was readily identifiable as her own writing, and it was these chapters and passages I used for this



analysis. Anything written as reminiscences by friends and family members, as well as her feature pieces, served to provide a richer understanding of Politkovskaya as a journalist and as a person. The majority of what she wrote, however, much as in her book *Small Corner of Hell*, employed foundational myths and cultural and historical references to help her readers make the connections she sought in the most powerful way possible.

I argue here again that, in her reporting, Politkovskaya's intent was to force her Russian readers to admit to the abuses and genocidal actions being taken by the government and army in which the people so blindly placed their full trust. However, she continued to employ images, metaphors, and appeals from Russian mythology and history that put her in a position to be criticized for being a bad Russian by the broad newspaper-reading Russian public, inasmuch as these strategies challenged fundamental underpinnings of the Russian world view. During this time period, when the Russian government proclaimed a war on terror much as the West was doing, Politkovskaya showed, through counter-myths and counter-cultural examples, that the Russian government was complicit with the terrorists it claimed to be eliminating and was engaging in terrorist activities of its own. She showed her readers that the Russian government had gone so far against the grain of what the people believed themselves to be that it had created a frightening fantasy world in the North Caucasus, where no logic could be applied and evil lurked around every corner. This upset of the "Russian mind" allowed readers to take a position of rejecting her message with impunity, because she turned the defining mythology of who they were as a people and as individuals on its head. Again, much as with Kenneth Burke's "trained incapacity," the Russian people were largely unable to accept the Second Chechen War as a crisis in which the Russian

government and its soldiers had become everything that the soldier-heroes had fought against in the past; it embodied poor leadership and created the most frightening of fantasy situations in which nothing could be set right. By forcing her readers to confront these facts, she again attempted to constrain their responses to her appeals: to act other than humanely to the Chechen suffering would show them to be as cruel as their soldiers were. But again, what she had not counted on was the power of the foundational myths and the cultural and historical beliefs that undergirded popular Russian thought. The majority chose to oppose Politkovskaya and remain true to their Russian roots rather than acknowledge the errors of their leaders and their heroes. Readers in the West, on the other hand, understood the power of Politkovskaya's arguments, because they understood and accepted the norms of international citizenship that she brought to bear in attempting to generate accountability for knowing about and acting on atrocities in Chechnya.

In her articles contained within the volume *Nothing But the Truth*, the groupings that carried some of the heaviest weight were references to history, soldier-heroes, *Khoziaeva / Khoziaistvo*, and the world *za zerkal'e* ("beyond the looking glass"). In the following sections I will examine a sample from her writings dealing with each of these thematic groups and show how they would have offended the Russians' cultural sensitivities and beliefs and made her vulnerable to criticism.

### **History**

Historical references, as shown in the previous chapter, can touch a nerve with Russian readers. As she did in her book *Small Corner of Hell*, Politkovskaya wrote newspaper articles that drew on similarities from various periods in Russian and Soviet history to make her points. Sometimes the references were direct; other times, words or

phrases served indirectly to bring to mind images or events that would bring weight to bear on her story. In 2001, for example, she wrote of problems with the United Nations' leader Kofi Annan. At that time, Human Rights Watch released a report, timed to coincide with Annan's trip to Moscow, accusing the Russians of civilian deaths in Chechnya; Annan, however, refused to acknowledge the report. In her coverage of the event, Politkovskaya explained that Annan had hoped to be reelected to a second term as secretary general, and he needed Russia's support in this endeavor, so he was unwilling at that time to give credence to any accusations against the Kremlin. In this story, Politkovskaya mentioned two past Russian leaders; she directly named a more recent Soviet figure, but she also took her audience back obliquely to the time of Peter the Great. This past week, she wrote, "has brought striking evidence of how enthusiastically we have got stuck into bringing back the Brezhnev era" (79), but further,

The influential Human Rights Watch group timed publication of its report about just one of the hundreds of civilian mass graves in Chechnya to coincide with the arrival in Moscow of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in an attempt to demand support from the international community, and in particular, of course, from the United Nations, for a proper inquiry. A great barrage of irate Kremlin comment, refutation and repudiation ensued. . . . There is no doubt that we have observed the conclusion of a business deal on a podium of human bones. (79)

The "business deal" was, of course, Annan ignoring the report in exchange for a vote in favor of returning him to his position, but the "podium of human bones" statement would have struck a chord with Russian readers. Tsar Peter the Great founded the city of St. Petersburg in 1703 on marshland in the Gulf of Finland by the Baltic Sea, and in order to build the European-style city he craved, Peter conscripted thousands of peasants throughout Russia to dig and haul and build. Conditions were so difficult that as many as

100,000 serfs died in the process, earning Petersburg the distinction of being “The City Built on Bones” (e.g., Kort, 2010; Osborn, 2006). The founding of Petersburg as a European city contributed to the eventual Slavophile/Westernizer debates of the 1800s, but it has also stood in history as an example of power over the peasants who gave their lives for the tsar, whose vision for the city was more important to him than the people. Politkovskaya’s implication here is that, similarly, the people who have been sacrificed meant nothing in light of the Russian government’s desires. This connection with history would have required Politkovskaya’s readers to acknowledge the similarity in the situations and to draw the conclusion that the Russian government cared little for people it considered “lesser.”

Politkovskaya did not hold back in her newspaper reporting from providing her readers other warning reminders that in history, such callous and uncaring behavior that goes around also comes around. In one particular instance of this, she reiterated the concept of genocide in her story of a little girl caught in the politics of war:

When this nightmare [the Second Chechen War] was inaugurated in September 1999, one did secretly hope in the depths of one’s heart that the state would catch terrorists and refrain from waging war against everyone in Chechnya. Some hope! Today it is obvious that the policy from the outset was genocide. The genocide of one people, however, soon leads to the genocide of another, a truism borne out through the centuries by successive generations of invaders and those invaded. For the totalitarian empire being constructed in front of our eyes, punitive expeditions give life meaning. Today one group is sent to the guillotine, tomorrow a different one. The day after tomorrow it will be the turn of little Liana, and later still, we need have no doubt, it will be our turn. (43)

In this instance, “genocide” is not even disputed, or put out for her audience members to determine on their own based on the facts. This statement is indisputable: History will remember this war as genocide of the Chechen people. She backed this up with a

statement just a few pages earlier by saying of the attack on the Urus-Martan district center, “There is a large discrepancy in the figures given for the simple reason that the surviving villagers could not dig graves fast enough and many buried their relatives together, so that there were fewer graves than casualties. It was another Guernica, comparable in horror to the infamous missile attack on the central market in Grozny last October” (40). Here, the word “genocide” provides a clear link for her readers to both the Armenian genocide during and after World War I and Hitler’s genocide, and the indisputable knowledge that what these armies did were in fact no different than what the Russian army was now doing to the Chechens. Readers of this material would have to decide whether they could support their own government committing such undeniable acts, or whether instead they would willfully ignore the accusation in favor of their foundational beliefs that the Russian government and army troops stood for what was right and good — a concept that was long the central motif of Soviet propaganda.

The concept of genocide also arises in her June 2000 coverage of Akhmat-hadji Kadyrov’s appointment as the director of Chechnya’s provisional administration in the first year after the start of the war. Of the 18 heads of district administrations in the region, she wrote,

only three . . . have agreed to work under the middleman Mufti [Kadyrov]. Twelve of them sent an abrupt demand to President Putin, the “Letter of the Twelve,” either to change his edict or expect sabotage. When Moscow chose to ignore this, a meeting of administrative heads in Gudermes on 16 June considered a proposal to try to persuade the Centre to at least delay Kadyrov’s accession to the throne by a couple of months, until the end of the harvest season. The reason is that people need to be able to harvest the 85,000 hectares they have sowed with such difficulty without the fear that Kadyrov’s coming to power heralds either a renewal in the near future of combat operations or that the Kadyrov gang, whose existence he no longer

bothers to deny, will simply set about brazenly filching the harvest, every hectare of which has been watered with blood and tears. (113)

This image of harvestable land being taken over by authorities who had unlimited power could not help but bring to mind an event from Russia's past: the 1932–1933 famine during Stalin's reign. This forced famine in Ukrainian SSR, known as the *holodomor*, claimed the lives perhaps more than a million Ukrainians who were forced to give up all their harvest, and even seed grain, for the greater good of the state. Although its actual status as genocide has been in dispute and the use of that term has basically been discredited, the blame for this horrible famine remains linked to Stalin and his poorly constructed policies.<sup>1</sup> Russian readers would be able to recognize this similar historical event in Politkovskaya's description of what the Kremlin would be doing to the Chechens with full permission of the man who was being put in charge, and this would once again raise the question of not only Stalin's actions and decisions years earlier but Putin's actions and decisions in the present. The force of a strategy designed to generate accountability — to pressure readers to acknowledge the nature and severity of atrocities in Chechnya — is mitigated by making her vulnerable to criticism for disloyalty.

Politkovskaya also drew on historical events to express her concern for the quality of leadership she saw, and she felt compelled to draw the historical connections for the readers. Of one court case she wrote:

In Doha, agents of the Russian secret services blew up Russia's enemy  
Zelimkhan Yandarbiev [a former acting president of the Chechen

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "PACE finds Stalin regime guilty of Holodomor" (April 2010). A lively and rather testy personal debate about the status of genocide, which began with Robert Conquest's 1986 book *Harvest of Sorrow*, ensues in Wheatcroft (1999), Conquest (1999), Ellman (2005), and Davies & Wheatcroft (2006).

Republic of Ichkeria]. The agents failed to cover their tracks, were caught, and now have confessed to assassination.

What needs to be added? The Doha bomb proves, quite apart from anything else, that Russia has returned to the Soviet period in the sense that it is not only practising political terrorism within its own borders, in Chechnya, but is also exterminating people wherever it pleases. . . . Some in Russia support the tactic of political terrorism which came in with Putin, while others are categorically opposed to it. Be that as it may, the tribalism of the FSB (or GRU) is real. Everything is permitted. (333–334)

Politkovskaya sometimes scolded readers for how little attention they paid to such matters. The West in particular, she warned, needed to be more vigilant about actions taken in Chechnya and not make allowances or excuses for the Russian administration in matters concerning that region. “Applying double standards is a dangerous game,” she warned in a lengthy but telling section:

Europe has been here before, with infamous consequences. In 1933 the Führer of a new Germany was also “democratically elected.” Europe was frightened by his speeches but, until they could no longer be ignored, paid them no attention, preferring to look to its own prosperity and pleasant morning coffee. With Europe turning a blind eye, two nationalities — the Jews and the Gypsies — were held collectively responsible for the deeds of particular individuals. What was the consequence? The consequence was 1945, with millions dead, millions burned in crematoria, and Europe in ruins.

It all started so simply. A particular gentleman with psychological problems took it into his head that one nation was great and the rest were less great, and that some, indeed, should be annihilated. Are we really to say that things are different now? That the Kremlin sometimes gives Chechens honours and medals and even promotes them to top positions and is doing something for them? Hitler did all that too, as a smokescreen for Europe’s benefit. There were “good” Jews, “honest” Gypsies were paraded now and again, and sometimes there were even “civilised” Slavs to be discovered, so that Europe wouldn’t be upset, would not become alarmed too soon. Europe pretended to swallow all this, but that did not save countless men, women and children from dying subsequently at the hands of the people of that “great” nation. (311–312)

Passages such as this, in which she employs lessons from history to warn *outsiders* about the present and the future, are especially interesting in that she seems to be talking *past* her Russian audience in a Russian publication and appealing directly to the West, indicating that Russians are missing the crux of the problem, and therefore other groups need to see and understand and appreciate the severity of the situation, because it has played out before in history. By appealing to the West, she attacks her Russian readers; the West is everything they find wrong with the world. This act makes Politkovskaya herself an outsider, an “other” who did not choose to work within the system and therefore someone whose opinions and warnings would carry less weight.

When she wants her Russian audience to take notice of historical similarities, however, Politkovskaya’s descriptions of visual images successfully hit their target. She provides several of these in her coverage of Ramzan Kadyrov, who was Putin’s chosen man to serve as the prime minister of Chechnya but who, in fact, proved to be quite inept at the job and was videotaped in circumstances that showed him to be an abuser and possibly a sexual deviant. In one of several videos provided anonymously to *Novaya Gazeta*, Politkovskaya describes him and his men shoving two beaten men into the trunk of a Lada 10 and driving off. She says at one point that Kadyrov “has already climbed up on to the car’s running board. In the heat of directing the abduction he throws his arm forward, like Lenin on the armoured car at the Finland Station in 1917” (147). This description provides a strong visual juxtaposition between someone still viewed by many as a hero, and a dangerous buffoon who could not appropriately handle the power entrusted to him. In similar fashion, she writes about the Ramzan Kadyrov propaganda



images posted around Chechnya, which are apparently as abundant as the Lenin and Stalin posters had been in the days of the Soviet Union; she says that Chechnya is

a republic which is claimed to be infatuated with Ramzan, which is inundated with outward signs of deference. There are posters everywhere: Ramzan with Daddy, Ramzan with Putin, Ramzan on his own with a furrowed brow, and “You Are Our Hero,” and “We Are Proud Of You.” They are plastered along all the roads, at the entrance to even the smallest villages, in all schools and state institutions, on fences, doors and lamp posts, on the concrete blocks of disused checkpoints . . . Everyone in Chechnya just loves him so. (155)

Again, the visual, which the Kremlin and Chechen governments had intended as a meme, a link to a proud Soviet past, is distorted by her stories of Kadyrov’s shameful behavior. Politkovskaya equates the two men, then sarcastically suggests that her readers recognize the foolishness of the actions of Kadyrov — the very man whom Putin trusted to run Chechnya.

In additional reporting on the younger Kadyrov’s regime, Politkovskaya drew on the Soviet tradition of holidays honoring the leaders’ birth and death anniversaries to show how it was being corrupted by this man whom Putin had personally chosen.<sup>2</sup>

Kadyrov Junior’s Hundred Days [as Prime Minister] has fused naturally with the “Republic’s preparations to mark the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the first President of the Chechen Republic, Hero of Russia, Akhmed Kadyrov,” as Government Order No. 241 of 24 May 2005, signed by R. Kadyrov, puts it. The odd idea of marking this anniversary is in fact a convenient way of bypassing such undesirable distractions as Victory Day, because it would clearly be inappropriate to have Chechens celebrating 9 May when that is also the day Kadyrov Senior was blown up. That

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<sup>2</sup> “The early cult of Lenin commemorated Lenin annually on his death day (not his birthday, as is the current custom) and celebrated the leader as a personification of the October Revolution, an embodiment of its foundation myth, ‘how the Soviet Union came to be.’ It had all the power of any myth of origin” (Tumarkin, 1987, 70).

consideration must clearly take priority over any rejoicing at the victory over fascism. (166–167)

“Ramzan Kadyrov is still a very young man and hasn’t read much history,” she wrote further,

but what about those who grew up long ago, and remember when plans exactly like these were drawn up by central committees, municipal committees, district committees, and all the rest of them on the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Birth of Lenin, the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Birth of Brezhnev, and so on ad nauseam?

To be fair, we should mention that the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations are being financed by the A. Kadyrov Foundation with funds extorted by official racketeers from the Chechen people. (169)

This use of historical remembrances provided Politkovskaya a way to show the mockery that Putin’s chosen Chechen administrators were making of something that had, during the Soviet era, been intended to honor the country and its true Russian leaders. Whom, then, could the Russian readers trust?

Politkovskaya used this pride in past events as a warning about the future as well. She took some occasions to remind her audience that the events of the present time would someday become the history that would be remembered by future generations, just as her readers now remember the events of the past. In one of her scolding moments, she recalled for her audience the suffering and the aftermath of the Great Patriotic War:

The war we are waging in the Caucasus dishonours our nation from top to bottom. Do you wonder how we can ever atone for that? How long will it take? Remember, Germany spent half a century trying to free itself from the tatters of its national disgrace. Throughout those decades, Russian children were playing games of fighting the Germans, and the grown-ups encouraged them. Are not we the Germans now? How long will it be before Chechen children stop playing games in which the most unpopular boy is the one who as to be the Russian? (35–36)

This warning is not baseless; along with it, she supplies the following, which happened as she was interviewing residents about the Aldy massacre: “A boy of about seven jumps down from the bench. He points a wooden rifle at me and shouts, ‘Are you a Russian?’ The grown-ups shush him, but he yells, ‘You are a fascist!’” (35) The accusatory linking here of the words “Russian” and “fascist” was dissonant to the Russian reader, who remembered the war in which the word “fascist” was inexorably linked with the enemy, Germany; this linkage would not be easily received by that reader. Politkovskaya again is attempting to force her readers to acknowledge odious similarities and to recognize that to ignore these similarities would imply complicity with the abusive acts, yet accepting this truth counters the readers’ foundational beliefs that this cannot possibly be.

These uncomfortable dilemmas did not stop here; Politkovskaya proceeded to push even harder against her readers. Not only did she demonstrate that the Russian people were being considered evil as a whole, as shown by comparisons with history, but she elected to chastise groups and individuals in the present who were looked up to by their Russian countrymen as particularly outstanding examples of what it meant to be Russian. Again, as in her book *Small Corner of Hell*, she took after soldiers in general and certain powerful leaders and held them up for especial scorn.

### **Heroes and Federal Soldiers**

Although historically the Russian people have held their military men in high esteem, Politkovskaya asked her readers to question them and their actions; she herself certainly did, and she found this group lacking in many important ways. Every age, she said, “has its own characteristics. The Brezhnev era was typified by cynical dementia. Under Yeltsin it was think big, take big. Under Putin, we live in an era of cowardice.

Take a look at those who surround him” (254). This belief that no one was worthy of admiration was clear in her answer to a questionnaire for the “Territory of Glasnost” Project. For the question *Which politicians, economists, people in the arts and culture, and also private citizens could you nominate for Person of the Year, Hero of Our Times, or as iconic personalities in present-day Russia?* Politkovskaya responded, “There are no heroes in sight. If we had one he would stop the war” (8).

And indeed, the stories of cowardly acts and cruelty that she related filled endless pages of her reporting in this volume, to the point that they became difficult to read; undoubtedly they had to have affected her as a reporter who witnessed the events or interviewed the victims as they relived the terrors. Cruelty and torture in the region became so bad that by 2002, she wrote,

In Tsotsan-Yurt’s central square there was a permanent wake for the victims of the security sweeps. . . . In the spring the Army’s incessant raids on the tormented village were replaced by a new horror: almost every day mutilated corpses were being systematically dumped on the outskirts. The villagers were living in a state of constant shock and panic. (123)

The attitudes and actions of the federal soldiers and the terrorists in the region were unconscionable by any definition; one man she interviewed said, “I found the body of a woman who had been beheaded and had her stomach ripped open. They had stuffed a head into it. Was it hers? Someone else’s?” (30–31). She interviewed teenagers who had lost their homes and now slept in the equivalent of a homeless shelter; she reports,

the boy is telling me about atrocities the soldiers committed in Aldy. They didn’t just murder, they desecrated the bodies. His father had every one of his gold teeth pulled out, along with all the others. During the “security sweep” their neighbour, old Grandmother Rakiat, had her mouth ripped open to her ears as they tried unsuccessfully to tear her jaw out. (34)

Some of the stories returned readers to memories of Khatyn; one woman, who unbeknownst to her torturers had managed to survive a shooting because the bullets had missed their marks, said, “They dragged our bodies together, threw a nearby mattress over us and set it on fire. They wanted the bodies burned so nobody would know what had happened, and that was the pain which woke me. It was the fire licking at my leg” (34). A teenage girl, telling of what happened to her neighbors, said,

Beyond them was Avalu Sugaipov, an elderly man who had refugees living with him. We hadn’t even had time to learn their names, but they were two men, a woman, and a five-year-old girl. All the grown-ups they burned alive with a flame-thrower, including the mother in front of her daughter. Before executing them the soldiers gave the little girl a tin of condensed milk and said, “Run off and play.” (34–35)

Stories such as these, which appear in article after article, would leave little doubt in any reader’s mind that Russian heroes in Chechnya were in short supply. Cruelty and death became such a norm that it went unquestioned; in Politkovskaya’s opinion, “Everyone working in the Chechen security agencies can be divided into those who think before they kill, and those who long ago ceased to think” (73). These, then, were the mythical soldier-heroes Politkovskaya was presenting to her readers; she was demanding that they abandon their myth for the reality.

It is with this division that Politkovskaya begins to define real “heroes” for her readers. No longer are they the uniformed men that Russians would recognize, fighting “terrorists” in the Caucasus; under the journalist’s watchful eye heroes are instead shown to be the people who stand up to cruelty and corruption, who do the right thing or in some instances simply try to do their jobs while being surrounded by corruption and bullying. Such heroes are particularly obvious to her in her coverage of the trial of Sergei Lapin, a

lieutenant in the OMON known as “The Cadet” who was being convicted of the death of civilian Zelimkhan Murdalov.<sup>3</sup> One of her earlier mentions of heroism came in her discussion of the problems with the prosecutor’s office:

This has been the state of affairs for three years now, since the beginning of the war itself. During this time dozens of people working for the Prosecutor’s Office have received government awards, titles and ranks for profaning their profession, while the few honourable activists who try to fulfil their obligations are relentlessly purged from these serried ranks, and the very best have actually been killed in Chechnya in mysterious circumstances. Like, for example, the fearless Alexander Leushin, the first investigator who took up the Cadet affair and was trying to have an arrest warrant issued when he was shot dead by “unidentified assailants.” (196)

Other simple acts that become cause for the honor of “hero” are simply coming to the office and doing an assigned job:

Maierbek Mezhidov is the Chairman of the October District Court in Grozny, and presides in the half-ruined building of the former Department of State Security of Ichkeria on Popovich Street. From the front this box-like building looks like an apartment block, but from the back you see it is little more than a façade. Less than half, on the ground floor, has been crudely repaired for the exercise of justice. Inside it is as cold as a refrigerator, and the sparse Soviet-era lightbulbs provide such meager light

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<sup>3</sup> “Otryad Mobilinii Osobogo Naznacheniya (Special Purpose Mobile Unit). Politkovskaya’s coverage of The Cadet began in September 2001 with an article entitled “The Disappearing People,” which detailed the disappearance of Zelimkhan Murdalov and the attempt by his parents to locate his body. As Politkovskaya pointed out, “It was a typical atrocity for Chechnya but had an untypical aftermath, because in this instance it proved possible not only to get a criminal case opened against Lapin, but actually to have it brought to court. What is more, it came to court in Grozny, despite several attempts by the Chechen Supreme Court to torpedo the first such trial of a federal serviceman. It was only thanks to the resolve of the Russian Supreme Court that Lapin’s trial opened in the October District Court of Grozny” (203). Lapin was eventually convicted but only after several years and under the most strained circumstances in which witnesses were threatened or shot, and Lapin was guarded at all times by his own security forces.

that the reading Judge Mezhidov — already well on in years — has to do of reports, interrogation records and the like is a truly heroic feat in the cause of justice.

Another heroic feat is dispensing justice at all in a building which has been surrounded. Where else would you find anything like this? This morning, individuals in combat fatigues, with shaven heads and festooned with rifles, drove up to the court building in armoured personnel carriers and military trucks, and pointed their weapons at anybody entering or leaving the court. (209–210)

Mezhidov also earned well-deserved accolades from Politkovskaya for seeing the trial through to its conclusion. Any decision he made could easily have set him in the crosshairs by Lapin’s henchmen:

Apart from providing the finance, Amnesty International also organised a world-wide petition demanding a fair trial. Thousands of letters came in addressed to Putin and were subsequently included among the case materials. Judge Mezhidov simply could not ignore them and himself referred to them in court. The letters also strengthened his position and, to be fair, he too behaved heroically. For the duration of the trial he was treading a knife edge, because he was walking around Grozny. (219)

In addition, Politkovskaya acknowledged the Murdalovs’ lawyer for even taking on the case against the lieutenant in what was a ground-breaking event: a Russian lawyer representing a Chechen family in a courtroom in Grozny. She wrote, “Everyone who saw how he conducted himself in Grozny admired his courage, self-possession and professionalism in some extremely uncomfortable situations” (219).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although it took longer than might have been expected, Stansilav Markelov ultimately met his end by an assassin’s bullet in Moscow on January 19, 2009. His murder was assumed to be related to his position in a trial against Colonel Yuri Budanov (Schwartz & Bowley, 2009).

As a point of comparison, Politkovskaya's coverage of the *Nord-Ost* siege showed that she identified only one hero, but she criticized numerous well-known administrators whom the public respected as leaders. In this situation, she wrote,

Onlyu Aslambek Aslakhanov, a Chechen and a Deputy of the Russian Duma, went in to talk to the terrorists, despite the fact that his act could have had extremely unpleasant consequences for him: he is, after all, an Interior Ministry general, and unambiguously a "federal" in the minds of those who took the *Nord-Ost* audience hostage. But Aslakhanov went in, despite his own young children at home. (235)

In opposition to him, however, Politkovskaya placed the rest of the Chechen administrators who paid scant attention to the crisis despite the fact that the terrorists wished to talk with them:

None of them spoke out; not even [Akhmat-hadji] Kadyrov, whom most of the Moscow Chechens are so busy buzzing around when he comes from Grozny that you start having dark suspicions about vested interests on both sides. In his old age, Kadyrov has covered himself with ineradicable shame by valuing his own life higher than the lives of 50 completely innocent spectators of the *Nord-Ost* musical. The terrorists invited him, as the Chief of Chechnya appointed by Putin, to visit them in exchange for 50 hostages but he didn't go, subsequently claiming he "hadn't heard about it." (235)

The leader of the country is here chastised for failing in his duties, and Politkovskaya is careful to remind readers of the connection between Kadyrov Senior and Putin, placing them on an equal level as heads of their respective people. How does she explain this failure to respond in the 57 hours after the *Nord-Ost* takeover?

Because they are cowards. Faced with their own younger generation who have turned into uncompromising radicals the whole lot of them bottled out. They slunk away. And perhaps, too, they considered it all beneath them. They think they are so elevated, but now we can see how low they are.



That too is a fact of history. The myth of the incomparable fearlessness of the Chechen nation has been relegated to history, to the period before 23 October 2002. (236)

Here Politkovskaya has not only labeled these people as cowards, but she has provided another reminder that this is how history has recorded the event, and this is how future generations will remember it. This will be the history that future Russians will use to remember the people of the present time, the “glorious past.” By tapping into the importance of history, she has again attempted to constrain the people’s response by forcing them to acknowledge the corruption and abuse that opposes their foundational myths of self and nation.

She took the same tack in discussing the Beslan school massacre several years later:

Neither Zyazikov, nor Alkhanov, nor Ramzan Kadyrov, nor Maskhadov went anywhere near the school. They bottled out, valuing their own lives above those of hundreds of children. To my mind, in the light of what resulted from the actions of both sets of citizens, the cowards are no better than the criminals.

Clever people say now that it would have been foolish for them to have rushed to negotiate in Beslan, foolish because it would have meant certain death. Quite possibly. What of it? Those who are guilty have to take responsibility. What actually happened was that innocent children bore the consequences of the cowardice and stupidity of those who, you may remember, chorused at election time, “We take full responsibility on ourselves.” (255–256)

This unwillingness to step up in time of crisis becomes the basis for Politkovskaya’s definition of heroes for her readers. The leaders, she says, rather than being people who put themselves in danger for the good of others, are hiding and ignoring the problems to keep themselves safe. This tactic, she tells her audience, will not work; the only way the problem will be solved is to find someone who values his or her own life less than that of

the country as a whole: “Nobody can doubt that it will take a hero to disentangle this mess, and heroes are currently in short supply. We need, nevertheless, to find such a hero, because we have already burned every other bridge” (48). This statement challenges the trustworthiness of the leaders, and the readers must acknowledge that these leaders, whom they trusted and behind whom they rallied, are in fact no leaders at all; the myth that leaders are wise and brave is simply false.

Where, then, to look for such a hero? Historically, the people have looked to their patriarchal leaders to guide the country and keep the people safe. At that time, however, Politkovskaya could see no such leader. As she looked around to see the shape of Russia and the condition of Chechnya, she could find only failure and corruption in the homes and administrative offices of the country’s *khoziaeva*.

#### ***Khoziaeva / Khoziaistvo***

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Russian mentalité holds that each home’s patriarch and the country’s leaders are expected to possess the wisdom and kindness of a true *khoziain* in order to be effective in protecting those who are *rodnoi* or *svoi*. It is evident from her writings collected in this volume that Politkovskaya saw little of this either in Russian or in Chechen leaders. She did, however, provide several statements in her writings that clarified what she considered the job of a leader and what responsibilities Russia’s leaders bore. In this way, she was reminding her readers of the duties of the position.

One way she chose to do this was by comparing Russian leaders with a leader she admired. As part of her interview with Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, she made much of the fact that in a military skirmish, Saakashvili had lost 16 Georgian soldiers,

and as a result he ordered that the troops be pulled back so no more would be lost. “I emerged staggered by the contrast,” Politkovskaya said.

In Russia not 16 but 16,000 soldiers can die and nothing would induce the President to save the rest by moving units back to a safe distance. It is not Russia’s size which is at fault here, not its millions of inhabitants, but its mean-spiritedness. Saakashvili’s love for his people must, one supposes, be completely baffling to Putin, who has persuaded himself that he is reviving an empire and must not hesitate to squander lives. Once the supposed road to empire has been embarked up on, colonies must prostrate themselves, and anybody who is not with us is against us. (338)

This last statement provides a distinct definition of the binary concept of us and them, *svoi* and *chuzhoi*, and with it, Politkovskaya points out the Kremlin’s belief that the regions that Russia had overrun and placed within the boundaries of the Russian Federation should behave exactly as commanded or be forced into submission; the numbers of lives lost on either side is irrelevant. However, she says, a true *khoziain* would show more caring for his own people. She is particularly direct about this when she says, “Finally, a word about love. In the twenty-first century clever rulers do not incite citizens they love and respect to bloodshed. The problems begin if the citizens are unloved, and the rulers a bunch of hopeless dunces” (341).<sup>5</sup> With this statement, she

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<sup>5</sup> An amusing non-sequitur: Politkovskaya had more to say about love as part of a review she did about the internationally renowned Buenos Aires company Tango Por Dos, which performed a dance show she saw in London. First, she notes, “Naturally, there is no sex, which I mention for Russian ignoramuses yet to learn the distinction between passion and bed” (350). Later, she says, “Love has, of course, taken root here [in Russia], and often, but we entirely lack any culture of passion. . . . Our pro-Soviet love is nothing but rummaging around in ourselves, not a desire to take from our partner every last drop of the happiness he can give, even if these are our final hours together, and to give him in return the same, even though we know the pillow will be empty tomorrow. Passion Russian-style is a trip from A to B. At A we kiss, and at B we saw away at the bed-frame.

attempts to destroy the myth of the leader's caring about his people and about his wisdom, both of which the readers would have been raised to believe was a foundational truth.

Politkovskaya's concern that the country's *khoziain* care for all his people extends as well to caring for the older, more helpless members. One of her stories tells of the elderly women who had nowhere to live and together had organized "Our Home," "a voluntarily run circle of 53 families which refugees of the 'Russian language persuasion' from Chechnya organised for themselves. All are now of pensionable age, and what brought them together was a determination to fight the state for their legal rights" (281). These women, many in their 80s, are given a single cot to sleep on and perhaps a meal each day in exchange for cleaning the floors of the building in which they stay. They continue to labor in their old age despite the pensions that should be due them.

Politkovskaya says,

They just pin their hopes on the world of "socially aware business," in favour of which [pro-Putin oligarch] Vladimir Potanin recently spoke so feelingly on television. The President bears personal responsibility for what is happening in Chechnya and for all its consequences, so let the Presidential Commission on Human Rights intercede for them with business. (285–286)

This statement clearly indicates that, as the leader of the entire country, including the region of Chechnya, the president should be taking care of his "family"; seeing to it that his Commission on Human Rights care for these women is part of Putin's duties as the country's father figure.

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It is great good fortune if the trip is direct, and awful if the path is tortuous, which it all too often is" (352–353).

Responsibilities for the people, then, extend beyond Putin himself to his choices of other prominent administrators. This deals to no small extent with those whom he views as *svoi*, and therefore the quality of those who will care for his broad-reaching “family” of Russian citizens. In a piece that was not seen by the public until after her death — *Novaya Gazeta* published it on October 26, 2006 — she explains:

The Pyramid of Power is something President Putin has been busy constructing for the past five years, in which every official — from top to bottom, the entire bureaucratic hierarchy — is appointed either by him personally or by his appointees. It is an arrangement of the state which ensures that anybody given to thinking independently of their immediate superior is promptly removed from office. In Russia the people thus appointed are described by Putin’s Presidential Administration, which effectively runs the country, as “on side.” Anybody not on side is an enemy. (3)

Although many in Russia might have viewed this as a good thing, Politkovskaya spent many column inches during her war-reporting years berating the cronies Putin chose as “on side.” Often these people were known for their corruption and cruelty, and for being particularly poor at doing their jobs or for caring for the people under them.

One man who received the bulk of her criticism from early on was the elder Kadyrov, Akhmat-hadji, and his “security team,” the Kadyrovites. The problem, the journalist points out repeatedly through the years, lies in their culture of cruelty and abuse that becomes overpowering. In June 2000, when Kadyrov is acting as head of the Chechen administration, she explains his position as the region’s leader and how he is viewed:

The Kremlin continues its Michurinist labour of planting and nurturing civil war in Chechnya as assiduously as the late father of Soviet hybridisation. Its most recent contribution was made on 8 June when the President [Putin] signed an order appointing 49-year-old Akhmat-hadji

Kadyrov “Chief of Chechnya” (Director of the Provisional Administration). Kadyrov is associated by most of the population solely with conflict and division. They call him the “middleman Mufti,” the link between Chechen bandits and those highly placed citizens in Moscow whose main priority is to prolong the policy of intimidation in the North Caucasus. (113)

She then proceeds to follow his actions, and the speed with which his corruption escalates. By September 2002, she is reporting:

During the last six months, however, a new punitive force has appeared, a kind of Chechen sandwich filling in the sense that they are not on either side, although they have an ideological affinity with the federals.

These punitive detachments are known as the Kadyrovites, named after their organiser, Akhmat-hadji Kadyrov, who two and a half years ago was appointed Chief of the Republic by President Putin of Russia.

The Kadyrovites are also an illegal armed group. They are commonly referred to as Kadyrov’s “Security Service,” which would appear to provide them with a vestige of legitimacy, but this is not the case. The Chechen Ministry of Justice has confirmed that Kadyrov’s “Security Service” is not registered anywhere, and accordingly has no legal right to exist, any more than Basayev’s brigade, or what remains of the detachments of Khattab or Barayev. (118)

What she finds particularly disturbing about this group is that Chechen law enforcement agencies know of the criminal actions of the Kadyrovites, but won’t — or can’t — do anything to stop them. She asks her readers, “How could the intelligence agencies, with which Chechnya is teeming, have allowed things to come to such a pass?” (120). She answers this herself: It is “because Kadyrov is now effectively beyond the reach of the law, thanks to his intimate relationship with the Russian authorities” (121).

It is that relationship with the Kremlin, she points out, that keeps Kadyrov in power. In late September 2002, she writes:

Kadyrov has agreed with the Kremlin that November would be the best time for a referendum on the new Constitution. They need to hurry, while

Chechnya is still full of Russian troops who can vote the right way once his path to the throne has been cleared.

He has overlooked just one detail. In this squalid tale of murderous passion, the Kremlin — with its stubborn support of Kadyrov, support which frees him of all moral constraint — insists on ignoring the fact that Kadyrov Senior can only win an election in which the security forces, numbering many thousands, distort the “democratic” vote. (125)

But more than just voting irregularities, she reports, the government is complicit in the Kadyrovites’ abuse and torture of the locals and of Kadyrov’s enemies. In August 2006, for example, Politkovskaya reported that in Kurchaloy, the Kadyrovites had been involved in a firefight that ended in the death of resistance fighter Khozh-Akhmed Dushayev. In front of children and other citizens of the town, the security team hung Dushayev’s severed head and his bloodied pants on gas pipeline in the middle of village; “After that, the Kadyrovites spent the next two hours photographing the head with their video cameras and mobile phones” (150). Witnesses, she reported, overheard the Kadyrovites reporting this victory to Kadyrov Senior over the telephone. “Let’s be clear about what happened here,” she writes:

One civilian government official, an aide to the Prime Minister of a government which is a constituent part of the Russian Federation, gave orders to soldiers who were not under his command to cut off a human head. . . . The Kadyrovites, who are now officially recognised as employees of the Russian Interior Ministry, carried out the order. . . .

The question we have to ask is whether this is a component part of our new “sovereign democracy” or merely a side effect? (151)

Again, the question of democracy, which was to have been ushered in by Vladimir Putin as the new course for the country, is being shown to have serious defects as administered and overseen by the Kremlin. This would indicate a lack of leadership on Putin’s part —

an inability to be an effective *khoziain* for the country; she is demanding that her readers acknowledge this weakness.

Nevertheless, this was Putin's chosen man, the man who served as president of the Chechen Republic from October 2003 until his death — the man who was

shown on Russian television side by side with Putin far more frequently than the Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Kasianov. Kadyrov it is whom President Putin insistently presents to East and West as “the face of the new Chechnya.” The new Chechnya is now in the second month of its existence. Nobody knows the whereabouts of Old Balu, and there is nobody to gainsay Kadyrov. Putin's Chechen stalemate, Kadyrov's land of despair. Late 2003, the “peace” after the “election.” (142)

After being “elected,” this man, she pointed out, spent the majority of his time away from the Chechen people and at the Kremlin; “the way he spends his time,” she says, “can hardly be described as ‘leading the Republic’” (140). Rather than being a true leader, he “continues to see keeping the Kremlin sweet as the first priority of his presidency, well ahead of working for the people” (140). He was, nonetheless, among Putin's elect, and someone Putin viewed as “on side.” Politkovskaya is quick to point out the similarity in a none-too-flattering way:

Who would deny that all the world's dictators share a family likeness? Kadyrov has Putin and the Kremlin as his backers; his murderous campaign against old Isakov and the mullahs; his regal progresses; and his levelling of society by the simple expedient of cutting off any heads showing above the parapet. As for corruption and officialdom, Kadyrov's Chechnya is one big playground of graft and corruption. (140–141)

As *svoi* in Putin's eyes, Kadyrov is apparently showing the very traits that the Russian president values, but Politkovskaya asserts that these are not good traits for any *khoziain* to enact or to pass on in the “family likeness.” Either the *khoziain* is flawed, she is saying, or the belief in him; readers must see the facts and decide.



But Kadyrov was no the only example of a powerful figure in Chechnya who had protective forces that abused the local populace while remaining protected by Putin. In the Zelimkhan Murdalov murder trial against Sergey Lapin, Politkovskaya spoke again and again of the criminal elements — the Khanties — who were protecting Lapin to the point that even the justice that Putin was supposed to uphold could not be properly served:

The presiding judge was Maierbek Mezhidov, a professional who had practised for many years under all manner of regimes. As he intoned the customary, “Hearing of the case of . . .” the voice of the grey-haired judge was shaking, as if he were a schoolboy taking an exam. “He is so frightened,” people who have come to the courtroom whisper understandingly. Fear, of course, is something everyone in Grozny lives with; fear of suffering the fate of Zelimkhan Murdalov underlies the words and deeds of people who have lived many years in the embrace of war and death. Judges are no exception, despite supposedly enjoying the protection of the President himself. But the President is far away in the Kremlin, and the Khanties, who in the build-up to their colleague’s trial have threatened everybody associated with this case, are very near. There is no escaping them in Grozny. (203)

Recall here Paxson’s description that the attitude of the *narod* toward their tsar was as toward a father, and that this belief in their leader as “a protector and bearer of otherworldly powers” (75) is at the mythological core of the belief in leadership today. Politkovskaya’s reporting shows that Putin’s powers are in fact limited and weak; his distance from Grozny means he cannot protect even those whom he has appointed to run the region in his absence. Perhaps he has chosen poorly in some cases (Kadyrov), her writing suggests, or perhaps the evil is too strong (the Khanties).

Poor leadership showed throughout the period of the war that Politkovskaya covered; it did not end with the death of the elder Kadyrov, and Putin apparently either

did not recognize his mistakes in naming that leader, or he chose not to acknowledge them, because he then went back to that family after the death of Akhmat-hadji and chose the son, Ramzan, as prime minister of Chechnya. Again, Putin elected to reward someone who was “on side” with him; Politkovskaya wrote, just a few months before her assassination,

It has to be admitted that Kadyrov Junior is an outstandingly fast-learning pupil of his senior Moscow comrades, including the President of the Russian Federation. What matters is not to actually do things, but to say it was you who did them. This is the main lesson he has learned. (166)

This statement not only links the two men, but it shows Putin to be the mentor of the younger man in a negative sense; Putin is not preparing the next generation to be an adequate *khoziain* because he is not one himself. Politkovskaya’s disgust for the younger Kadyrov, and therefore for Putin’s ability to pick leaders, is further evidenced in the statement (published posthumously, but nevertheless seen by the public shortly after her death, contributing to her overall opinion of the leaders), “Ramzan Kadyrov is President Putin’s Chechen favourite, appointed Prime Minister with blithe disregard for the fact that the man is a complete idiot, bereft of education, brains, or a discernible talent for anything other than mayhem and violent robbery” (5). Further criticism of Putin’s wisdom in this choice of “leader” appeared in regard to a short cell phone video that was released anonymously to *Novaya Gazeta*. The clip showed the younger Kadyrov in a club setting at which he demanded that one of his minions lower his pants, and Kadyrov proceeded to repeatedly photograph the humiliated man’s genitals. Politkovskaya asks why the video was provided to the newspaper at that time and wonders about the intended “consumer” of the piece:

Nobody out there has had any illusions about Ramzan for a long time. Even in Kremlin circles, most realise that Putin made a bad mistake in choosing the Kadyrov family to be his team in Chechnya. . . .

I have no doubt at all that this mobile video has been released for the benefit of just one person in Russia: Putin. It is for showing in an auditorium where the only spectator obstinately refuses even to pretend he is concerned about the vileness of what he cobbled together from the material most readily available.” (149)

Readers of this piece see Putin attacked not only as a someone who uses poor judgment in choosing his allies, but also as someone who cannot or will not see what others already see, and perhaps most important, does not care that he has chosen badly.

But in addition to addressing poor choices in lower-level leadership by the country’s *khoziain*, Politkovskaya devoted a great many words to addressing the way corruption and lies of these leaders affected the people they were charged with protecting. In nearly every article she filed, Politkovskaya pressed the idea that cruelty and corruption was a way of life for both the federal army and the administrative workers in the region, and as a result, the Chechen people were suffering. The number of examples in this collection proved almost overwhelming; each was tragic in its own way. As in *Small Corner of Hell*, she used these stories of this dysfunction to her advantage, adding to her enormous body of evidence that Russia and Chechnya were out of control, with no one stepping up to take control. She struck repeatedly at the notion that Russia lacked a strong leader who should be acting as the expected *khoziain*, setting matters right and helping the country to run smoothly, fairly, and efficiently.

One of the many examples of the Kremlin’s lack of control became apparent as Politkovskaya was following an extradition trial in London, in which the Russian government hoped for the return of Ichkerian Prime Minister Akhmed Zakayev.

Politkovskaya carefully recorded and analyzed the testimony that resulted in the court's overturning the request; the lies and ineptitude of the Russian administration proved too much for its own people, and one witness, Investigator Konstantin Krivorotov, ended up unable to extract himself from his own lies. She wrote:

It had been . . . proved in court that the law enforcement agencies functioning on the territory of Chechnya are totally arbitrary and lawless. That is why Krivorotov could treat his listeners in a London courtroom only to long explanations about how things are supposed to be. He knew only too well how they are supposed to be, but he also knew that how they are bears no relation to that. Poor wretch. Anything goes, and nothing seems wrong. Barbarity becomes the norm. (104)

In this instance, she has led her readers to recognize that the leaders in charge of enforcing the law recognize “right” and “wrong” only as something that should be, not as something that can or must be, which would be the job of the *khoziain* to enforce.

In article after article, she brought up the fact that Putin's — and his administration's — dishonesty had caused great harm to a great many people, both Chechen and ethnic Russian. In early 2000, for example, when Politkovskaya was interviewing citizens who had been affected by the ruthless attack on Aldy, she quoted one teen girl, Rezeda, who told her,

“When we were in Ingushetia I saw a television report on the security sweep operation in Aldy. They showed a female sniper they said was Chechen who had supposedly been shooting at the federals from houses in Aldy. They claimed that was why the reprisals were so severe. I couldn't believe it. It was Tanya Ryzhaya. Everyone in Chernorechiye knows she is an alkie, and, incidentally, Russian. For more than two years her arms have been shaking so violently she couldn't hold a spoon. We had to feed her, and here they are saying Tanya Ryzhaya was the justification for this whole nightmare in Aldy!” (35)

Similarly, in January 2000, Politkovskaya wrote about 5-year-old Liana Shamsudinova and her family, who fell victim to one of the many untruths that Kremlin-appointed officials told to the people of the region:

Fleeing from the bombing [in Martan Chu, Urus Martan District, Chechnya], her family lived from October to December 1999 in a refugee camp in the hill village of Assinovskaya. From mid-December the refugees came under increasing pressure from Migration Service officials, who did not want them concentrating in one locality and urged them to return to their home villages, assuring them that peace had returned and their area was secure. On 29 December Liana's mother, Malika Shamsudinova, finally fell for these lies, the family went back to Martan Chu, and just four days later Liana was orphaned. On 3 January 2000 at 8.20 p.m. their home on Pervomaiskaya Street suffered a direct hit from a tank shell. (38)

Although this was a situation in which a true *khoziain* should stand up and right the wrong, "There will be no inquiry into the killings in Martan Chu, the massacre of a family not meriting a criminal investigation," Politkovskaya observed. "The implication is that the aftermath of the New Year crime is the personal problem of this luckless little girl and her Aunt Raisa, who now faces the task of trying to bring her up" (40).

But in addition to being concerned about individuals in this corrupt environment that seems to lack any real leadership, Politkovskaya wants her readers to consider this on a broader scale as well. "What is going on in Chechnya today?" she asks her readers. "It is my profound conviction that what is going on is an unambiguous civil war, deliberately provoked by the three-year-long so-called 'anti-terrorist operation,' which sees brother rise up against brother, one family against another" (118). She here suggests that Putin as *khoziain* is pitting *svoi* against *svoi*, which ultimately will be the undoing of the nation. This suggests that the leader in whom they have placed such great faith is not even concerned about keeping the cloth of the nation whole. Such an attitude, Politkovskaya

warns, will leave future generations in danger. The terrorist siege at Beslan, in fact, which she had attempted to cover as a reporter, showed her what she considered to be Putin's inability to function — or perhaps his disinterest in functioning — in a crisis and therefore to leave the future safe for coming generations:

The first three days of September 2004 have demonstrated once again that the moral and intellectual level of the Kremlin's current occupants gives no grounds to hope that there will never be another Beslan. The days since the tragedy have demonstrated, moreover, that they have no intention of learning any lessons from the school massacre. They persist with their lies and evasions, and insist that black is white. This leaves our children and grandchildren in danger. (253)

This concern for future generations runs through much of her work; in many articles she warns, as she did in *Small Corner of Hell*, that those of the future would remember bitterly the actions of the present, particularly the Chechen youth whose childhoods were lost amid the cruelty and corruption of the federal army actions.

It would seem at this point that she could do little more to insult Putin's ability to run his country, and yet Politkovskaya manages to attack on yet one more front: She reminds her audience that the rival West also has little regard for the Russian leadership and methods of functioning; this, too, would cause anger and resentment among readers. The story of the Zakayev trial, in particular, gave her an opportunity to mention this disrespect; when the verdict was announced that London would not extradite Zakayev to Moscow, Politkovskaya wrote not only of the embarrassment of Russia's lies being discovered, but the also of the fact that such poor leadership leaves Russians themselves at risk:

What have we just witnessed? We have tried to spill out into Europe our corrupt legal practice of fabricating cases whenever and however the state authorities decree, and we have fallen flat on our faces.

The Russian state didn't get away with it in Britain. There was no way it could, because the British have no reason to allow this virus of ours to infect them. Who can blame them? But what of us now, the citizens of Russia, with our law enforcement gangsters ranged against us? The British will survive our invasion. They will merely note for the record the kind of people they are dealing with in the Russian legal system, and of course they will not extradite Zakayev.

But what about us? We citizens must make ourselves heard, not just keep our heads down. If you don't feel moved to defend Zakayev, then at least rise to your own defence. The state system poses a deadly threat. Anyone can be tortured. These are terrorist acts perpetrated by the regime against us all. (110)

These accusations, it seems, left Politkovskaya little more to say that would undercut the readers' faith in their leader, but yet she persisted: "after the London court ruling, it is impossible to go on pretending that our country is on the road to democracy" (110). She concluded by saying, "The Government wanted to show the world how cool we are and how we stand for truth, but succeeded only in showing our true nature. The Russian Government is the laughing-stock of Europe because it has no substance, only wild pretensions" (110). The West, she is telling her readers, has a better grip on the situation than all of Russia.

It is hard to imagine where readers can go with such criticism. The fact is, Politkovskaya told them, the Russian government has come to this: that in its attempt to form a respected democracy from the ashes of its Soviet ruins, something has gone horribly wrong. The country's *khoziain* has not performed his duties, the heroes have become fascists, the people now fight against their own, the lies extend, the corruption grows: How did this happen? How did the promise of the bright future ushered in with Vladimir Putin come to such ruin? In several places, Politkovskaya explained this to her readers through oblique reminders of a concept that has long been part of Russian thought

and tradition. The country, she suggested, existed much as Alice did in her Wonderland when she went *zazerkal'e*, or “through the looking glass.”

### ***Zazerkal'e (Through the Looking Glass)***

Much of the rich Slavic/Russian folklore that is studied today derives from people long ago who inhabited a thickly forested region that supplied the majority of the goods these people needed to survive: food, herbs, vitamins, and wood for homes and heat. It was a mysterious place, where the villagers could easily be lost and frightened by wild animals and unfamiliar surroundings. It is not surprising, then, that stories are replete with forest spirits and forest *khoziaeva* who could look kindly on the lost individual or might instead choose to frighten or even lead that person to his or her death. Such stories were not fairy tales; these were believed by the village residents to be completely true. Thresholds became especially magically charged places: entryways, for example, or the boundaries between places, such as villages and forest. Similarly, areas that were strange or foreign came to be recognized as places to be feared, where the unpredictable could happen. Here, one's *rodnye* were not present; one was surrounded by *chuzhie*. In foreign places, regular occurrences might become altered or appear different and therefore prove dangerous. “Journeying takes one out of that carefully crafted *svoi* nexus,” Paxson (2005, 141–142) observed.

If given symbolic spaces resonate with their own indigenous sets of metaphors, the boundaries between these spaces are particularly charged. The space between villages, the space between life and death, sleep and waking, sobriety and drunkenness, here and there, us and them, are naturally precarious places. . . . Certain conditions heighten the possibility for harm. Thresholds are charged. Regardless of the kind of threshold (physical, social, or symbolic), it is dangerous to linger there. The entry into the world of the *chudesnoe* necessarily involves a leave-taking of the



everyday world. In the village narratives, this brings one into territory that has a surreal quality. (Paxson, 147)

Such areas describe for the Russian mind the world of wonders, of strange things:

In the broadest sense possible, *in the world of the chudesnoe, is a world where the regular, predictable aspects of time and space are suspended.* When one is there, one can expect invisible beings to come into view, sounds to ring out when there is no source, and time and distance to collapse as flat as an unopened top hat. (Paxson, 123)

Each village has its own stories, remembered by the older generations, of times past when someone disappeared into the woods and was found days later, uttering stories of a forest *ded* who had stolen his horse, or upset his cart, or who had appeared to a small child as a kindly grandfather and then led her off the usual path. For the village people, these forest spirits absolutely exist, and they perform miraculous feats that no human could accomplish.

Although these magically charged places and spirits do not fall into the realm of foundational mythology *per se*, much in these descriptions rings familiar in the case of Chechnya, and it is not a great leap to understand how, during Soviet times, the people quickly picked up on the concept of Lewis Carroll's Alice and the wonderland (*strana chudes*, or "land of wonders") she visited, which has long been equated with the absurd nature of Soviet life (see, for example, Galantière, 1949; Gabowitsch, 2006). The term *zazerkal'e* has come to commonly and accurately describe the way Soviets and Russians have seen their lives, where everything from politics and administration to daily life seem to be an inversion of traditional (or even Western) reality — again, fitting neatly into a thought pattern that deals with black and white, either one way or its opposite.

When this concept is applied to Chechnya, we note that Russians distinguish between the Orthodox ethnic Russian “us” and the Muslim Chechen “they,” who live in the Caucasus, a strange and foreign region. The very incursion by the Russian army into Chechnya is movement across a threshold into a region that is foreign to a native Russian. This observation ties in with another observation that Paxson made about these mysterious occurrences with the *chudesnoe*: many such stories take place at night (*prikhodiāt po nocham* — they come by night), and while interviewing her villagers who had lived through the Stalin years, Paxson recognized a similar theme from a different time period: the 1930s. During that time, people were encouraged to report their neighbors for words or actions construed as anti-communist, and such reports usually resulted in the suspects being visited late at night by government agents who took them off in cars, sometimes never to be seen again. Paxson observed:

I found the structure of arrest stories to be remarkably similar to other stories where one chanced upon otherworldly forces. Words fall on the wrong ears. Those terrifying creatures, the Kegebeishniki [KGB] come for you at night. One idle statement becomes ten years of banishment. Where is the continuity with the everyday world here? There is no continuity. Another frame has been entered. (143)

And indeed, the world as it evolved under Politkovskaya’s watch had indeed become a place of otherworldly forces. Nothing was any longer what it seemed. Just as Paxson describes the aspects of the *Mir chudesnogo* and its relation to Soviet times, and as the Soviet and Russian people spoke of life as a *strana chudes*, so pieces of Chechnya fit into each. Paxson says that “the miraculous world is defined by its otherness, by the ways in which space and time mutate within it” (Paxson147); this is how one might describe the life lived by 5-year-old Liana Shamsudinova, who lived in and out of consciousness, in a

state of shock, at the local hospital for several months after her family was blown up. “The beings of the world of the chudesnoe, like the protean forces that make them up, display a range of qualities — from kindness and tenderness to unpredictable or vengeful cruelty,” says Paxson (147); this aptly describes the soldiers who murdered a young woman with a flame-thrower but before they did so, they gave her young daughter the can of milk and told her to run along. The world of Chechnya had in fact become no different than a nightmare, described by Paxson as this very world of wonders:

The urge to guard oneself from the form-changing beings and the faceless figures who can send a husband somewhere out to the whirlwind, never to return, amounts to a nervous pall cast over a life. When is it safe? The fact that stories of senseless arrest are told via the nearly exact narrative structure of stories of whimsical unseen beings indicates that it — life — is never quite safe. Frightful things can befall one from above — whether the “above” amounts to a forest sprite or the state. From the powers above, life’s proportions can shift at any turn; as the powers lie in wait out there, every word counts. (148)

This description of the fantastic is little different than the everyday lives of the Chechen people about whom Politkovskaya wrote. Consider again the previously cited passage about life in Tsotsan-Yurt, where “the central square there was a permanent wake for the victims of the security sweeps”:

In the spring the Army’s incessant raids on the tormented village were replaced by a new horror: almost every day mutilated corpses were being systematically dumped on the outskirts. The villagers were living in a state of constant shock and panic. (123)

This became exactly what Paxson recognized in the villagers’ stories of the KGB raids during the reign of Stalin.

And in one particularly telling passage, Politkovskaya uses language to describe exactly how the world in Chechnya has lost all reality, all perspective, all meaning. In

speaking about the fact that Sergey Lapin at one point failed to show up in court for the trial in which he was being convicted of murder, Politkovskaya writes:

But the issue to be examined is not why The Cadet has so blatantly shown his contempt for the court. On the contrary, it is the acts of Judge Mezhdidov which must be scrutinised in daring to demand that “S. V. Lapin should without fail appear in court on 30 October.” It is an example of the topsy-turvy world of distorting mirrors of the Russian Prosecutor’s office. We live in times when the Prosecutor’s Office is truly independent: independent of the laws, of logic, of decency and of conscience. (208)

The word “mirrors” here is not used lightly; again we see the world *zazerkal’e*, and when she uses the word this way, Politkovskaya is saying that reality has been inverted.

Chechnya is now a *strana chudes* in which even the people in charge must play into the hands of such as the Kadyrovites or the Khanties. The Russian secret police become the very terrorists they say they seek, as seen in Politkovskaya’s story of *Nord-Ost*, which convincingly shows that a branch of the Russian government had helped facilitate that terrorist take-over. “Some in Russia support the tactic of political terrorism which came in with Putin, while others are categorically opposed to it,” she writes.

Be that as it may, the tribalism of the FSB (or GRU) is real. Everything is permitted.

We again face that question of who[m] to trust. Who[m] can you trust as you go down into the Metro, as you take your seat in a suburban train, on a steamer or plane, or fall asleep in your own home?

Nobody. This total lack of trust will sweep away the very government which have sown it — be sure of that. (333–334)

And with this statement, Politkovskaya hits her readers with perhaps the most frightening realization of all: all of Chechnya, and perhaps all of Russia as well, is *zazerkal’e*, where nothing is any longer as it should be.

## **The Message**

The rhetorical analysis of this volume of Politkovskaya's collected reportage shows that, as with her previous book, she was devastated by the carnage and abuse she saw in the North Caucasus region, and she felt strongly compelled to do whatever she could to make her fellow Russians aware of the situation. She could not, by herself, correct the problems, but through her writing, she hoped to construct arguments powerful enough to enlighten her readers and lead them to take action to help the Chechen people. However, also as with the previous book, her appeals to Russian pride, which employed foundational myths and cultural and historical references, ultimately had only part of its intended effect. She did indeed catch the Russian readers' attention with her references, but rather than constraining their responses to the humanitarian ones she had hoped to see from them as responsible Russian citizens, she instead put herself in a position to be criticized for own poor showing as a loyal Russian. This had the effect of driving them deeper into their nationalist identities and turning against her, making her part of the "others" from whom they preferred to distinguished themselves. Her appeals struck too deeply at their sense of Russian citizen identity, speaking more strongly to a Western view of corrupt Russians than to a Russian view of humanity toward all who fell under the umbrella of the Russian Federation.

As one of the primary means used in this volume to appeal to the Russian readers, history in which the Russian people have taken genuine pride became instead a warning sign under Politkovskaya's pen: How would the future judge Putin's administration and decisions if the available evidence proved that murder, corruption, and lies were rampant and mimicked the actions of fascist Germany more than the honorable Soviet government

that had saved the world in the Great Patriotic War? With her writing, she disabused her readers of the notion that this war would be remembered by the world as war against terrorism; rather, she showed them, it would be seen as a civil war filled with cruel terrorist actions perpetrated by the Russians themselves.

Similarly, she hoped to move her readers to action by attacking their belief that their heroes in uniform who represented and protected them were actually vicious, sadistic abusers who had little interest in finding terrorists but instead looted and raided, tortured and murdered. Her evidence was plentiful, disturbing, and gruesome, and she had hoped it would pressure readers to acknowledge the number and severity of atrocities and therefore object and demand better; instead, her words served as an assault on the Russian sensibilities that, in the eyes of her readers, moved her further into the camp of the “others.” Her stories led international readers to recoil and to honor her as a truth-teller; they led her own people to turn from her as they embraced their own national identity.

Her attacks on Putin and his administrators also served less to lead the Russians to action against these “leaders” than to drive them back to their own needs to see their leaders as kind and wise *khoziaeva* than as ruthless and uncaring dictators who could not even control their own military forces. Her stories provided the foreign West with fodder for attacking the Russian Federation, further moving the international community to support her concerns. Her Russian readers, however, rather than acting with the concern and indignation Politkovsaya had hoped to arouse, again returned to the foundational myths and “Russian ideas” that formed their national and collective identity.

Even the evidence that Chechnya had in its own way gone *za zerkal'e* did not sway the Russian readers to demand an end to the war and abuse. Stories from Grozny and other Chechen regions of unexpected and terrifying happenings in the middle of the night, which paralleled Stalin's night raids of the 1930s, did not move the Russian readers in the way Politkovskaya had hoped. Although they may have recognized the similarities to stories in their own past, their foundational beliefs of their country's righteousness proved stronger than anything Politkovskaya could have written to sway them. These stories moved the international community, but they could not shake the core identities of the Russian nationals, who instead choose to see Politkovskaya as someone outside their group, as "not *rodnoi*," for delivering this news.

This selection of her newspaper articles, then, suggests that regardless of the format she used — book or newspaper article — to attempt to sway her readers to take a action against the corruption, torture, and genocide, Anna Politkovskaya could not effectively pressure her Russian readers to rise up and take action against the problems. They could respond instead by saying the journalist was the problem, that her writing was not worth the reading and simply showed her to be of the West, which did not understand the Russian way. Her appeals instead roused the ire of the international community, however, because the force of the appeals was based in part in bringing to bear in the situation norms of responsible international citizenship, including acting in response to atrocities. Nonetheless, the international community did little itself to correct the dire problem.

## Chapter Five

### Is Journalism Really Worth Dying For?

In the Russian language, the word *obrashchenie* means literally “turning toward.” It is used as an expression of faith, a request or plea for help or assistance, made to an authority figure, both in real life and in the sense of forces beyond Humanity’s understanding.

In the village, stories were told of *obrashcheniia* to local Party members or police when kinfolk were arrested. In folklore, there are *obrashcheniia* to the tsar to correct the injustice of a local authority (or, more recently, to Stalin, for the same thing.) The underlying sense of *obrashcheniia* is that they are what one does when one is beyond hope, given the regular course of things, when something transformative must enter the picture. . . . Through the gesture of *obrashchenie*, there was a chance for hope. (Paxson, 2005, 159)

Anna Politkovskaya was just such a person to whom *obrashcheniia* were made by the Chechen people, most of whom were beyond hope. She was the only person who was listening, who was hearing, and who had a platform — her newspaper — through which she could make their pleas known, and on more than one occasion, the Chechen people begged her to tell their story to the Kremlin and to the Russian people. Politkovskaya had entered her journalism career primarily with the intention of helping others in just this way. In the course of her work, in a region far from Moscow, she found the audience most in need of that help, and in the end, it was her obsessive devotion to the oppressed that brought about her own demise.

Politkovskaya had been opinionated; she had chided, scolded, and shamed, and she had even written out a plan for what needed to be done to correct the situation in the North Caucasus. “What gives me the right to pronounce on this?” she asked her readers.



Only my experience of working in Chechnya over many years. This is, of course, a journalist's experience, which consists mainly of constant meetings with people at every level of Chechen society: with those who are pro-federal, and those who are anti-federal; with those active in the resistance, and their opponents; with children and young people, old people, and women; with Kadyrovites, and militiamen; with special operations troops, and Kadyrov's bureaucrats; with mullahs and muftis, and with everybody else.

My job has been to go from one village to another, from one town to another, and to ask, and ask, and ask; to try to understand what moral code people live by, what they will settle for, and what they hold unacceptable. (257)

And so while the Western world praised Politkovskaya's dedication to this reporting on the horrors that were Chechnya, and it criticized the lack of a moral code being exercised by Russia's federal army, a majority of Russian readers accused the journalist of advocacy and subjectivity in her work, believing that her words unfairly, even traitorously, shamed the Russian people and their government.

These were the same words, the same stories read by both audiences, yet the two groups came away with vastly different interpretations: What caused the different reactions? Bateson (1995) states that

Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some renascent truth. . . . Our species thinks in metaphors and warns through stories. (11)

These myths, these connections, give people pride in their cultures and histories, and for her various readers, they affected the reactions of the people for whom Politkovskaya was writing. Simply put, the Russian readers had a different way of understanding the symbols and images they saw than did the Western readers. Just a few years before the Second Chechen War began, for example, Hockstader (1996) reported:

Yeltsin, in his first major address from atop Lenin's Tomb on Red Square since the collapse of Communist rule here, gazed over a grandiose, Soviet-style parade of more than 7,300 soldiers, sailors and cadets and told them, "all the country now clearly sees the continuity of times contained in our symbols, the proud spirit of the motherland in the unity of generations, in each of us." (para. 2)

The stories that Politkovskaya told, however, disputed the continuity of time and the proud spirit of the people. Rawls (1999) has described an interest, applied to "peoples," that is their "proper self-respect of themselves as a people resting on their common awareness of their trials during their history and of their culture with its accomplishments" (34; see also Spinner-Halev & Theiss-Morse, 2003, 515). Russian readers of Politkovskaya's reporting would not only have recognized the attacks on a group level, but they would have felt them on an individual level. Social identity theory explains this individual connectedness and sense of identity to the larger group, requiring that people "be generally respected and not be made a subject of ridicule, hatred, discrimination, or persecution" (Margalit & Raz, 1990, 449).

Ridicule and criticism, however, were Politkovskaya's way of trying to make the country and the world stand up and pay attention to what was happening in the North Caucasus region. Although the stories that Politkovskaya relayed from Chechnya were true, this study has shown that she wove within them words and ideas that attacked the cultural paradigms, and myths that the Russians used to define themselves and their nation. These stories and ideas were not random fairytales. Rowland (1990) has argued that such "myths, both in primitive society and also today, wield great power" (102), and that "myths are anything but false stories," where "'true' does not necessarily mean 'historical.' . . . the details of the narrative may not reflect historical events, but the story

is still accepted as ‘true’ in a larger sense by the culture in which it is told” (103). Despite the fact that “In terms of function, myths are the most important stories in a society” (Rowland, 1990, 105), still “the complete structure of myth remains hidden in ordinary political discourse. Only a few key symbols are needed to invoke meaning and responses” (Bennett, 1980, 170). Politkovskaya knew that “To make a difference in society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received; in short, it must become a sociocultural mode of action” (Confino, 1997, 11). It was this very *action* that Politkovskaya hoped to achieve with her writing. She hoped that her appeals, utilizing Russian foundational myths, histories, and exceptionalist ideas would inform her Russian readers to a degree that, as citizens of a larger and humane world, they would be constrained to do nothing less than stand up and demand that their government right the wrongs that were occurring in Chechnya. These members of the Russian Federation would have to act on this information they now knew or risk being held accountable by the world for the corruption and destruction, abuse, torture, and genocide that was being perpetrated on innocent civilians.

What Politkovskaya seems to have reasoned wrongly, however, was that the key symbols she selected from among the nation’s foundational myths, cultural ideas, and history hit many of her Russian readers’ identities with such force that they turned against her, choosing to see her as an outsider, an “other” who did not understand what it meant to be truly “Russian,” and they responded by pushing her into a traitorous “Western” camp that stood diametrically opposed to their beliefs based on their binary thinking. The Westerners, in the end, were able to best understand the urgency of her message because they were not constrained by the details of Russian identity embedded in the myths and

ideas, and they therefore could sympathize with the message being relayed without being threatened at the core of their being. They, however, were in no better position to force action and change the situation.

The outraged Russian responses aimed at Politkovskaya during her life and even after her death ultimately come as little surprise. McDaniel has described the Russian “dualistic conception of society” as it unfolded during the Stalin era, as

friend versus enemy; we versus they; loyal worker versus saboteur; and the like. All problems were caused by ill-intentioned people, by enemies of the people. Poor performance was not rooted in weak organization or lack of resources, but in sabotage by enemies. The classic question of Stalinist Communism was not “what is going wrong?” but “Who is guilty?”

The guilty, knowingly departing from true values and the correct way of life, should have no rights. (McDaniel, 1996, 96).

This question of how “guilt” is viewed is exactly the one that put Politkovskaya crosswise with her Russian readers. For her, “guilty” was an attribute of the out-of-control soldier “heroes” and of the *khoziaeva*, who could not or would not lead. To her, it was a matter of forcing the Russian people to see the inhumane circumstances into which the Russian government and its army had thrust the innocent people in the North Caucasus. Russia was guilty in her eyes, and the people needed to understand this and take responsibility. Through her writing, she was able to make the world see this and demand of them some action.

For the Russian readers, however, the guilt lay with Politkovskaya, who was attacking their national identity. National identity is, after all, “an identity essential for very many people to give meaning to their lives” (Nielson, 1999, 120), and “One of the distinctive features of membership in a constitutive community is that members view

their self-esteem and well-being as affected by the successes and failures of their individual fellow members and of the group as a whole” (Tamir, 1993, 96). For Politkovskaya to attack the core, the foundation, of Russia was to render herself a traitor and an enemy rather than someone who brought news to enlighten them.

The articles and stories contained in the two volumes examined for this study covered a time period that was not an easy one in Russia’s history. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Communist Party, and the problems with the failing economy, the nation’s people were desperate for a way to feel the same pride in their country that they had in the past; this meant returning to their foundational myths and embedded cultural beliefs to achieve a sense of self and of knowing who they were and what they were capable of. But old doubts and fears came into play in the Russian psyche during this time. Even “The battles over the memory of August 1991 and October 1993 show a myriad of political actors searching for positive mythic elements with which to inspire an increasingly jaded and apathetic public” (Smith, 2002, 55). Politkovskaya herself told her readers, “It is generally accepted that we Russians do not like ourselves much” (2010, 297); McDaniel (1996) and Smith (2002) agreed with her, and Hingley (1977), too, spoke of “Russia’s abiding consciousness, surprisingly little modified in recent years, of its own backwardness when compared to the advanced nations of the West”:

Culturally, economically, industrially and above all administratively, owing to the two archaic institutions of serfdom (abolished 1861) and hereditary autocracy (abolished 1917), Russia long lagged behind. Hence the Russian love-hate hysteria about the West and other manifestations seeming to betray an inferiority complex such as extreme national boastfulness combined with extreme self-deprecation. (Hingley, 1977, 41)

It seems, then, that the Russian readers who strongly identified as Russian nationals and were looking to their heroes and *khoziaeva* to bolster their identities, both as a group (*rodina/svoi*) and individually, could not help but react negatively when Politkovskaya attacked their beliefs through her reporting, despite the accuracy of the facts she presented. The only *action* they could take was to reassert their Russian identity in the face of international scorn at the way the Russian government was handling — or *not* handling — the Second Chechen War. Rather than prompting help for the abused and tortured people, Politkovskaya’s writing only exacerbated the binary split between Russia or “us” and the West, or “them.”

When dealing with Politkovskaya’s use of the terms or concepts of *svoi/rodnoi* for some people, versus *chuzhoi* for others, the analyses of this study show that the idea was applied in several different ways, and these touch in part on how the “nation” and “nationalism” were being described and defined. Spinner-Halev & Theiss-Morse argued that “To capture the general meaning of *nation*, one can say that it is a limited political community, [it] desires or has political recognition, has some territorial claims, and shares a collective identity. This community has a basis in history, language, culture, or religion, or some combination of these elements” (2003, 516). Renan (1990) defined two attributes of a “nation”:

One lies in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. . . . The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion. (19)

For the members of these nations, however, Nielsen (1999) defined different types of nationalism: Civic nationalism, he said, “is rooted in a civic conception of nation” and within it, “there is in principle at least an equal access for everyone to the cultural goods of and in [it]” (122). In contrast, “Ethnic nationalisms [are] rooted in an ethnic conception of ‘the nation,’ [and] define membership in the nation in terms of descent” (121).

What became apparent in this study was that Politkovskaya’s uses of *svoi* and *rodnoi* frequently referred to ethnic nationalism, although she wanted her readers to consider all of the people about whom she wrote to be civic nationals. The problem for her, however, was the strong affiliation the Russians have for people of their own nationality. “There is a sense of *svoi* that surrounds . . . being a Russian as opposed to any other nationality. McDaniel noted that:

Community was experienced in Russia primarily in very local contexts. . . . It was also very narrow sociologically; that is, community was seen to include only those groups very similar in social makeup. People from different backgrounds, either class, ethnic, or religious, were not *rodnoi* – that is, not part of the extended family concept that was the basis of the experience of community in Russia. Thus, to an unusual degree, the sense of community in Russia was always *in opposition to* some other group. (McDaniel, 1996, 42)

This statement provides another example of Russian binary thinking that shows how deeply the concept was imbedded in the Russian psyche even when defining themselves.

But similarly, from the examples presented, the Chechen people had come to identify most strongly with *their* own, as time and time again they were singled out and abused by the federal army troops and administrators who wanted the region back under the umbrella of the Russian Federation but would not accept its people as specifically “Russians.” The examples used in the articles and book chapters showed that Chechen

children, in particular, were growing up to fear and hate the Russians, whom they recognized as “other” both by appearance and by language. Politkovskaya’s use of the term *svoi* indicated very clearly to readers that Chechens connected with “their own” and saw the ethnic Russians as the enemy in many respects; this was perhaps most strongly evident in her aforementioned description of Aishat’s son, who looked at Politkovskaya in the hospital as if to say “it’s not for *you* to feel sorry for *us*” [*emphasis mine*] (*Small corner of Hell*, 84/80).

Further playing into this myth of the good *svoi* and the untrustworthy *chuzhie*, however, was Politkovskaya herself. She was of the *intelligentsia*: educated, privileged as the daughter of a diplomat, and respected among those who worked for independent media rather than on government-sanctioned newspapers or television stations. Her stories seldom towed the line or supported the pro-Russian view. The leeriness that the masses felt for the *intelligentsia* was deeply embedded as well; McDaniel noted that in history, “These odd intellectuals were never *rodnoi*, never trusted in the same way as their brother peasants or workers” (1996, 81), and that distrust was still present during Politkovskaya’s time. Adding fuel to that fire was the journalist’s dual U.S./Russian citizenship, which represented to the Russians a deep alliance with the West and specifically the Western thinking to which they were so opposed. Because of who she was, the fact that she was honored by the Western world, and that she wrote in support of the Chechens, Politkovskaya herself was *chuzhaya* to the Russian people. She was no longer “of them” because of the ideals she embraced and the company she kept during a time of war in her own country.



It was, perhaps, *because* this was a time of war that the Russians' sensitivity to what they were reading was heightened. Smith (2002) has observed that "Periods of turbulent change always seem to foster waves of looking backward, whether with nostalgia or with distaste" (4), and further,

Dramatic and traumatic events in a nation's history are processed by the media, politicians, and cultural figures in ways that affect the popular legitimacy of regimes and policies. Comparisons with past regimes, in particular, shape notions of good government. (5; see also Schudson, 1992, xiii)

Politkovskaya's use of historical memory could indeed have affected the popular legitimacy of Putin's regime, but certainly not in a good way. Her work cited important events in Russian history that triggered collective remembering of painful experiences, particularly experiences of the Great Patriotic War in which the Russian people suffered yet persevered.<sup>1</sup> However, the events that Politkovskaya paired these with in the Second Chechen War showed explicitly that the pain inflicted on the Russians by the Germans

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<sup>1</sup> "Collective memory, though it is a matter of recalling and retelling the past, should not be equated with history. . . . Collective memory is more fluid than history. . . . collective remembering has to do with framing the past in ways that attempt to capture the common experience that defines group identity. Collective memory, in short, provides a means to conceptualize the omnipresent phenomena of mythmaking and the 'invention of tradition'" (Smith, 2002, 7). Similarly, "Earlier, I likened social memory to a forged landscape. Vygotsky's argument (1962) resonates with this: that thought is canalized in stages throughout early childhood, and familiar paths of thought are tread to such a degree that they feel inevitable. [In answering t]he question of how and why given paths are chosen in the face of symbolic dissonance . . . [i]t will emerge that there are cases where not only do local, anarchical powers win the battles for dominance in some important contexts, but the symbolic pathways forged beneath them are so deeply defined that they can shed the outer symbols that they once bore and still retain their dominance. In other words, remembering can happen without memories" (Paxson 215).

was now the same pain — or perhaps a worse one — that was being inflicted by the Russians on the Chechen people. In this way, even the history in which the Russians had previously taken great pride was now tainted by the knowledge that the tables had turned, and the Russian people had become the very evil-doers they had despised in the past.

That evil, unfortunately, was being perpetrated by another mythical group in the Russian people's past: their heroes. As Tumarkin (1987) notes,

The war myth is used to generate nostalgia for a better, more heroic, and simpler time when people were finer; when it was clear what was good and what was bad and who was good and who was bad; when young people in the Soviet Union did not imitate the culture of the enemy, as they do today. In those days girls were girls and boys were boys. All the important ethical issues were well defined. (71)

Perhaps the situation was clearer to the Russians when theirs was the land being invaded, and their heroes were acting in defense of their own country. In the Second Chechen War, however, the Russians were the invaders in a region they considered their own land but that was occupied by Muslim “others,” making their intrusion in a sense a civil war. Politkovskaya exploded the myth of the heroic soldier in that the troops who were supposed to be “good” were in fact the “bad,” and they acted as enemies would act. Corruption, bribery, lies, torture, and murder: these were the evil traits of the young men in whom the Russians had placed such pride and confidence as heroes who were seeking out the Chechens, all of whom had been mythologized as terrorists. They *were* the evil, and yet, as Rowland (1990) pointed out,

Only a great hero can conquer evil. . . . The hero symbolically solves the problems confronted in the myth and serves as a model for social action. In this regard, there is a simple rule: The greater the problem facing the society, the more “heroic” the hero must be. One reason that myths possess more power than other types of stories is that their heroes are greater. (104)

In the absence of soldier-heroes, the people would need to look to a great leader to solve the Chechen problem. If Politkovskaya destroyed her readers' illusions of soldier-heroes, they would have to find a single *khoziain*-leader to be their hero. So important is the concept of the Russian leader to the people that Cherniavsky (1969) has called the position the "most striking of Russian myths" (2), and so important is that leader himself, says Paxson, that his image, "part father, part god, part holy icon" (2005, 229), often lands in the "red corner" of village homes — an honored place in a special corner of each home, reserved for religious and holy icons and relics.

Historically, faith in the leader was total, McDaniel said. Opposition to him was perfidious, initiated only by those who were really outsiders to the people — Jews, perhaps, or Western-educated intriguers. . . . A true tsar embodied the values and traditions of Russian life. He ruled according to the Truth and protected the community from dangerous outside forces. (1996, 65)

It is here, then, that we see more problems for Politkovskaya in regard to her written criticism of Putin the mythological *khoziain* figure: as this study shows, she was perceived as an outsider, clearly that "Western-educated intriguer" who was impugning the very leader who claimed to be opposing the forces of terrorism. Yet readers had to contend with Politkovskaya's factual accounts of Putin's unwillingness or inability to effectively keep control of his armed forces, which would be a valued trait in an effective leader. "A true tsar embodied the values and traditions of Russian life," McDaniel said. "Clearly, these implications of ancient ideas of autocracy provide much of the foundation for the Russian idea of politics" (1996, 65). And equally, any failure on the part of that leader would be cause for concern among those governed:

If the tsar or the party has to be all-knowing and wise, any perceived fallibility will have a catastrophic effect on legitimacy. This political vision will also create a psychology of dual consciousness, according to which public beliefs and statements must conform to the ideal image of the Government of Truth, which in their private lives people know has not been realized. (McDaniel, 1996, 52)

Politkovskaya's writings, therefore, created a dual tension that her readers would have been forced to address: They had rallied behind and put their faith in Putin as the nation's *khoziain*, who was charged with knowing Truth and able to act on it as such. However, were he indeed an infallible leader, the Second Chechen War would have shown signs of ending, with the army having eliminated the terrorists. Events such as *Nord-Ost* or Beslan would not have happened; the Kadyrovs, as Putin's appointees, would have been effective leaders themselves. And the federal soldier-heroes would not stand accused of the horrific crimes that Politkovskaya witnessed and on which she reported.

In some respects in Russian culture, however, expectations and realities will never meet, and those who were reared in the culture have learned how to deal with that as well:

The authority of institutions and social structures is not so binding in Russia – they are, after all, really only phantoms of their true essences. The person is left to himself or herself to discover the truth that lies completely apart from them. People depend on their wits and their friends much more than on fixed procedures and routines. There is little authority in the formal authorities of the world, for Russia is a literary world where appearances always lie, and people are constantly engaged in a process of interpretation and decoding.

. . . Miracles and mystery still inhere in daily life. (McDaniel, 1996, 39)

This said, it is perhaps less difficult to accept that what the Russian people saw and felt happening in the North Caucasus had evolved into the fantastic *strana chudes*. Although

this world was a place of fantasy different than the foundational mythology upon which the culture was built, it nonetheless mimicked in many ways this dark world in which nothing was as it seemed or could be counted on to work as expected. Much like the dark, frightening forest regions and the years of night visits by Stalin's forces, so Chechnya became a frightening place where ordinary citizens stayed hidden or crept from place to place to avoid notice; it took little more than a word or glance to be shot or spirited off in the dark by federal soldiers.

These categories of foundational myths and Russian ideas examined in this study are by no means exhaustive; this fact points up one of the limitations of the study. Any non-native Russian examining these texts will miss some of the cues, the turns of phrase; the ideological connections that are made will be accessible only to those reared in the culture from the outset. Not all cultural cues will be recognizable, nor will non-Russians be able to understand the power of one cue over another, especially as different generations are concerned; those who survived a war, for example, will be more conditioned over longer periods of time than those who have merely celebrated the victory of wars of years past.

Additional limitations include the fact that not all of Politkovskaya's writings have been examined, or even the ones she might have chosen differently in a collection for her national and international audiences, and those examined here were read primarily in translation. To do justice to her work, these writings would need to be examined concurrently in the language in which they were originally written, to examine all the nuances of the language; specific verbal prefixes can carry a tremendous amount of weight when determining why or how a specific verb is employed, and such analysis

might provide insight into the way the Russian audiences might have perceived the writing.

Moreover, it would be presumptuous to assume that any set of texts examined would completely explain the effects her writings had on the ethnic Russian population. Again, the reach of her reportage was limited to a group of readers who could regularly afford to purchase the publication and who had an interest in and some degree of openness to the ideas espoused by an independent newspaper. These writings, after all, expressly countered the government-sanctioned stories and “facts.” Public response to a public figure derives from many variables; this study presents only those found in a rhetorical analysis of a limited data set.

What this study provides, however, is a contribution to the conversation of how media affect and appeal to the public in conversations about topics of extreme importance and relevance to a nation, particularly during wartime, when thousands of human lives are affected. These results reinforce the understanding of the power of foundational myths to a people, especially a group that is attempting to overcome what could be considered an international embarrassment with the fall of its authoritarian government that had for so long required its people to believe in the propaganda that it had been served them. In this respect, Politkovskaya actually may have been ahead of her time in attempting to affect change in her readers: Katherine Verdery has written that postsocialist change “is a problem of reorganization on a cosmic scale, and it involves the redefinition of virtually everything, including morality, social relations, and basic meanings. It means reordering the people’s entire meaningful worlds” (Verdery, 1999, 35). As Politkovskaya attempted to facilitate this change through her acerbic writing,

however, the people still resisted, showing that their foundational stories were still stronger than any desire to become something entirely new with new core beliefs. At times of such rebuilding and uncertainty, then, these results support the idea that people seem to need to retreat to their foundations in order to find the strength to rebuild and determine how to move forward.

In addition, this study contributes to a broader understanding of Russian communications in general, pointing out that even those individuals reared as ethnic nationals cannot employ foundational myths and cultural ideas to counter their own national identity when constructing appeals that seek to change the *status quo*. As Smith (2002) has observed, “Neither the achievement of sovereignty nor a sharp break with a political system guarantees the quick adoption of new identities or the rapid reconstruction of new historical narratives that explain how the present came to be” (4).

Finally, the analyses presented in this study provide a springboard for investigations into Politkovskaya’s other works, particularly her volume that is a dedicated attack on Putin and his policies. Within her work, she frequently touched on the subject of a free press and the problems of the government distributing false stories and information through media that accepted these reports and facts as the official word on each subject. Politkovskaya’s own actions of embedding herself in the North Caucasus region and reporting even when the government had forbidden it shows her dedication to enacting the principles of a free press, independent of the government, that the rest of the country seemed to shun. Future studies should examine the attitudes about a free press by such a reporter who enacts the principles despite threats of physical harm to that individual or of destruction of the news organization. The attitudes expressed by the

ethnic Russians toward counter-mythological media messages may indicate a unique feature of the people. In some countries such as this, which have been ruled for their entire existences by a form of autocracy outside of the Western realm, the foundational myths and beliefs might be so powerful and deeply embedded that the populations may never fully come to embrace democratic concepts such as the idea of a free press. The embedded need for the autocratic leader to supply the messages may prove more powerful to overcome for such countries and would require other tactics to enact.

Additionally, Politkovskaya's words and actions would provide particularly rich material with which to address a critical question in news reporting: Is it ever possible for a journalist to recognize an absolute right and wrong side in a reporting situation and use media to take a moral stand to address the situation? In other words, is it ever acceptable for a journalist's morals to override the ethical considerations of a reporting job? Purely subjective cable news sources notwithstanding, some situations in history — genocide, slave trafficking, sexual abuse of children — are all instances in which, within our culture, no excuse could justify representing “the other side of the issue.” Do such situations require a journalist to abandon objective reporting in order to bring the situation to the public's attention without risking the label of “advocacy”? For Politkovskaya, advocacy was her only choice her morals would allow; she felt that this was the only means of attracting the world's emotional attention.

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“Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others,” Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön (2001) wrote. “Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity” (50).



In the months after Anna Politkovskaya was buried in Troyekurovskoye Cemetery in Moscow, her name was bestowed on the granddaughter she did not live to meet, and the first of several suspects were charged in her murder. In the years since, several more have been implicated, but to date no one has been convicted. Less than two years after her death, visitors to Grozny could see new construction and rebuilding in the city and throughout the region (Steele, 2008). On April 16, 2009, Russia's counter-terrorist activities came to an official close ("Russia 'ends Chechnya operation,' " 2009), and the situation in the North Caucasus seems to have stabilized, although Chechnya continues to be run by former prime minister and now president Ramzan Kadyrov. He remains close to Vladimir Putin and is still lauded on posters and banners as a hero.

And on July 15, 2009, the body of Natalya Estemirova, a Grozny-based human rights reporter for *Novaya Gazeta*, was found along a road in Ingushetia, eight hours after she had been kidnapped outside her home. She had three bullets in her chest, and two in her head. Witnesses around her home continued to see her kidnappers, but they were too afraid to speak up (Chivers, 2009; Ognianova, 2010).

As in a fabled Potemkin village, life in Chechnya goes on.

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