

Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*
 Harvill Press: London 2001, £12, paperback
 xxxiii, 336 pp, 1 86046 897 7

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PUTIN'S COLONIAL WAR

On 6 August 1996, three days before Yeltsin was to stumble through the especially shortened ceremony inaugurating his second term as Russian President, Chechen forces suddenly attacked and recaptured a string of major towns, including the battle-blasted capital, Grozny. It was the success of this assault—coupled with the unending and increasingly unpopular stream of Russian casualties—that persuaded Yeltsin to sue for peace, and within a month General Aleksandr Lebed and the Chechens' military commander Aslan Maskhadov had signed the Khasavyurt accords, seemingly bringing to an end the brutal conflict that has been dubbed 'Yeltsin's Vietnam'.

Five years later, Russia is once again involved in a murderous war in Chechnya, waged as before largely on a civilian population living beneath ruins or in 'filtration centres' that echo unapologetically Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet Gulag. But where the first Chechen war was widely unpopular, seen as a needless waste of lives and an unwarranted use of force, Putin's war has until now commanded widespread support, as an 'anti-terrorist operation'—the action of a strong state that means to rein in lawlessness on its periphery, no matter how daunting the task, and in so doing regain some measure of its former greatness. Yeltsin's Vietnam has become Putin's Falklands. Still more sombre analogies can be found: as Anna Politkovskaya writes in *A Dirty War*, 'the tragic terrorist bombings in Moscow, Volgodonsk and Buinaksk [in September 1999] are far too rapidly coming to resemble another distant event: the burning of the Reichstag.'

Anna Politkovskaya has written on Chechnya for the Moscow-based newspaper *Novaia gazeta* since July 1999, and the present volume gathers her dispatches from the North Caucasus up to January of this year. The book has

been widely praised as a principled and unflinching exposé of Russia's conduct, garnering the author prestigious awards from the Russian Union of Journalists and Amnesty International. Earlier this year she was arrested, abused and threatened with rape and execution by FSB personnel in Chechnya, after she probed too much into allegations of Russian torture of Chechen civilians; here she braves the streets of Grozny despite the snipers and the high incidence of kidnapping, using the pages of her newspaper to publicize the names of Russian officials responsible for withholding supplies from refugees, and to wage a campaign to evacuate the inhabitants of Grozny's old people's home. *A Dirty War* is frequently devastating about Russia's barbaric conduct of the war; but despite the author's brave and honourable intentions, the book is shot through with the prejudices and incomprehension subtending both the current war and its historical antecedents.

Russia has claimed dominion over Chechnya since the days of its Imperial expansion southwards beyond the Terek River—Grozny (meaning 'terrible' or 'awe-inspiring') was founded by General Aleksei Ermolov in 1818 as a garrison town from which to conduct a steady pacification of the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus. This policy did not prove entirely successful, however; the history of the region has been littered with instances of rebellions which proved hard for Russia to quell—the most notorious being the uprising led by Imam Shamil, which lasted from 1829 to 1859. Further uprisings occurred in Chechnya in 1905, and again in the Soviet period, in 1917–21, 1929, 1937 and 1942—this last doubtless contributing to Stalin's decision to deport the entire Chechen nation, together with the neighbouring Ingush, to Kazakhstan, whence they returned in 1957.

Having earned a reputation for fractiousness, the Chechens were mistrusted by both Russian and Soviet authorities, marginalized from positions of power; the Chechens have, however, proved extraordinarily adept at living in the cracks between state authority, often flourishing in illicit trade networks and criminal gangs in European Russia. In the years of exile, this impassioned resistance to alien authority combined with a forceful sense of national humiliation, and when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate Chechen nationalism expressed itself in urgent demands for full independence—backed by a prosperous Chechen diaspora. This double legacy of resistance to and successful subversion of state authority proved invaluable to the Chechens in the war of 1994–6, but—as elegantly chronicled by Anatol Lieven in *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (1998)—it has also hamstrung any attempts to establish a viable state since then, and has given a sad degree of credence to claims that Chechnya's only law is lawlessness.

In 1991, the Yeltsin government was convinced that, were Chechnya to gain independence, the rest of the North Caucasus would follow and the region's many nationalities—the Arabs called the area 'Language Mountain'—would be

plunged into ethnic anarchy; the ‘domino effect’ might then spread to others of the Russian Federation’s national autonomous areas and republics. That this failed to occur can be explained by their economic dependence on Moscow, as well as the continued dominance of local Soviet party and managerial elites. Apart from Chechnya, the only place where substantial autonomy of any kind (let alone independence) was actively sought, and achieved, was Tatarstan, which in 1994 negotiated with Moscow a separate federal treaty. No such compromise was ever contemplated by the then Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev, and Moscow initially preferred to support and arm Dudayev’s opponents, in the hope of installing a more pliable regime. The manifest weakness of this opposition, together with a string of hijackings on Chechnya’s borders, blamed on the separatists, provided the rationale for Moscow’s intervention in the autumn of 1994.

Putin’s policy in Chechnya has replicated many of the features of Yeltsin’s: an initial pretext of dealing with lawlessness; an attempt to install a pro-Moscow puppet regime (this time headed by Ahmad-Hadji Kadyrov, the former Chief Mufti of Chechnya); and, of course, the presumption that the result would be, in the famously ill-starred words of Nicholas II’s Interior Minister Viacheslav Pleve in 1904, ‘a small victorious war’. But where Yeltsin’s blundering and brutal intervention was at least in part motivated by a concern to preserve Russia’s territorial integrity, Putin’s was driven by a need to manipulate the fears and prejudices of the electorate, by cold calculation and bottomless cynicism—and by the Russian military’s burning desire to reverse the humiliations of the previous war.

Politkovskaya is frequently illuminating on the pervasiveness of this cynicism, and what it might portend—as in the reference to the Reichstag fire, and elsewhere a description of Putin as an incipient Pinochet. She is also unafraid of comparing Russian police harassment and unlawful detention of ‘people of Caucasian nationality’—Chechen or otherwise—to the Nazi targeting of Jews and Gypsies. Her account of the Russian military lays bare an unrelenting decline of morale and, most terrifyingly, of basic humanity—from the commercial exploitation of war casualties by the private firm Military Commemoration Ltd. to the abduction of recruits to the front in the middle of the night; from the rancid food with which soldiers are expected to fill fighting stomachs to random acts of terror and large-scale atrocities, such as the massacre at Novye Aldy. There are chilling moments here, such as an interview with Major-General Anatoly Shamanov, who announces that ‘kindness must have its limits . . . If the bandits do not understand our code of ethics, they must be destroyed. If someone falls ill, they hurt the patient by removing the affected organ.’ One of the most disturbing pronouncements in this idiom comes from Putin himself, announcing on Russian television in early November 1999 that he would ‘corner the bandits in the shithouse and wipe them out.’

There is much, then, in Politkovskaya’s book that is praiseworthy and even necessary: as Thomas de Waal writes in his preface to the volume, it is ‘the

nearest thing yet written to a correct diagnosis.’ However, much of the good work is unravelled by a few stray, but damning sentences. The process begins with such crudely prejudicial statements as ‘Ruslan is a devout Muslim. But you’d never know it. Not a single word, look or movement betrays his inner faith, let alone demonstrative green bandannas or cries of “Allahu Akbar!”’ The simplistic division between well-behaved, silent Muslims on the one hand and raging Wahhabite extremists on the other is paralleled by a division of Chechens into a peace-loving, pro-Moscow camp and rabid, extremist (and, naturally, far too vocally Islamic) nationalists: at one point, Politkovskaya refers to ‘the “liberated” northern areas of Chechnya, a region opposed to Maskhadov, Dudayev, Basayev and all of their kind.’ The mere attempt to lump these men into a single category indicates a shameless ignorance of the politics of Chechnya between 1991 and the present—Dudayev representing the maximalist separatist tendency and Maskhadov the pragmatic approach quite visibly preferred by Moscow; hence the failure of negotiation in 1994, when Dudayev was in charge, and its success in 1996, when the Russians, having assassinated Dudayev, were much relieved that Maskhadov had taken over.

Politkovskaya reserves a special tone of condemnation for Shamil Basayev, who has been Russia’s demon of choice since June 1995, when he and a busload of heavily armed fighters bribed their way several hundred miles into Russia, before reportedly simply running out of money in Budennovsk. They seized a hospital, took 1000 hostages, and demanded the start of peace negotiations—which began only after a bungled attempt by Russian special forces to storm the building, in which over a hundred hostages were killed. Basayev then finished second in Chechnya’s presidential elections of 1997, and was appointed Maskhadov’s Prime Minister before leaving the government, disappointed by the lack of official backing for his plans to unify Chechnya and Dagestan—and thus, he thought, remedy the former’s isolation. It was Basayev, together with the Wahhabite leader Khattab, who led a band of men into Dagestan in August 1999. A month later, Politkovskaya went to Dagestan and encountered the incomprehension and anger of refugees from the fighting, to whom she refers as ‘mountain women’. Two passages are worth quoting, both for their patronizing ethnographic tone and for their more troubling implications:

They are, as you see, very simple people. Some might even call them primitive. However, they can see to the very heart of the matter, while we remain blinkered and confused by our complexes and sophistication. These women speak with a decisiveness and clarity that we have long forgotten: ‘Basayev is a bloodthirsty bandit and traitor and he has no place among normal people.’ Their questions and answers expose Russia’s ill-defined policies in the North Caucasus. Our own answers hint at some involved game we are playing, and it is never clear to whose advantage: ‘Things aren’t that simple,’ we say. ‘It makes sense to negotiate with Basayev . . .

They simply cannot understand that Russian men are going to say nothing to Siberian mothers to explain how they are dealing with Shamil Basayev. They'll keep quiet as usual. Yet again they'll do nothing about Basayev and swallow this disgrace. Then they'll shield themselves behind clever words: discussion of the status of Chechnya has been 'postponed', we must not increase tension by arresting Basayev. Madness. The women are right. As long as our men behave in this way, their war will never end.

Within a few short weeks Putin began a war that supplied answers to all of Politkovskaya's prayers: a 'decisiveness', shorn of 'complexes and sophistication', an end to 'ill-defined policies in the North Caucasus', to 'doing nothing about Basayev', an end to 'swallowing disgrace'. It is also, incidentally, quite extraordinary that a book which begins with an exhortation to Russia's men to do their masculine, militaristic duty should then be lauded (on its back cover) for 'excoriating male stupidity', when the war Politkovskaya seems so urgently to be requesting eventually arrived.

Indeed, there are many more passages which point to this contradictory stance: for example, condemnation of Putin's use of force, paired with blanket categorization of Chechnya's democratically elected leaders as 'bandits'. (If they're simply bandits, why not use force?) At one point Politkovskaya suggests Russia's leaders should try 'either focusing the war within clear lines or a local arena, or else halting it altogether'—when Chechnya's borders have, with terrifying logic, been sealed precisely so as to do this. She notes that 'the present "struggle with the terrorists" is spreading across the entire country and is becoming a deadly danger to many who have not the slightest connection with the terrorists.' But the logic of the entire operation has been precisely to forge this link, to turn all Chechens into terrorists so as to give a mask of legality to a war designed to crush their aspirations to independence. Putin's subterfuge seems to have escaped a great many people in Russia today, Politkovskaya included.

This blindness to the national aspect underlies most of the weaknesses of her account. For example, Politkovskaya seems to see Kadyrov's puppet regime as simply another instance of corrupt and ineffective rule—which of course it is—but it is also more than that: a regime imposed by Moscow, under force of arms, against the democratically expressed wishes of Chechnya's populace. The smallest sign of Politkovskaya's disorientation is that, in the tenth year of Chechnya's struggle for independence, she announces in shock—as if it were merely a symptom of how bad the situation has become—that 'Chechnya is not a part of the same country.'

Politkovskaya's book is, in more senses than one, a diagnosis of Russia's ills: the horrifying parade of scars and suffering, the incompetence and brutality to which she testifies are not rapidly forgotten, and deserve far more attention than they are given. *A Dirty War* lays no claims to authoritative analysis—it is, after all, a book of reportage, of testimony rather than critical insight—but

even so it is deeply flawed, and symptomatic of a broader malaise. If one of Putin's harshest and most principled critics turns all Chechen politicians into bandits or raving Wahhabites, ignores the fundamental historical fact of colonization, objects to the 'anti-terrorist operation' only because of its geographical imprecision—in short, replicating much of the logic driving the current war—then there can be little hope of a cogent and well-informed resistance to it. Worse still is the Western reaction to the Chechen war: as in NATO's assault on Serbia, thousands of human lives are held to be of secondary importance to the maintenance of liberal values. In the revealing words of the translator, John Crowfoot, 'the suspension of the constitution in that small republic puts democracy and free speech throughout Russia at risk. And that is a danger that no one can ignore.' The reduction of a city of 400,000 to post-apocalyptic rubble, the immiseration and reduction to abject servitude of an entire nation, and the massacre of countless innocents at Novye Aldy, Samashki, Alkhan-Yurt: all this can safely be ignored, so as not to interrupt the charade of lies, theft and corruption the world's leaders have been pleased to call democracy in Russia. Politkovskaya's freedom to speak a tainted truth is meagre compensation for lives lost and ruined.