

We Mustn't Forget Russia's Truth Seeker¹ Anna Politkovskaya

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Until recently the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko consumed the media. It is, as of yet, unsolved. If Russian history has taught us anything, it will remain so. But Litvinenko's murder is not the subject of this article. This article is about Anna. Litvinenko's murder overshadowed the heinous killing of the brave Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya. It is a sad state of affairs when one of the G8 countries is the topic of such intrigue. Aren't these countries supposed to be an example to the world? Anna Politkovskaya was trying very hard to tell the world something. It would be wise of us to listen.

Anna Politkovskaya was a staunch critic of the Putin administration and of the Russian army leadership. She was a fervent supporter of the rule of law and human rights, and argued that Putin was stifling civil liberties and moving the country back to a Soviet style dictatorship. "Everyone is convinced that the Soviet Union has returned, and that it no longer matters what we think."² In light of death threats, and a case of poisoning, she continued to confront the government whom she accused of abusing her beloved Russia and its people. On October 7th, 2006, she was killed contract style-four bullets, including one in the head- in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building. United States Congressmen, Representatives Adam Schiff and Mike Pence, Co-Chairs of the Congressional Caucus for the Freedom of the Press, wrote to Putin calling on him to fulfill his promise to investigate the murder. Pence said, "The troubling trend of the intimidation and murder of Russian journalists must be investigated vigorously by President Putin and his government. The killers must be brought to justice if Russia is to be taken seriously as a nation that values a free press." Anna is the thirteenth journalist who has been murdered since Putin's ascendancy to President. All thirteen cases remain unsolved.

On October 16, 2006, the National Endowment for Democracy held a memorial gathering for Anna Politkovskaya. Among the speakers were Don Jenson of Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, Andrei Piontkovsky of the Hudson Institute, David Satter, author of *Age of Delirium* and *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State* and also affiliated with the Hudson Institute, Susan Glasser of the Washington Post, Undersecretary Paula Dobriansky, and former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzinski. One of Anna's Moscow colleagues sent a message to be read at the memorial. In it he said, "...to keep silent now, after Anna's murder amounts to becoming complicit with her

¹ I have borrowed the term 'truth seeker' from David Satter's book *Age of Delirium*. He defined truth seekers as those who could not reconcile themselves to the difference between the stated law and actual practices.

² Politkovskaya, Anna. *Putin's Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy*. p 232.

murderers.” The theme throughout the memorial was not only one of remembrance, but also one of responsibility and honor.

Undersecretary Paula Dobriansky said that the role of a true journalist is to bring the truth, especially regarding difficult situations, to the citizens of the world; and that is exactly what Anna Politkovskaya did. David Satter said that Anna acted according to her own moral criteria, and did not fall to the pressure of the authoritarian Putin regime. He said, “...what she represented were a set of values, and those values insofar as they represent something that is basic to all people, and represent the best in people, are the most formidable enemy of a regime which tries to rule through violence, and has no respect for the truth.”

Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski said that Anna Politkovskaya was a lonely hero; that she stood for something transcendental, something utterly good, amidst silence, indifference, hostility, cowardice and opportunism. And Andrei Piontkovsky stated that Anna was a dedicated person of one noble mission, to save the souls of the Russian people. “What made her unique was... her enormous moral and spiritual courage.” Piontkovsky also said, “If Saint Peter has read Anna’s book, *Putin’s Russia*, I think that Mr. Putin may find at the Pearly Gates that Anna was much more influential than he would like to believe.” Following Anna’s murder, Putin made a public statement in which he stated, “She was known among journalists, and in human rights circles and in the West, but I repeat that she had no influence on political life.”

Anna’s most recent book, *Putin’s Russia-Life in a Failing Democracy* is a damning conviction of Putin and the current state of affairs in Russia. She says, “This book is about Vladimir Putin-but not, as he is normally viewed in the West, as seen through rose colored glasses. This book is also about the fact that not everyone in Russia is prepared to put up with Putin’s kind of government. We demand our right to freedom.” In it she says that stability has come to Russia, but a stability under which no one seeks justice in courts that flaunt their subservience and partisanship. In her own words, “Nobody in his or her right mind seeks protection from the institutions entrusted with maintaining law and order, because they are totally corrupt.”

She called to the responsibility of her own people to change the political climate in Russia, and blames apathy for the increasing police state that it has become. “Society has shown limitless apathy, and this is what has given Putin the indulgences he requires.” She argued that Russian citizens respond to his actions and speeches not just lethargically, but fearfully. “As the Chekists have become entrenched in power, we have let them see our fear, and thereby have only intensified their urge to treat us like cattle. The KGB respects only the strong. The weak it devours.” Since Putin’s ascendancy to President, many former KGB or FSB (the domestic successor to the KGB) hold influential or lucrative positions. His main support derives from Russia’s intelligence services, stemming from his own former intelligence career.

Anna also lamented that there seems to be a change in moral values. She argues that this change in moral values is more noticeable as the war in the Caucasus continues and broken taboos increasingly become familiar facts

of life. “Killing? Happens every day. Robbery? What of it? Looting? Perfectly legal in a war. It is not only the courts that fail to condemn these crimes, but society as well. What was regarded in the past with repugnance is now simply accepted.”

There seems to be a lingering culture of Communism, not just in Russia, but in many of the former states of the Soviet Union. Communism is a system of monolithic political control. The Communist regime did not provide for opposition or dissent. The few vocal non-Party members were harassed, imprisoned, or killed. The majority of the population kept quiet, regardless of whether or not they believed in the party line. The people learned they were better off conforming, even if only externally. At work and in social environments, the people erected a façade of compliancy and congeniality towards the ruling regime. Relationships were superficial, speech was guarded, and truth became nonexistent.

This is important because of the moral devastation Communism left in its wake. People learned to lie, cheat, and steal—often out of survival exigencies—but that does not negate the moral deficit these actions produce. Russia’s recent history, since the Bolshevik’s 1917 *coup d’etat*, has been a tragic story of oppression and manipulation. The fall of the Soviet Union and Communism was touted as the beginning of a new era, a new Russia-free and democratic. But evidence shows that Russia and her leaders are not forging a new path, but following the old one. Anna said, “There is no doubt that Communism was a dead loss for Russia, but what we have today is even worse.”

Russia is a dangerous place, not just for its citizens and journalists (even Western correspondents—those who record the truth—are hesitant to go there), but for all of us who believe in the rule of law and universal values. The West has given Russia plenty of rope to forge her own way, her own democracy, but she is hanging herself. We must not look away this time. We must listen to Anna, and her call for help. In 1975 Alexander Solzhenitsyn stated, “On our crowded planet there are no longer any internal affairs. The Communists say ‘Don’t interfere in our internal affairs. Let us strangle our citizens in peace and quiet.’ But I tell you: Interfere more and more. Interfere as much as you can. We beg you to come and interfere.” Though Anna did not ask, or expect, the West to help save Russia, we must. We must stop condoning Putin’s policies, and we must stop inviting him to our table, until he is ready to start serving his country, instead of ruling it. The longer we refrain from truly standing by our own moral principles, the larger the dissonance will become between our thoughts and deeds. Then we too will be susceptible to falling morally ill, if we already haven’t. Anna was right; Putin’s Russia really is a failing democracy.

Note from the author:

I cannot claim to be unbiased. All people are subject to deeply embedded internal ideologies and beliefs stemming from sociological influences. I am an outsider, idealist, and a product of Western civilization which is based on democratic and Christian principles. I do not claim to be an expert on Russia; just a devout student of history and international affairs. My information is

secondhand; therefore I am relying on the integrity of the authors who have decided to record what they have seen with their own eyes. That being said, there is no doubt that certain facts can be gleaned intuitively. Common sense and accepting that there is such a thing as universal values, leads to only one conclusion. Cultural pluralism does not account for what is occurring in Russia.