

of revenge: the rebels are replenishing their ranks with new recruits from decimated families. More than 4,000 Russian soldiers and many more Chechens have been killed.

Russia has refused Western mediation, pointing to NATO's compromising attack on Serbia. Although the Council of Europe had temporarily suspended the voting rights of the Russian delegation, Tony Blair invited Putin to London at the height of the fighting, with his spokesman claiming that Russia was facing a 'terrorist insurrection' in Chechnya. Having demonstrated his ability to keep post-Soviet Russia under control, Putin was Washington's and London's man, and in return received *carte blanche* in troublesome Chechnya.

Most Russian journalists reported the war from the point of view of Moscow. The most honourable exception was Anna Politkovskaya, writing for the independent *Novaya gazeta*. Politkovskaya visited Chechnya thirty-nine times, doggedly uncovering atrocities and human rights abuses. In her dispatches from July 1999 to January 2001, she concentrated on the civilian victims of war caught between the Chechen fighters and the Russian Army. 'Both sides support the same ideology,' she wrote. 'Neither one or the other has any pity for the civilian population.' Reporting from the refugee camps in Dagestan and Ingushetia as well as from the front line in Chechnya, she has shown that, through the use of indiscriminately applied firepower, the civilian population has become the main target of the Russian 'antiterrorist operation'. Still, she treats both the victims and the victimisers with compassion and describes the plight of the rank-and-file Russian soldiers as hungry, abandoned cannon-fodder.

Politkovskaya is outraged that the suffering in Chechnya has been ignored in Russia and the West. She likens the refugee camps in Dagestan and Ingushetia to the Nazi concentration camps and compares the branding of the Chechens as a 'nation of criminals' to the Nazi treatment of the Jews. The destroyed Chechen capital of Grozny is an 'appalling contemporary Stalingrad'. Not surprisingly she has made powerful enemies. When, in February 2001, she investigated a Russian Army torture centre, she was detained overnight and repeatedly threatened with rape by senior Russian officers. She has received numerous death threats, including an attempted poisoning in 2004. She lives and works in Moscow.

The following dispatches are followed by her remarkable reporting from a Moscow theatre captured by Chechen guerrillas in July 2002.

Chechnya: A Dirty War

You probably think I'm writing all this to stir your pity. My fellow citizens have indeed proved a hard-hearted lot. You sit enjoying your breakfast, listening to stirring reports about the war in the North Caucasus, in which the most terrible and disturbing facts are sanitised so that the voters don't choke on their food.

But my notes have a quite different purpose, they are written for the future. They are the testimony of the innocent victims of the new Chechen war, which is why I record all the detail I can.

4 November 1999

8.2

Chechnya: A Dirty War 1999–2002

Anna Politkovskaya

[Editorial Note by John Pilger]

Unlike the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the war in Chechnya has been all but ignored by the West. Although Russia's behaviour in Chechnya has been condemned by human rights organisations, the Putin government continues to enjoy membership of the Council of Europe, is a signatory to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and is answerable to the European Court of Human Rights.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was relatively non-violent—except in Chechnya, where calls for autonomy led to a war with Russia in December 1994. Fierce Chechen resistance, mounting casualties and a small but articulate opposition in the Russian parliament and media forced President Yeltsin to reach an agreement with Chechnya's leaders in August 1996.

Three years later, the war resumed when two Chechen warlords, Shamil Basayev and Khat-tab, staged an armed rebellion in neighbouring Dagestan. The new Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, once head of the counterintelligence service FSB, successor of the KGB, ordered an uncompromising response and Russian troops attacked two Islamic villages in Dagestan. In response, bombs tore apart a Russian Army compound in Dagestan, then killed more than 200 people in Moscow and southern Russia. On 1 October 1999, Russian forces attacked Chechnya.

This time, following a wave of anger at the explosions inside Russia, military intervention in Chechnya appeared to have broad popular support. Russian propaganda linked the attacks to 'international terrorism' and to Osama bin Laden, who at that time was wanted by the United States for attacks on American embassies in East Africa. Doubts remain, however, that the bombings were the work of Chechens; there is the strong possibility that Islamic militants from Dagestan and Russian provocateurs played a part. Certainly, the main beneficiary of these events was Vladimir Putin, who now emerged as Russia's new autocrat.

Putin's 'anti-terrorist campaign' destroyed the Chechen capital, Grozny. The civilian population fled to the neighbouring republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia, where they live today under appalling conditions in refugee camps. Although the war has been declared officially over, Russian soldiers continue to shoot civilians for no discernible reason. Torture is commonplace, 2,000 civilians have 'disappeared' and there seems to be no accountability for Russia's 'excesses'. Moreover, the maltreatment of the civilian population has bred a culture

Source: Anna Politkovskaya, 'Chechnya: A Dirty War 1999–2002' in John Pilger, ed. *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism that Changed the World*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005, 409–433.

We know of instances when air-force pilots jettisoned their bombs into the river on the outskirts of villages so as not to commit the sin of bombing their peaceful inhabitants.

We know cases of quite the opposite kind. The pilots deliberately fired on the Rostov-Baku Highway when refugees were fleeing along it from the war zone, and then flew past a second, third and even a fourth time when they saw that someone below was still moving. The war is rapidly acquiring two faces and each potential victim hopes and prays that they will be lucky and meet the 'kind' face of this war.

Asya Astarmirova, a young twenty-eight-year-old inhabitant of the Katyr-Yurt village in the Achkhoy-Martan (district, has looked at both the one and the other. She survived physically because some soldiers saved her. But she is now dead to the world because other soldiers carried out a dreadful and cynical atrocity before her very eyes.

On 16 November Asya was bringing the body of her husband Aslan back to be buried in Katyr-Yurt. He had died in the Sunzhensk district hospital from the wounds he received when he came under fire. With her in the car were her children, six-year-old Aslanbek and two-year-old Salambek. In another car were Aslan's older sister Oeva, a mother of two, and their two uncles who were no longer young men. At the checkpoint between Achkhoy-Martan and Katyr-Yurt they were stopped and, without a word, the soldiers opened fire on both vehicles. When the first burst into flames Asya and the little boys leapt out. 'For Allah's sake, save us!' they cried. The contract soldiers in their bandannas, who were not raw youths, continued shooting and told her: 'There's no Allah, you Chechen bitch! You're dead.'

They fired directly at her and the children. Aslanbek fell unconscious, Salambek screamed and Asya saw the car and her husband's body burn. Young conscripts observed the whole scene from a distance. When the contract soldiers had finished and went off to rest, the conscripts loaded the wounded Asya into an armoured vehicle and took her away. After several hours driving across the fields, avoiding the military posts, the soldiers unloaded the wounded family outside Sunzhensk hospital and without a word to anyone they left.

Asya is still in a state of shock. She gazes blankly round ward No. 1 where she and the children were placed. Her mother Esira Islamova asks each new visitor, 'How can I tell anyone after this that we belong together, that we're citizens of Russia? I can't!'

I try to stroke tiny Salambek's hair—his right leg is encased in plaster where fragments hit him—but the boy begins to scream and cry. He turns away and hides in the pillow.

'He's afraid,' Esita explains. 'You're a Slav, like the contract soldiers.'

'But what about the conscripts, they're also Slavs?'

'He's only a child. . . It's what he remembers and that's what he's reacting to.'

Our losses are immeasurable as we let the army get out of hand and degenerate into anarchy. By allowing such a war to be fought in our own country, without any rules, not against terrorists but against those who hate their own bandits perhaps even more strongly than we do, we are the losers and the loss is irreversible.

28 November 1999

She was lying on her back, arms by her side, shoulders square, like a soldier on parade, unaware of anything in the world around her apart from her pain. Some people came up, threw back the sheet, and looked at the eleven bullet holes scattered across her slight, girlish body and sewn together by the doctors. But even then Mubarik Avkhadova did not react. Her enormous dry eyes were fixed on the ceiling. Her arms lay helplessly by her side. Her only link with the world was the drip running into her vein.

For the third week twenty-two-year-old Mubarik has hovered between life and death. No one will give any guarantees. No one who visits her in Ward 8 of the Nazran republican hospital talks about the future. And everyone looks away when, worn by her struggle to keep alive, this once cheerful and carefree fourth-year student at the languages faculty in Grozny university suddenly shifts her gaze from the ceiling and stares at them as they repeat their meaningless phrases.

What happened? By current standards it was a very ordinary case. The Russian Army were advancing on the village of Alkhan-Yurt, only a kilometre from Grozny. Mubarik, the younger daughter, had stayed there on Suvorov Street with her elderly parents, her mother Tumish and father Ali, convinced until the last that the soldiers would not open fire on peaceful civilians and residential areas. On 1 December Ali decided that they could wait no longer and, stopping a passing *Zhiguli*, which already contained six people, he persuaded them to also take his wife and daughter. He stayed behind.

Round midday the vehicle with a white flag tied to its radio aerial was moving towards Goity. The village is now overflowing with refugees and it was there, a few days earlier, that Mubarik's elder sister, Aiza, had gone with her four small children. Two kilometres down the Goity road, off the main Rostov-Baku Highway, a plane began to pursue the unfortunate *Zhiguli* and finally opened fire.

An old woman and her grown-up daughter died immediately. To this day their names are not known. Mubarik and a thirteen-year-old girl, the old woman's granddaughter, were wounded. While the plane prepared for a second swoop, Tumish dragged the girl and her own daughter out of the car and shielded their bodies with her own, already bleeding from a number of wounds. She feverishly tucked their arms and legs under her and when the plane returned and again fired it only killed Tumish. On the evening of 1 December it was announced on TV that the air force had destroyed a *Zhiguli* full of Chechen fighters who were trying to flee. Only on 11 December, on a Saturday, was Aiza able to get her wounded sister to hospital in Ingushetia, after bribing each and every post now set up on the Rostov-Baku Highway. (At Goity the village elders had collected 3,000 roubles to help her.)

And what about Mubarik's village? On 9 December the federal forces arrived at Alkhan-Yurt. What did they gain there at the cost of such torment to this pretty young woman?

The same day that Mubarik was brought to Ingushetia, 11 December, the area around the village was swarming with soldiers and their officers, tanks and armoured vehicles. At first sight it looked exactly the way the books describe the front line in a war or the fictional versions of the present Chechen campaign that they show, hour after hour, on every TV channel. Machine-guns, bullet-proof jackets, mud, and helicopters boastfully zooming overhead.

The closer you look, however, the stranger the sights you see. The officers, for instance, are standing with their backs to the front line. Whoever heard of such a thing? The soldiers follow their example. They sprawl over their armoured vehicles in such a way that they cannot possibly observe the territory of their opponent because it is located directly behind them.

'Where's the front then?'

'Over there.'

All cheerfully pointed to a pile of tree trunks that have been chopped down and laid straight on the road to Grozny. This means that from where we're talking to the front line, beyond which there was fierce fighting, is at most fifty metres. You could hit the trees with a slingshot, let alone a machine-gun or a sniper's rifle.

'And the fighters are over there, in that belt of trees,' the officers continue, with no concern for the absurdities they themselves are offering me.

'But we're no distance from them, and you're not even wearing bullet-proof jackets? Why aren't the fighters firing? Where are those snipers that everyone is so scared of? We're sitting ducks here.'

The ordinary soldiers are even more open targets on this strange front. Contemptuous of the dangers concealed in the surrounding area (if, that is, one

believes this talk of a front outside Grozny), they stand on the roofs of the ugly concrete bus-shelters and seem in no fear for their lives.

So where are the Chechen fighters? Are there any here at all, and were they ever here? It all feels like some show put on by the military and not really the front line in an uncompromising struggle with international terrorism. What physical evidence can we see here of the fierce war that Russia's forces already, in their tens of thousands, have been waging in the North Caucasus since mid-December?

The refugees are unanimous. They talk today of a slaughter only of the civilian population, and the death of children, pregnant women and old men, instead of Basayev and Khattab. That is why I am here to record such testimony from those around Alkhan-Yurt. This is the area the military call the front. We know that here, one kilometre from Grozny, there were particularly fierce battles and pitiless operations to 'cleanse' the territory. I want to understand the reason why the nameless passengers of that *Zhiguli* on the Goity road lost their lives, and Mubarik was shot.

I want to know why twenty-three people died here in Alkhan-Yurt between 1-8 December: farmers, their wives and children. Only three died as the result of bombing, the rest perished during a check on 'ID documents and residence permits' (information from Human Rights Watch). [...]

How are we to go on living after this? Who is our friend or enemy now?

On the eve of Constitution Day the 'liberated' Chechen settlement of Alkhan-Yurt was as empty as a film-set in the middle of the night. There was not a single human being anywhere, not a cow, a chicken or a goose. Not a single living thing, nor any sound that might distantly suggest a mooing or clucking. If someone had been weeping, shouting or lamenting it would have been less frightening.

Silence. On the hill a churned-up graveyard. The officers tell me that Chechen fighters had dug themselves in there, so they had to fire straight at the graves. But where then are the dead fighters' bodies or the prisoners?

'Where they should be,' the officers reply.

Perhaps it would be better to show them to everyone. To put the survivors on trial. Then that would really be the triumph of the legitimate authorities over international terrorism.

The silence that greets these elementary proposals is the most telltale sign of this war. We continue gazing in silence at Alkhan-Yurt. The cupola of the mosque has been turned into a sieve. A few jagged rafters are all that remain, at best, of the roofs of hundreds of houses. The walls are like some worn and discarded garment, with gaping holes of all sizes (depending on the calibre of weapon the officer chose to shoot with). Alkhan-Yurt lies quiet and deathly still in the tight grip of the encircling armoured vehicles. If people can be wounded, so can the villages they leave behind them.

So this is the 'fierce struggle with the Chechen fighters'. The army tells us, 'We are not shooting at people's homes', and the result is a devastated village and not one piece of evidence that the fighters have been there. And the front? There are no fighters there either.

But where are all the people? There must be someone on the front line in Alkhan-Yurt. Where is Mubarik's father, Ali, who couldn't get into the *Zhiguli* on 1 December and stayed behind at their house on Suvorov Street?

The commanding officer issued a very straightforward order. The civilian population has the right to leave their cellars and basements only between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., carrying a white flag. If there is no white flag, they will be shot and also if they come out after 1 p.m. But why, I ask? The village has already been 'liberated'. And why only at those times, why not from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.? The military here prefer to answer every question with a brief and clear 'Because'. That's how General Shamanov, our newly decorated Hero of Russia, has taught his subordinates to reply when asked about his imposition of this twenty-two-hour curfew, an unfathomable addition to the theory of military strategy at the close of the twentieth century.

That is why they do not allow journalists here who have not first been thoroughly tested and processed by the press service of the combined forces in Mozdok. Without such ideological preparation the picture is all too clear. They call it the front, but it's nothing of the kind. And there can be no justification for the sufferings of Alkhan-Yurt. Who then are they fighting against? When the remaining inhabitants are allowed back, to walk again through their village and fields as they wish, they will know the soul-wrenching answer. Well, what would you say if you found yourself in the position of these hunted and tormented villagers who have been deprived of every human right?

The answer is obvious. But let me offer one more picture, this time from the 'liberated' northern areas of Chechnya, a region opposed to Maskhadov, Dudayev, Basayev and all of their kind. The snapshot comes from Goragorsk on 10 December. This large and once unbelievably beautiful village, spread out like Moscow over 'seven hills', lies roughly eighty kilometres north-west of Grozny. There were also fierce battles here and people died on both sides. A great deal of destruction is evident, as are the fresh graves. A rough-hewn cross commemorates Private Alexei Mitrofanov, who died fighting for Goragorsk, and stands next to the vast and gaping holes left in the oil tanks by heavy artillery shells. This speaks more eloquently than any briefing: Mitrofanov died for someone else's oil.

You can't help noticing that they took particular and malicious delight in targeting the mosque in Goragorsk. It has been reduced to its foundations. The villagers give a welcoming smile to all visiting 'persons of Slav nationality', but their silent response came during the night. The statue of the Unknown Soviet

Soldier, which stands as always in the central square, was neatly decapitated. No one can find the head. There are those here who fought the Germans in the Great Patriotic War, but even that did not halt the villagers who have driven inwards their feelings of hate and desire for revenge.

The memorial itself suffered from the fighting nearby. The words NO ONE IS FORGOTTEN, have fallen off; the words NOT ONE DEED IS FORGOTTEN remain.

16 December 1999

The Independent Expert Legal Council in Moscow, at the request of the Memorial Human Rights Centre, has recently provided its analysis of certain aspects of events in Chechnya. This voluntary group of lawyers, headed by Mara Polyakova, has spoken out firmly and clearly, as international law and Article 2 of our own Constitution ('the rights of the individual take priority over all other values') demand.

There can be no talk of a guilty nation that must answer for the actions of certain of its members. The Criminal Code and Russia's law 'On the Struggle against Terrorism' both define a terrorist action as a specific event. An anti-terrorist operation is therefore an action taken against specific individual criminals. Any restrictions on the rights and liberties of the population as a whole can only be imposed by the law 'On the State of Emergency'. In this case, that law has not been invoked. Additional Protocol No. 2 of the Geneva Conventions (to all of which Russia is a signatory) is expressed in even more uncompromising terms: 'collective punishment for a specific crime is categorically prohibited'.

Are we witnessing an anti-constitutional putsch? Without a doubt. When you carelessly congratulate yourself that we have just had democratic elections to the Duma, stop and think for a moment. We are living under a Constitution that has in part been revoked and now functions only in those parts that continue to receive the approval of the Kremlin. If they then take a dislike to other articles they will toss them aside, just as they will quickly deal with any of us. Yet what will Chechnya look like in the year 2000? We are moving towards the creation of some anti-constitutional territory, a reservation jointly controlled by the harsh military rule of the federal authorities and the so-called police force of the Gantamirov band. This reservation has been set aside for people of an inferior status, Russia's Red Indians of the late twentieth century, who are guilty of having been born in the Chechen Republic. Russia, it seems, cannot live without a Pale of Settlement. At the end of the last century the Jews were thus confined and, as a consequence, they provided many of the young revolutionaries and terrorists of Bolshevism. By creating a reservation for the Chechens we are preparing an inevitable rebellion, led by the hot-headed youths who will grow up there.

27 December 1999

Picture a classroom. Children sit on their small chairs. One is scratching her leg, another picks his nose, while over there a boy in ragged sports trousers examines a gaping hole in his shoe as if no one else exists.

What can you expect? They've only been going to school for three years and are still little children by ordinary standards. They have just written a composition on the most universal school subject of all: 'My Homeland'. Which of us has not done the same, and committed the minor offence of filching wise words from some book or other?

But as I read through this pile of papers I was horrified. This hackneyed subject produced a series of burning revelations. It proved so wounding and painful a subject for those gathered in that classroom that I could hardly bring myself to call them children, let alone small children. Outwardly eight- or nine-year-olds, tragic circumstances had filled them with an adult and fully formed view of the world. Moreover, there were no exceptions, it affected each and every one.

But before you read about 'My Homeland' I should set the scene. We are in Ingushetia on the outskirts of the village of Yandara, not far from the Chechen border, at a refugee camp called 'Goskhov' (State Enterprise). Tents, sheds and dugouts. Nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep, no clothes to wear and nowhere to wash, not even once a month. Nothing to provide any cheer. Yet the school is working and, an unbelievable luxury by local standards, it has been given several tents.

Officially we are in 'Tent School No. 8'. Almost 500 children are taught by twenty-one volunteer teachers. Of course they are not being paid, though there have been a great many promises. The admirable young director, Minkail Ezhiev, is devoted to his profession and, until September, was Head of School 21 in Grozny. Today that school is nothing but ashes.

Class 3C. Russian Language. Composition. Jamila Djamilkhanova, the young teacher from Grozny, speaks a faultless literary Russian; she does not conceal her surprise and pride at the patriotism of her pupils.

There's nothing else to add. I did not select the best compositions. There were only twelve altogether because the classes in the school are small. The tents are not large and many children cannot attend regularly; they have nothing to wear. As a rule, one member of a family attends school today, and tomorrow a different child goes. No one complains if they miss their studies; no one calls in the parents for an explanation.

There is something else distinctive about these compositions. The girls are usually more lyrical, but the boys are severe, single-minded and uncompromising. It's frightening, isn't it?

The first important discovery: not one of the children said that the Russian Federation was their homeland. That's all finished! They have cut themselves off from us.

Second, and equally important: these texts are the work of small children and so they have made quite a few mistakes. Their teacher Jamila has given them all full marks, however, no matter what errors they made in spelling or grammar.

'In our situation could you possibly say to one of them: "I'm giving you top marks for love of your homeland," and tell another, "You're only getting three out of five?" she asks. I thought I could also learn some patriotism from them, and so could many other adults. Full marks are a very small reward for the suffering through which these children have learned to love Chechnya. Not one other child in Russia has had a comparable experience.'

She handed me the flimsy scraps of paper. Condensed emotion. Undeniable proof and material expression of their love. It does not get any more truthful than this.

And in the short interval before her next lesson we talked: you can still do something about hatred (for instance, by using superior force to overcome it) but, we agreed, there is nothing you can do about love. The only reaction is one of resignation and acceptance.

'I'm giving you these compositions,' concluded Jamila, 'with one purpose in mind: so that people in Moscow will finally understand.'

And their authors seem to be talking to us; even in the pages of our newspaper you can feel how much they want to make us listen.

Abdelazim Makhauri:

I have only one homeland. Grozny. It was the most beautiful city in all the world. But my beautiful city was destroyed by Russia and together with it, all Chechnya and the people living there. The people that Russia had not yet managed to destroy went to Ingushetia, as I did. But I miss my home. I so terribly want to go home although I know already that my house has been bombed to pieces. All the same, I want to go . . . Why do I want to live at home? So I can have the right to do what I want, and no one would tell me off.

LEAVE US ALONE, RUSSIA. WE'RE ALREADY FED UP WITH YOU. There were only a few Chechens before you started. GO HOME and put things in order there, not in our country . . .

Ali Makaev:

I always wanted to see my country Chechnya free from terrorism. Now here I am studying in a cold tent while Russian children can work on computers in warm schools. . . I do not know if Putin has a heart. But if he did he would not have started such a war. Putin thinks that human life is worth fifty kopecks. He is deeply mistaken. He is stealing these lives from people. I'd like Putin to know that we are also human beings. Until war came Chechnya was more beautiful than Moscow. I would like to go home and live there to the end of my life.

Islam Mintshev:

I very much miss my school, my friends and all that I know and love. We don't live badly here in Ingushetia. We go to school in a tent settlement. But Ingush children go to big schools, to a three-storey building like we had in Grozny.

At night I often wonder when this cursed war will come to an end and we can go home. Grown-ups say that the houses are no longer beautiful there: everything has been destroyed and each day young people and our furniture are carried away on APCs [armoured personnel carriers]. They take the young people to Mozdok and torture them there like in the worst films. When I hear the roar of aeroplanes I again feel terrified, just like when we were at home. Again they are bombing my homeland. How many of our relatives have died? And how many are left homeless?

[no name]:

I love my homeland, the village of Urus-Martan because it is the most beautiful village in the world. Now I miss it very much. At night I dream that I am running with my satchel in my hands and my girl friends to our own school.

Here in Ingushetia planes and helicopters often fly past and I get scared, as though I am at home again. During the last war the soldiers from Russia killed my father. Mum searched for him everywhere. Finally she found a dead, mutilated body buried in the ground. I was six then, my brother was eight and my younger sister was eleven months old. After everything that happened I thought, the war has ended for good. But in a short time it all started again.

Now every day I hear the grown-ups weeping and telling of their murdered relatives. I would like to live under a peaceful sky! But will there be such a thing?

Marina Magomedkhadjeva:

My city Grozny always radiated beauty and goodness. But now all that is gone like a beautiful dream and only memories remain. The war is blind, it doesn't see the city, the school or the children. All this is the work of the armadas from Russia, and therefore not only our eyes are weeping but also our tiny hearts.

Now we have nowhere to go to school, to play and enjoy ourselves. Now we run back and forth and don't know what to do. But if they asked us we would say: 'That's enough bloodshed. If you do not stop this senseless war we shall never forgive you.' Soldiers! Think of your children, of your own childhood! Remember the things you wanted in childhood and what your children want, and you'll understand how sad and difficult it is for us. Leave us alone! We want to go home. [...]

Hospital No. 9 is the only accident and emergency hospital in Grozny. You come here to be saved or to die. All emergencies end up here, from appendicitis to a stab-wound in the chest. Most of its patients, though, are people wounded by mines. Not a day passes without an amputation, because the main scourge of the city are the anti-personnel mines that were scattered everywhere and today turn up in places where they were not to be found yesterday. During June there were forty-one amputations, not counting the patients who did not survive. Ilyas Talkhadov in Ward 3 was blown up on a route he had safely used the day before, driving to collect hay from the '60th October Revolution Anniversary' collective farm. The six neighbours travelling with him were torn apart. Both Ilyas' legs are broken and his hip joints were smashed to pieces. The only hope for him is Hospital No. 9. However, there is nothing here today apart from healing hands and souls. Nothing that could distinguish a hospital of the early twentieth century from a rural dispensary of 100 years ago. The only modern equipment is an X-ray machine that works one day in two because the electric current is unreliable and the machine itself is old.

A diesel engine roars fiercely outside the office window. The military donated it so that the hospital could occasionally have some electric light. Abdul Ismailov, deputy chief surgeon of the hospital, explains why the engine has just started: the relatives of a patient have finally found some fuel and the doctors have begun to operate.

Another way of operating is described by Salman Yandarov, a middle-aged and highly qualified specialist. Today he is the chief traumatologist and orthopaedic surgeon of the Chechen Republic, having recently returned, after appeals from his colleagues, from St Petersburg where he had everything: a professorship, students, respect and a very good position in a famous clinic (not to mention a salary).

'This is my native country, so I gave up everything. But what can I offer people who are blown up by mines every day? The hospital is not functioning, it simply exists,' he says. 'For instance they often bring in someone who has lost both legs and needs urgent amputation if they're not to die. I carry in the battery from my car, connect it to the X-ray machine and take an X-ray. Only then do we operate. When the relatives don't have any money to buy diesel I again go and get my battery, rig it up to my car-lamp and operate. It's shameful ...'

'But they've surely been bringing you some equipment from Moscow?'

'Yes,' replies the doctor, who has the hands of a pianist and the manners of a gentleman. 'They donated three operating tables. I can tell you, they are so out of date that no self-respecting hospital in Russia would accept them today.'

To begin with I thought how senseless everything happening here was. If you look at it from the state's point of view, why scatter a vast number of mines

around the city and receive in return an astronomic growth in the number of disabled people, who require tons of medicine, artificial limbs and so on? And then scatter more mines. And again ferry in medicine, etc. Now it's clear what the state is up to. Its concern for the situation is purely virtual; the only reality is the scattering of mines. No matter how much we want to believe the reverse, or attribute everything to our chronic disorder or thieving, the reality is that the inhabitants of Grozny have been sentenced to this fate. Evidently, the ultimate aim is to ensure that as many people in the city as possible are either left without legs—or dead. Perhaps this is a new stage in the 'anti-terrorist operation', an unhurried punitive mission directed against one ethnic community, which now requires hardly any more ammunition, just the patience to wait for the inevitable outcome.

It all fits together. Why bother to rebuild if there is no fundamental need to rebuild? Why feed people if there is no fundamental reason for them to be fed . . . ?

27 July 2000

On 23 October 2002, Chechen guerrillas stormed a Moscow theatre and held 750 people hostage for four days. In the rescue operation staged by Russian special forces, at least sixty-seven hostages (the official figure is 128) and all fifty Chechens were killed. On the third day of the siege, Anna Politkovskaya returned to Moscow from exile and entered the theatre. Her aim was to save the hostages. This is her report.

I Tried and Failed

'I am Politkovskaya, I am Politkovskaya,' I cried out at about 2 p.m. on 25 October, when I was entering the theatre at Dubrovka seized by terrorists. I had no expertise under my belt, absolutely no experience of negotiating with terrorists. If I did have something, it was my desire to help the people who were in trouble through no fault of their own. And also, as the terrorists had chosen me as a person they wanted to talk to, I couldn't refuse.

My soles squeaked on the floor of the theatre, and the sharp noise made by my feet on the broken glass will always reverberate painfully in my heart. I kicked spent cartridges as I walked, tossing them up. My legs felt like rubber from fear. 'Why have I, a woman, got myself into this hellish situation?' I thought. 'We have macho men at every crossroads, just whistle for them. Why did I have to come here?'

'I am Politkovskaya. . . Is there anybody here?' I cried. 'Hello, I am Politkovskaya. . . I have come to meet the commander. Reply!'

It was completely silent and calm around me. To my right, the theatre's cloakroom was filled with raincoats and jackets. Coats but no people, and no people

sounds. It felt like walking into a school while all the children were sitting quietly in their classes.

I walked up the stairs to the second level, still crying out. I stepped into the half-lit area, without a soul in sight. Finally, a man wearing a black mask and carrying a sub-machine-gun appeared. 'I am Politkovskaya. I have come to meet with your commander,' I said.

'I will call him right away,' he replied. He looked me up and down and we exchanged a few words.

'Where are you from?' I asked him.

'From Tovzeni.' (A big village in the Chechen mountains.)

'I have been there.'

'You have? How was it? Did you like it there?'

I shrugged. We had already been waiting for fifteen or twenty minutes. What were they up to? I thought I heard a rustling noise coming from behind the green door just a couple of metres away, where I imagined hundreds of people were sitting trapped and frightened, the people whose plight I had come here for. Then the green door opened. Another masked person led out a frail teenage girl with a bluish-whitish face, wearing a yellow blouse. She was led past me, then they came back, and I plucked up my courage and asked, 'How are you doing?'

'What?' the girl replied.

And that was it; she was pushed away with a sub-machine-gun, back behind this damned dark-green door. With all my expertise and education, I was still totally unable to help the child. The helplessness was terrible.

Masked people were going to and from, talking to each other and asking me, 'Are you Politkovskaya?' Curious heads bent down from the third-level balcony. I could see through the mouth slits that they were smiling behind their masks. In order to shake off the heavy weight of silence, I tried talking to them.

'Your mothers. Do your mothers know about this?'

'No, but we have gone past the point of return. Either the war stops, or we will blow up the hostages.'

'When will the commander come?' I asked.

'Wait. Are you in a hurry? Don't hurry. You'll have everything right away,' one of them replied. The words made me tremble again.

What's next? Will they kill me? Will they take me hostage?

Soon, someone entered from that door, behind which were the hostages, and told me to follow him. A minute later, we were talking in a dirty room with no windows, adjoining the hall. There was light in here, and for the first time I could see everything properly. The chief negotiator from their side turned out to be a twenty-nine-year-old man called Abubakar, who introduced himself as deputy commander of the subversion and intelligence battalion. At the beginning, the conversation was strained. Abubakar seemed nervous at first, but then calmed

down. He became angry when he talked about his generation of Chechens, aged twenty to thirty, who had been through the two wars and knew nothing except fighting.

'You won't believe it, but for the first time in many years we feel calm here.'

'In the theatre?'

'Yes. We will die here for the freedom of our land.'

'You want to die?'

'You won't believe it but we want it very much. Our names will remain in the history of Chechnya.'

I am, of course, a very poor negotiator. I had no idea what to say. And he—who had lived for half a life without taking off his military uniform and with a sub-machine-gun in his hands—he didn't know how to do it either. That is why we kept slipping into conversations about the meaning of their life, for instance. Some of the other rebels came in to listen.

Abubakar became calm again, put aside the sub-machine-gun and said he wanted to clear his soul before death. I listened to him attentively but also tried to interject about the plight of the hostages.

'Let the teenagers out,' I suggested.

'No. We suffered at the hands of your people. Now let your people suffer. And the parents there, outside the theatre, let them feel what it was like for our parents.'

'At least let us feed the children.'

'No. Our children are hungry—let yours also go hungry.'

Abubakar said he did not expect mercy and that he dreamed of dying in the battlefield. I think he was being honest and frank with me because he was in the presence of a woman the age of his mother. And that is what I told him—that he was the same age as my son and that even in the worst nightmare, I would not see my son cornered by people.

'If he were a Chechen, he would be. And he would also wish to die like myself because of everything that you are doing to us in Chechnya.'

'And if you have to die tomorrow?'

'Praise be to the Almighty.'

Finally, we decide it is time for us to part. We have not agreed on much and I'm not convinced that the talks were in any way effective. But I am no negotiator. We had only agreed that in the coming hours I would carry water and juice into the theatre and I would try to bring them enough for almost 700 people.

I left the theatre in complete silence. Again, I had the feeling that there was no one around me. Lonely jackets and raincoats watched my steps. It was cold, very cold in this dreadful theatre—and there has never been a theatre in the entire

world so stuffed with explosives. I just said to myself, 'Go and get the juice, look for it, do now only this and don't think.'

Had I done a lot or a little? A little, of course. But I could not do more. When the place was stormed, all the terrorists I had spoken to died. And with them died sixty-seven of the hostages who had drunk my juice before death. Let war be damned.

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