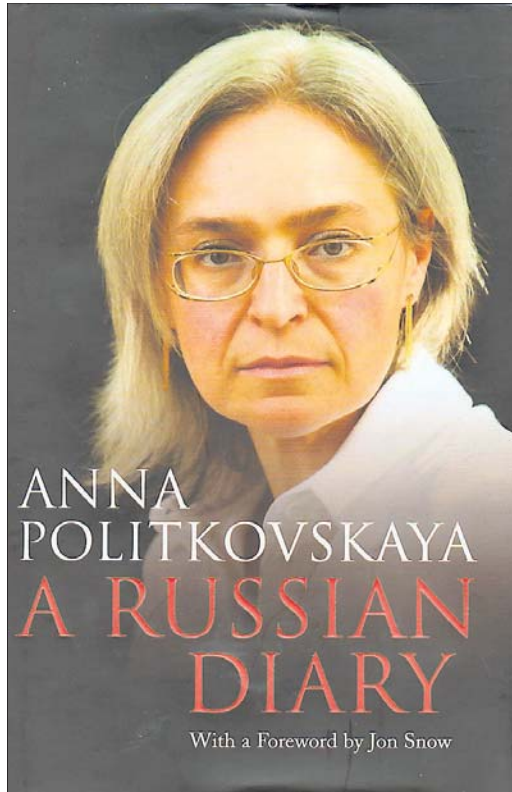


In the air

# Heart of darkness



Ariel Wagner Parker

**It is 29 August 2004, and Anna Politkovskaya has travelled to the remote village of Tsentoroy, in south-eastern Chechnya, to interview the „deranged“ boss of the Chechnyan militia, Ramzan Kadyrov, the favourite of Vladimir Putin who wields the real power in Chechnya.**

He keeps her waiting six or seven hours and night has fallen before she sets eyes on his „fatuous degenerate countenance“. The lengthy interview that follows is chilling for the cynicism and brutality with which the sprawling 27-year-old responds to Politkovskaya's unsparing questions. Chilling too for the picture it paints of a country where „everyone is fighting everyone“.

It is late when orders are given for her to be driven back to Grozny.

*„Musa, a former fighter from Zakan-Yurt, sits at the wheel and there are two bodyguards. I get into the vehicle and think that somewhere along the route, I am obviously going to be killed. But the ex-fighter from Zakan-Yurt is just waiting for Ramzan to leave. He wants to bare his soul, and when he starts telling me the story of his life, how he had been a fighter, why he joined Ramzan, I know he is not going to kill me. He wants the world to*

*hear his story. I understood that, but sat there, crying from fear and loathing. ‚Don't cry‘, the fighter from Zakan-Yurt finally said to me. ‚You are strong‘“.*

This episode stands at the heart of Anna Politkovskaya's last book, *A Russian Diary*, which has just been published in English. It brings home both the utter moral seriousness of the journalist's crusade against the destruction of democracy in Russia by Vladimir Putin, and the hopelessness of the situation in Chechnya, the „justification“ for his ruthless exploitation of the „terrorist threat“ to achieve his end.

Politkovskaya journeys into the heart of darkness to learn the truth about Kadyrov – this „baby-dragon“ fostered by the Kremlin, then let loose on the hapless people of Chechnya to torture and kill – and tell the world the story. She risks her life in so doing, but then she does that every day. She is not fearless, but, indeed, strong; and her outrage at the everyday horrors she sees around her lends her an ironclad courage.

Politkovskaya's diary covers the period from December 2003 to August 2005.

She describes the Russian president's farcical election campaign, asking the question „How did Putin get re-elected?“ The answer, backed up by numerous examples: by abolishing the rule of law, violating electoral legislation, purchasing or intimidating the few candidates prepared to stand against him (including Ivan Rybkin, who fled to London), and scaring to death, sometimes literally, potential opposition.

Also, laments Politkovskaya, by exploiting the „sickness“ of the Russian people, „most of whom are suffering from paternalism, which is why Putin gets away with everything, why he is possible in Russia.“ And if the oligarchs, the government and the bureaucracy are the object of her scorn and loathing, her despair at the apathy of her fellow-citizens, the lack of serious political opposition and the increasing self-censorship of the press, runs like a red thread throughout the book.

The events described in the diary take place against a background of terrorist atrocities, brutal racist attacks by the ever-growing fascist youth movements, to which the security services turn a blind eye, abductions, killings and individual horror stories.

One of the strengths of Politkovskaya's narrative is the juxtaposition of the Big Picture with individual human stories. The explosion in the Moscow Metro does not remain an anonymous slaughter: we „meet“ two of the victims, Alexander Ishunkin, a young officer in the armed forces, in Moscow to buy spare parts and see friends, and 17-year-old Vanya Aladiin, „a lively, cheer-

ful, friendly boy people called ‚Hurricane Vanya‘“. Elsewhere, incompetence and brutality in the army is sickeningly illustrated by the stories of Alexanders Slesarenko and Sobakaev and Yevgeny Fomovsky, three of the innumerable victims.

Another strength is the use of arresting images that graphically capture a personality or situation: the physical isolation of Putin during his inauguration, or the slouching insolence of Kadyrov; Christmas – in an orphanage outside Moscow, with little Danila „sticking out like a candle from the adult arms of a carer“, and at the ski-resort of Couchevel, with the oligarchs and other new rich eating eight kinds of oysters and drinking wine at £1,500 a bottle.

She also describes the cover-ups following the Nord-Ost hostage-taking and the attack on the Beslan school, two of the lethal results of self-censorship in the media.

She observes the few instances of resistance with pessimism, yet sees hope in the evolution of *Committee 2008*, headed by former chess champion, Garry Kasparov.

In a brief coda, called *Am I Afraid?*, Politkovskaya foresees a drastic decline in the population of Russia if poverty, healthcare, environment, addictions, Chechnya, oppression and greed are not tackled quickly.

If there is anyone around who still believes Putin is Europe's ally against Bush's America, the diary of the woman who has been called „Russia's lost moral conscience“ will open their eyes – to present horrors and future dangers: one should listen when Politkovskaya warns that „Russia is in danger of turning into a national socialist state armed with nuclear weapons“. And when she pleads that if no one is ready to fight, the curtailing of our freedoms will soon reach the point of no return.

The book is beautifully produced, with a foreword by fellow journalist, Jon Snow, maps, an index and invaluable glossaries

Arch Tait's translation reads fluently; the tone is authentic: the sober, factual language of the professional journalist, shot through with the cold fury of the increasingly isolated activist and the desperate sympathy of the caring human being.

As we know, Anna Politkovskaya was not murdered in Chechnya on 29th August 2004 but in the stairwell of her Moscow apartment building on Saturday 7 October 2006. It was Vladimir Putin's 54th birthday.

The Russian president couldn't have wished for a better gift than for someone to rid him of this „turbulent“ journalist.

**-> A Russian Diary by Anna Politkovskaya (2007, Harvill Secker, London, ISBN 978-1-8465-5102-4)**