

RUSSIA

## Death of a Journalist

Patrick Martin

The assassination of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya is an ominous warning to working people and intellectuals in Russia and throughout the world of the lengths to which the regime headed by the former KGB agent Vladimir Putin will go to suppress criticism and political opposition.

Politkovskaya, the best-known journalistic critic of the Putin government, author of two books exposing the barbarism of the war in Chechnya, was gunned down in the lobby of her apartment building in central Moscow. She was 48 years old, and had survived several previous assassination attempts as well as countless threats.

The murderer, shown by CCTV cameras as a young man wearing a hooded jacket, approached the journalist as she was leaving the building and fired three shots into her body and a fourth into her head, then threw down the weapon, a Makarov 9mm pistol of the type regularly used by paid hit-men in Russia.

Politkovskaya wrote for the bi-monthly *Novaya Gazeta*, a bourgeois-democratic magazine critical of the Putin regime which was partially financed by billionaire Alexander Lebedev and former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. She spent most of the last seven years writing investigative reports on the war in Chechnya, for which she made more than 50 trips to the war zone. She sympathetically interviewed Russian conscripts, Chechen guerrillas, and civilians trapped in the fighting.

Born in New York to a Russian couple who worked at the Soviet mission to the United Nations, Politkovskaya is the *thirteenth* journalist murdered in Russia since Putin came to power in 2000. All of these victims had run afoul either of government officials or powerful economic interests, and nearly all these cases remain unsolved.

Igor Yakovenko, general secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists, said, "There is no doubt she was killed for her professional activities." He suggested that the timing of the murder—on Vladimir Putin's birthday, and a few days before the birthday of Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov—was a gruesome tribute. "Apparently, this was a present for the two leaders," he said.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said Politkovskaya's murder was a "shocking outrage that will stun journalists across the world."

Politkovskaya wrote several books, including, *A Dirty War : A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, *A Small Corner of Hell : Dispatches from Chechnya and Putin's Russia*, an exposé of the regime's corruption and attacks on democratic rights. She was reportedly writing an article about torture in Chechnya the weekend she was murdered. It was to be published on Monday, but *Novaya Gazeta* had not yet received the text.

While evincing sympathy for the suffering of the Chechen people, and opposing the Russian military occupation, she was also opposed to the Islamic fundamentalism of such Chechen terrorists as Shamil Basayev, organizer of the massacre of schoolchildren and teachers at Beslan in 2004.

One widely quoted passage from her reporting on Chechnya could apply equally to America in Iraq, or countless other great power interventions against small nations. “The army and police, nearly 100,000 strong, wander around Chechnya in a state of complete moral decay,” she wrote. “And what response could one expect but more terrorism, and the recruitment of new resistance fighters?”

According to a profile in the British press, Politkovskaya was repeatedly detained by Russian special forces while reporting from Chechnya, and several times threatened with rape and murder. In 2001, she fled to Austria after receiving a particularly pointed death threat from an army officer. In 2004, while on her way to cover the siege at Beslan, she was apparently poisoned and nearly died.

While the Russian prosecutor general Yuri Chaika declared he would personally lead the investigation into the murder, because of its “particular importance and its wide resonance within society,” it is more than likely that the order for Politovskaya’s liquidation came from within the Putin security apparatus, if not from the president’s own entourage.

The killing is the second assassination of a prominent Muscovite in less than a month. Andrei Kozlov, a Central Bank official identified with anti-corruption campaigns that infringed on the interests of billionaire oligarchs and high government officials, was shot to death as he left a soccer match in September.

Putin himself has maintained a stony silence about the brutal killing of his most vocal media critic, a silence which amounts to moral endorsement of the assassination.

In this, Putin is true to his roots. He served for two decades in the Stalinist KGB and its post-Soviet successor agency before being elevated into high office. Accompanying him into the Kremlin is an entire coterie of former secret policemen, the so-called *soloviki*, who combine the repressive brutality of the Stalinist secret police—responsible for the mass murder of Trotskyists and other socialists—and the corruption and avarice of the new Russian ruling elite.

The murder of Politkovskaya testifies to the nature of the regime that has arisen from the so-called “democratic revolution,” supported and in no small part orchestrated by the US and other imperialist powers, which replaced the Soviet regime with one based on capitalist restorationist policies. ~~████████~~