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From Stalingrad to Grozny: patriotism, political pressure, and literature in the war reporting of Vassily Grossman and Anna Politkovskaya.

A submission for Media, War and Conflict.

Abstract: Comparing the work of the 20th century Soviet journalist and writer, Vassily Grossman, with that of his compatriot, Anna Politkovskaya, almost half a century later, this article examines the two journalists' writing for what it tells us about the changing nature of Russian journalism, and reporter involvement in the coverage of war. Grossman was reporting on his country's fight for survival in a war with Nazi Germany; Politkovskaya had no peer in her coverage of the bloodiest consequence of the collapse of that country, the Soviet Union: the wars in Chechnya. It also considers the literary nature of Grossman and Politkovskaya's reporting. The article argues that the two journalists' work has significance far beyond the time when they were reporting, and should therefore be more widely read and studied for what it tells us about covering conflict, and especially civilian suffering and, in the case of Politkovskaya, counter-insurgency.

Keywords: Grossman Politkovskaya Stalingrad Chechnya Journalism Conflict

It is something which we, in the West at least, find almost impossible to imagine these days: our homeland facing a threat to its existence, and our being forced to confront an enemy which seeks especially to annihilate one minority within that homeland. We might therefore conclude that the experiences of Vassily Grossman, a Jewish, Soviet, journalist reporting the USSR's struggle to drive out the invading Germans in the 1940s are only of historical or literary interest today – their significance limited to what they tell us about that period of the 20th century. We might think something similar of the work of Anna Politkovskaya. Her work, and murder, belong to the much more recent past. She was shot dead in 2006 in the entrance to the Moscow apartment block which was her home. Still, she is best known for her reporting of a conflict – Chechnya – which, if it is not over, is not on the same scale as formerly and may be considered part of the instability and unrest which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her work, one might therefore argue, has less relevance today. This article argues that those assumptions are wrong. For the work of these two reporters not only continues to tell us much about the time in which they worked, illuminating events in Russia and helping thereby to explain Russia's position in world history, but also offers some enduring characteristics of first-rate chronicling of conflict. That we know relatively little of them may in part be blamed on the circumstances of the history which we in the West share with Russia and the Soviet Union.

In Moscow in 1995, on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the then President of the United States, Bill Clinton, told his Russian counterpart, Boris Yeltsin, 'the Cold War obscured our ability to fully appreciate what your people had suffered and how your extraordinary courage helped to hasten the victory we all celebrate today.' (Clinton,

1995). With western memory formerly focused largely on the achievements of the United Kingdom and the United States – as a boy growing up in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s the stories in many of the comics I read still told tales of the Second World War, but Russians in those stories were rare indeed – it is no surprise that Soviet writers on the conflict were somewhat obscured too. Vassily Grossman was overlooked not only because he was Soviet, but also because he was out of favour for many years in his homeland, too. As a reporter, he was blessed with courage, tirelessness, and talent; cursed by later falling foul of the Soviet authorities. The main consequence was the delay in publication of his novel *Life and Fate* (*Zhizn' i Sud'ba*) considered unflattering in its portrait of the USSR in wartime, and not published until the *glasnost*' era of the 1980s, many years after Grossman's death in 1964. So controversial was *Life and Fate*, indeed, that the KGB actually took the step of confiscating the manuscript in 1961 (Chandler and Chandler, 2010: 391) – locking it away as if it were hazardous material that might be dangerous to public health. While *glasnost*' may have brought a political climate in which Grossman's work could be published, the end of the USSR has not led to a full recognition of Grossman's place in Russian literary and journalistic history. According to his American biographers, John and Carol Garrard, 'within Grossman's own country, an enormous silence still obtains. We await a complete edition of his works in Russian.' (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: x). Thankfully, two events of recent years have begun to bring Grossman's work to a wider western audience. The first was the publication in 2006 of Anthony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova's translation and edition of his journalism and notebooks, collected as *A Writer at War* (Beevor & Vinogradova, 2006). The second was the BBC's season of radio programmes *Vassily Grossman: his life and legacy*, which included a dramatization of *Life and Fate*, broadcast in the U.K. in September 2011 (BBC, 2011).

In their introduction to *A Writer at War*, Beevor and Vinogradova describe Grossman as, 'the most perceptive and honest eyewitness of the Soviet frontlines between 1941 and 1945' (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2006: vii). Perhaps the battle in which he brought that perception and honesty best to bear was Stalingrad. Hitler's Germany had attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, a development which the Soviet leadership had not expected, and for which it was unprepared. As Service writes, 'The shock to Stalin was tremendous.' (Service, 2003: 260). In consequence, as Barber and Harrison say, 'German successes continued to mount in August and September. Lightning advances and great wheeling manoeuvres outflanked Soviet defences, seizing cities, and trapping huge armies.' (1991: 27). Millions of Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner (ibid, 27). The coming of Russia's notoriously harsh winter slowed the German advance, 'The supply lines of the Wehrmacht were overstretched and German soldiers started to feel the rigours of the Russian climate.' (Service, 2003: 262) but the eventual conquest of at least the European part of Russia remained a real possibility – and remained so until the Red Army triumphed at Stalingrad in early 1943. It was a turning point. As Hobsbawm has written, 'From Stalingrad on, everyone knew that the defeat of Germany was only a question of time.' (1995: 40). As a major city on a major waterway, the Volga River, Stalingrad was strategically important. As it bore the name of the Soviet leader, it was also extremely important as a symbol of Soviet resistance to the invader. Deployed there to write for *Krasnaya Zvezda* ('Red Star' – the Army newspaper) Grossman used his skill as a reporter to share what he saw and heard with a readership in desperate need of inspiration and encouragement. His interview with a young sniper, Anatoly Chekhov, is an example of his fine technique

When I first got the rifle, I couldn't bring myself to kill a living being: one German was standing there for about four minutes, talking, and I let him go. When I killed my first one, he fell at once. Another one ran out and stooped over the killed one, and I knocked him down too ... when I first killed, I was shaking all over: the man was only walking to get some water! ... I felt scared: I'd killed a person! Then I remembered our people and started killing them without mercy. (2006: 157).

The reader is given a rare insight into the mind of the sniper. It is as if the reader, who has probably never pulled a trigger to end the life of someone oblivious to the danger they face, is invited to share the process through which one must go to turn from recruit to trained killer. Chekhov's humanity 'the man was only walking to get some water' shines through, as does the possible weakness this may represent in the kill or be killed world where he is now forced to function: 'I felt scared'. The conclusion of the extract shows how complete Chekhov's transformation has become. Not only has he lost all qualms about pulling the trigger, he is now able not simply to kill, but to do so 'without mercy'. The piece was presumably intended to inspire a population to continue to resist their occupier and would-be conqueror. From a journalistic point of view, it is a fascinating piece of human interest – allowing a population suffering the privations of invasion to share, for a moment or two, the life of one fighting to drive the invader out. From a propaganda point of view, there seems to be another message too – if this young lad can overcome his fears to become a merciless killer, so can we all. This, the message might say, is the kind of ruthlessness we need to win this war. For this had to be a time of great patriotism, and not only in the Soviet Union. The Second World War was a time when – whichever side the journalist was on – patriotism and the profession went hand in hand. Journalistic cultures which might in peacetime prize impartiality were suppressed. As Asa Briggs says of the BBC in those years, 'BBC staff felt themselves to be in the front line' (1985: 194). Grossman – although working in a totalitarian system – seems to have had similar convictions, although his identity was more complex, as will be discussed in a moment. He was definitely a writer who was part of the war effort. Consider this, from in the early days of the Nazi invasion of the USSR

There were black holes and craters from bombs everywhere along the railway. One could see trees broken by explosions. In the fields there were thousands of peasants, men and women, digging anti-tank ditches. We watch the sky nervously and decided to jump off the train if the worst came to the worst. It was moving quite slowly. The moment we arrived in Novozybkov there was an air raid. A bomb fell by the station forecourt. This train wasn't going any further. (2006: 8).

Here Grossman picks out details which help to create the whole picture in relatively few, spare, words. The craters and broken trees remind his reader what has already happened. They are the consequences of the invasion which had given Stalin that 'tremendous shock' some months earlier: not just Stalin, either – but the armies of which he was commander-in-chief, and the civilians whom those armies were supposed to defend. Now we see them drawn into the war effort in their 'thousands', 'men and women' all working hard together. The use of the word 'thousands' seems designed to inspire a readership who must have been fearful of the future, and still suffering from the terror of invasion. The fight back begins here, Grossman seems to suggest: we Soviet citizens may be surrounded by bomb craters and broken trees, but we are not cowering in fear. Instead, strong in our great numbers and our unity of purpose, we are working tirelessly to trap our enemy. The Soviet system in which

Grossman had grown up had delighted in the new medium of cinema to spread its message. Can we almost see here an echo of a crowd scene in an Eisenstein film, or an even older literary reference to peasants cutting hay together in *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 1979: 269)? It may be that Grossman intended to draw upon both Soviet and pre-Soviet cultural heritage in preparing a despatch that would inspire a wartime population to resistance and, he hoped, eventual victory. Then suddenly he draws his reader back from this inspirational look across the expanse of the Russian countryside to look at the sky above, and a present threat. It is the journalistic equivalent of the edit in film making. He changes tense from ‘in the fields there were’ to ‘we watch’. Then the bomb falls near the station as their train draws in, and their journey comes to an end. Grossman’s skill as a journalist in wartime is such that even his attempt to reach the front, not only what he will see once he gets there, is packed with detail and meaning.

Grossman was a patriotic Soviet citizen, and, in the war years at least, a committed Communist. He was also Jewish. Given the Third Reich’s murderous anti-Semitism, this too is an important part of his identity – one which inevitably influenced his journalism. His experience of reporting from Treblinka is one of those occasions in history where journalism has had a direct effect on the way justice was meted out after a conflict. ‘Grossman had written the first eyewitness account of a Nazi death camp in “The Hell of Treblinka” (*Treblinsky ad*) which he published in the journal *Znamya* in 1944. It was introduced at the Nuremberg trials of leading Nazis as evidence.’ (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: xxii). His Treblinka coverage is especially affecting when he imagines the victims’ last thoughts.

What pictures flashed in the glazed dying eyes? Those of childhood, of the happy peaceful days, or those of the last harsh journey? The grinning face of the SS soldier in the first square in front of the railway station? (2006: 298).

These thoughts presumably haunted Grossman as they do his reader even now, some seven decades later. Garrard and Garrard (2012: xxii) make the connection between Grossman’s reporting from Treblinka, and the scene in *Life and Fate* where Sofia Levinton goes to her death in the gas chamber there. Grossman must have been haunted all the more by the fact that his own mother was a victim of the Holocaust. The Ukrainian town of Berdichev, where she lived, had been captured in July 1941 (Clark, 1997: 132) during the early days of the German invasion of the USSR. So while he travelled across the frontlines reporting on the war as it unfolded, he must constantly have been wondering about the fate of his mother, while knowing that there was little hope that she had been spared. He shares his fears not in a despatch, but in a private letter which Beevor and Vinogradova included in *A Writer at War*

No I don’t believe she is still alive. I travel all the time around areas that have been liberated, and I see what these accursed monsters have done to old people and children. And Mama was Jewish. A desire to exchange my pen for a rifle is getting stronger and stronger in me. (2006: 224).

Here Grossman touches on one of the eternal dilemmas of a journalist accompanying an army, especially when the journalist identifies so strongly – both ideologically and personally – with that army’s cause. John Reed, in *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1977: 208), and Michael Herr in *Dispatches* (1977: 60), both describe situations where they, as reporters, take up weapons reason of self-preservation, underpinned by varying degrees of commitment to the cause of the troops they are with. Grossman, though, undoubtedly achieved more as a

writer than he might have done as a rifleman: he inspired an army fighting occupation; wrote stories which came to be used as evidence at Nuremberg; left accounts which continue to attract the interest of students of history, literature, and journalism today.

That he is not so well known either in his native country or outside may be blamed, in part at least, on the Cold War, and his own struggle with the political authorities in his own time. Victory in the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War (*Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voina*) as it is officially known in Russia, continues to be an unrivalled source of pride in Russia today. As a journalist working in Moscow for long periods in the 1990s and the decade which followed, I had the strong impression that the Second World War was taking on an increasingly important role in defining national identity. The passing years, and the dwindling number of those who actually remembered the conflict mattered little. As memories died with those who had lived in those horrific times, so the history grew to fill the gap. As Russia's confidence grew, in the oil boom years of the first Putin presidency in the mid-2000s, so did the scale of the Victory Day parades. In 2008, three months before Russia would be at war with Georgia, tanks reappeared for the first time since the end of the Soviet Union. Back as President four years later, Mr Putin told the Victory Day rally on Red Square, 'Because it was our country that took on itself the chief onslaught of Nazism and met it with heroic resistance, went through the harshest trials, defined the outcome of the war.' (BBC, 2012). For today's Russians, young and old, those trials, and the outcome which followed, are increasingly portrayed as almost sacred moments of national glory. Grossman's preference for grim realism, whether in journalism or the fiction of *Life and Fate*, may have contributed to what Garrard and Garrard call the 'enormous silence' around his work. Despite this awkwardness about his legacy, Grossman's work offers valuable insights into addressing the challenges which journalists reporting conflict have always faced: the need to show a degree of personal courage; the need to remain a human being as well as a professional journalist (his imagining of the camp victim's last thoughts is a memorable example of this); the expectation that there will be battles with authority. In professional terms, Grossman paid a high price for the latter. Not only was his manuscript taken from him, he 'was ordered to leave Stalingrad' before 'the dramatic end of the battle' (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2006: xv).

Triumphant in having defied, and finally conquered, the other totalitarian power which shaped the history of the 20th century, the Soviet Union did not appreciate its own weaknesses until it was too late. Like many of his contemporaries, Grossman can hardly have foreseen the collapse of the USSR less than thirty years after his death. When it came, the end of Soviet Communism delivered the greatest shock the people living under that system had known since the 'Great Patriotic War'. New conflicts arose as tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh, Moldova, and Georgia found expression in armed confrontation. On the territory of the former Soviet Union, the worst of these was in Chechnya. The fighting there was confined to two main periods. The first, from late 1994 to 1996, is known in Russia as the first Chechen war (*Pervaya Chechenskaya Voina*). The Moscow government sent in troops to counter growing lawlessness in a region where it had lost any real authority. The then Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, unwisely boasted that Grozny, the main city in Chechnya could be taken 'in two hours with one parachute regiment' (De Waal, 1999). Tens of thousands of civilians, and an unknown number of Russian soldiers, many of them poorly trained conscripts, were killed as those 'two hours' stretched out into almost two years. A peace deal agreed in the summer of 1996, under the General turned Politician Alexander Lebed, lasted for around three years. Then, in the late summer of 1999, after blaming Chechen separatists for a number of bombings of apartment blocks in Moscow and other parts of Russia, the Russian government began a major new military campaign. This 'Second Chechen War' was

closely identified with Mr Putin's rise to political prominence. The major phase of the campaign lasted less than 12 months. By the time it ended, Mr Putin had gone from being a relatively unknown new Prime Minister to President.

This was not the heroic armed struggle for national survival which Vassily Grossman had witnessed and written about more than half a century before, although, after months of merciless bombardment, the centre of Grozny did come to resemble the blasted ruins of Stalingrad. In other respects, this was a conflict very much of the post-Cold War era. While the Russian army were generally identifiable from their uniforms (although tennis and training shoes seemed as common as combat boots among the more down-at-heel soldiery), their enemy was less easily distinguished. It was sometimes hard to tell civilian from combatant. This lack of clarity seems symptomatic of the era in which the first war in Chechnya erupted. Grossman found himself reporting on, and supporting, the cause of an army fighting the forces of Nazi Germany. Just causes were less easily defined in Chechnya. This was part of Russia's post-Soviet history which might have been well described by President Medvedev's later phrase 'legal nihilism' (Medvedev, 2009), which he used to describe the corruption which came to be such a part of public and economic life. Russia had changed from the certainties of the Soviet era. Russian journalism had changed too. In Vartanova's words,

Russian journalism in the 1990s lost the moral legitimacy gained in the first few years of perestroika¹ [...]The decline in journalism's moral standing occurred under conditions of economic crisis, new social stratification, and impoverishment of the majority of Russians in the late 1990s (Vartanova, 2012: 137).

Vartanova's idea of lost 'moral legitimacy' seems to echo Mr Medvedev's phrase 'legal nihilism'. It is interesting to imagine how Grossman might have approached an assignment to Chechnya. Certainly, the journalist who produced some of the most memorable coverage of the conflict, Anna Politkovskaya, shared his courage, literary ability, and his tense relationship with political power. Yet there were differences as well as similarities. Politkovskaya was working in a different world. Where Grossman was covering the Second World War, victory in which helped Moscow to achieve the superpower status it enjoyed for much of the second half of the 20th century, Politkovskaya found herself in the midst of the bloodier consequences of that superpower's downfall. Like Grossman, she is working alongside the troops whose campaign she is covering. Unlike him, she does not identify nearly as closely with what they are trying to achieve. Instead, as we will see, at times she even argues forcefully that their actions are counterproductive.

As a producer and correspondent for BBC News, I covered both the first and second Chechen wars. We western reporters faced difficulty of access (many of us were detained on more than one occasion); the threat of kidnapping; and the danger of a conflict itself where the front lines were hard to define. It is unusual for a journalist to be able to report on armed conflict from both sides. If it is possible, it is often only after negotiation and a considerable interval of time. In Chechnya, especially in the first war, journalists had the strange experience of crossing checkpoints held by both the Russian army and their enemy at different times of the day. The main restriction on movement was a sense of safety. By the start of the campaign in 1999, greater restrictions had been placed on journalists. The Russian Army and their political masters seem to have judged that they had had a bad press in the first war. They

¹ The programme of reform begun in the 1980s by the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

wanted to prevent a repetition. They made life harder for reporters. That makes Anna Politkovskaya's determination to get the story all the more remarkable, and admirable.

One of the consequences of the renewed military campaign in 1999, as so frequently in armed conflict, was a great exodus of civilians fleeing the fighting. Numbers are difficult to come by: either for displaced or dead. The latter category for the two conflicts seems never to have been satisfactorily established. In 2005, the *New York Times* reported a death toll of up to 160,000 (New York Times, 2005). *The New York Times* story quoted a Chechen official, Taus Dzhabrailov. In a reflection of the challenges facing reporters or researchers trying to establish how many people had been killed, the newspaper noted that there was a 'gap' in the figures which Mr Dzhabrailov gave. The decision to publish his estimate at all seems to have been taken because, 'in the absence of reliable Kremlin figures his remarks came as a rare official assessment' (ibid). 'Reliable Kremlin figures' have always been absent presumably because the authorities in Moscow did not wish the number of civilian or conscript dead to be known. From my own experience of reporting on this conflict, it is also my impression that no one – with the possible exception of human rights organizations – was actually trying to keep count of the number of people who were killed. Anyone trying to assess how many people had been forced to flee their homes faced similar difficulties, although documents from the time are helpful. A Human Rights Watch news release from December 2, 1999, for example, talks of 7,000 people living in railway carriages in Ingushetia (the neighbouring region of the Russian Federation), and a further 175,000 living in the homes of local people (this among an Ingush population which was itself 'only 347,000') (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The large number of refugees living with local people can be accounted for at least in part by the fact that there are close ties between Chechens and Ingush, and the culture of the North Caucasus stresses a duty to provide help and hospitality to extended family members, even if they are not close relatives. Because of the great difficulty of getting into Chechnya itself – reporters who were caught trying to do so were liable to be detained, and non-Russian nationals risked expulsion from the country if caught – these refugees became an important, often the main or only, source of information for journalists in Ingushetia who were rarely, if ever, able to go into Chechnya itself.

The journalist's daily task then (I was among the sizeable international and Russian press corps who spent much of that Autumn in Ingushetia – living in the main town, Nazran, and trying each day, usually without success, to get into Chechnya) was to head towards the crossing point to talk to refugees and learn what news we could from those seeking safety over the administrative border between Chechnya and Ingushetia. Anna Politkovskaya's reporting from that time, collected and translated into English in *A Dirty War: A Russian reporter in Chechnya* (Politkovskaya, 2001) shows her, as so often, at the sharp end: both in terms of where she goes, and in terms of the words she uses to describe what she sees when she gets there. Her story, published in *Novaya Gazeta* ('The new newspaper'), on 4 November 1999, asks, as she surveys the miserable conditions in which the refugees live, 'What difference does it make, in the end, if you die from hunger or bombing?' (2001: 59). The article is headlined 'Ingushlag' (a combination of 'Ingushetia', and 'lager' the Russian word for 'camp'), perhaps meant to echo the word 'Gulag', the system of prison camps set up under Stalin for enemies, real and imagined, of the Soviet authorities. The article's sub headline runs, 'A new kind of concentration camp' (ibid). Even having fled, the refugees were perhaps safer, but not safe.

They await the first snows in November almost as though they were death itself. Each night their fear of bombardment is magnified a hundredfold by the roar of weapons being

fired nearby. All the food they brought with them has now been eaten and there is a chronic shortage of humanitarian aid: the little there is totally inadequate for the number of refugees. Cold, hunger, sickness and everywhere pale children with blue lips. Adults squabble over each crust of bread. (ibid).

With a sense of rage against injustice which pervades almost all of Politkovskaya's reporting, she does not stop there. Merely telling the story – well as she does that – is not enough. Other articles show her trying to track down where the aid has got to ('The Warehouse', p64), or trying to organize transport to get residents of a Grozny old people's home to safety ('Bomb, Don't Save', p76). As she untangles the knots of contradiction, corruption, and self-interest which seem to keep the refugees tied up in their misery, Politkovskaya moves from detail such as 'pale children with blue lips' to the bigger picture, and the wider significance of what she is writing about. In one story 'A High the Size of an Ammunition box' (p 108) she finds soldiers selling their own bullets to buy vodka or hashish – not missing the irony that these are, 'the very bullets that, sometime later, will almost certainly fly in their direction.' (2001:108).

As with her examination of the wider reasons behind the refugees' continuing suffering, Politkovskaya shows why the soldiers' selling ammunition which will end up in the gun barrels of their enemies matters. In *A Small Corner of Hell* (2003), she makes the link between the illicit commercial activities of military personnel, high and low, and the very fact that the war goes on

This is how things are done all over Chechnya. The officials' interest in the war is one of the biggest reasons for its continuation. The Khankala generals (the North Caucasus United Group of Armies) and the general staff in Moscow are equally interested in the war continuing. Middle-rank officers stationed at the edge of Chechen villages make friends with minor local officials; neither of them want anyone to meddle in their small but gainful domain. (2003: 176).

A blunt assessment, and one for which you will search largely in vain elsewhere. Does that make Politkovskaya eccentric, or just plain wrong? No. Like the best journalists, Politkovskaya had got to the heart of the story while other journalists were largely satisfied with a more obvious explanation. That is not to say that there was not important information to be shared with audiences about the balance and condition of combatants, the fate of civilians (as we have seen, Politkovskaya was pretty good at reporting on this too), and the likely future course and consequences of the conflict. It does mean, though, that without an explanation of the 'officials' interest' – their dealings in the unofficial economy – nobody's understanding of the war could be complete. I say this because I must place my own reporting of the conflict in 1999-2000 in the category of 'more obvious explanation'. I know that Politkovskaya was onto a more profound truth because of two conversations about Chechnya – one of which I overheard while reporting from there, one of which was a briefing with a senior Kremlin official some years later – which confirmed what she was writing then.

In the summer of 2000, I was on a reporting trip in Chechnya which the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had organized for foreign journalists. It was then the only way of getting access to the territory so, for all the drawbacks of being under the constant supervision of Russian minders, it was worth doing. Nevertheless, it was, as Carruthers, tracing the origins of the 'embedding' system back as far as the First World War, puts it, 'a cosy-up that

promise(d) certain benefits to all parties.’ (2011: 54). In other words, our minders expected more favourable, or at least less unfavourable, coverage than they would have had if they had simply allowed reporters freedom of movement. We travelled in a small bus. One afternoon, a young Russian officer, apparently going on leave for a day or two, got on the bus. He was soon chatting to another Russian passenger, and explaining how his unit were competing, with one stationed nearby, for the illegal market in petrol and diesel. This seemed to be his principal concern. Were we western reporters meant to hear this? There were often other ‘journalists’ who turned up on these trips who then made remarks which could have been designed to try to give our reporting a pro-Russian slant. The officer’s apparently chance presence on our bus may have been designed to give western journalists information they might not otherwise have come across. I suspect not. I suspect that this was one occasion where our minders had failed to vet what we heard. I did not report it then. I had no means of knowing if it were true, or whether it was boasting. The officer’s interlocutor was a young woman, who could have been his girlfriend, or at least someone he wanted to impress. Moreover, given the limited access I had to Russian troops, I had no means of knowing whether this might be an isolated case, or part of a more widespread problem. Some years later, though, I was one of a group of journalists briefed by a senior Russian official ‘for background only’ – in other words, we were not permitted to cite the official or name him. Such exchanges are normally considered purely to ‘inform reporting’, as a British official who had organized a similar one for me in Iraq once put it. Still, when asked why the war in Chechnya was still going on, the Russian official – knowing this was in effect a private conversation – frankly conceded that corruption among the officer corps was the main reason. It was around that time that I met Anna Politkovskaya when she was on a visit to Denmark. I was fortunate enough to spend an hour or so talking to her about her work in Chechnya. She told me then of her contacts with Russian officialdom: while publicly she was often criticized, privately, it seemed, they respected her. It could perhaps be that her reporting, or conversation, had even provided the material for the astonishingly frank briefing I had from the Russian official.

Her relationship with the political establishment, though, was never good. On her death, Vladimir Putin said her ‘influence on political life in Russia was utterly insignificant.’ (New York Times, 2009). Politkovskaya’s death marked an awkward moment for Mr Putin’s administration: facing growing criticism both inside and outside Russia about restrictions placed on political dissent, and freedom of expression, the death of a prominent Kremlin critic did not look good – especially given that Politkovskaya was killed on Mr Putin’s birthday, October 7th. While the English-language Russian TV channel RT suggested that the murderer or murderers chose this date ‘to send a powerful message to authorities’ (RT, 2009), another, less charitable, view might conclude that the killers intended the final silencing of one of his critics as a kind of murderous birthday gift. At the time of writing, July 2013, five men are accused of involvement in the murder, although ‘investigators have yet to provide any details of who they believe ordered the killing’ (BBC, 2013). In the absence of a clear motive, it has all the same never been seriously suggested that Politkovskaya’s death was not linked to her journalism.

Politkovskaya’s reporting of the second Chechen war began with accounts of the gruesome legacy of the first. She had discovered that a large number of soldiers’ corpses remained unidentified. In ‘Land of the Unknown Soldiers’ (2003, pp 15-25), she sets out to check the allegation that

for the convenience of research and the writing of dissertations, the army privates who serve as lab assistants are forced to boil up the bones of the deceased soldiers in the laboratory courtyard in full view of the unfortunate parents. Mothers supposedly had to pass by bubbling cauldrons full of skulls before they could view the remains of their children (2003: 21)

Politkovskaya follows the usual journalist's thought processes, and then decides to take a step which not all reporters would

How do you check this story? You must venture yourself into that devil's kitchen. There it is, exactly as described. Surrounded by filth and an unbelievable stench, soldiers are boiling the bones until the rotting flesh falls off them. It is also quite true that they do this in large vessels more usually employed for boiling clothes. (ibid).

It might be argued that here Politkovskaya does have advantages: she is a Russian journalist, and working for a newspaper. She was less conspicuous than a non-native Russian speaker would have been, and any television reporter will explain that print colleagues are obviously able to move around sensitive areas far more discreetly than a crew lumbered with professional camera and other heavy equipment ever could. Nevertheless, her determination is what sets her apart. It gives her a knowledge of the conflict which in turn gives her authority. It is not the red flag-waving patriotism of Grossman, but perhaps it may be considered patriotic nonetheless. Her work sends an urgent message which her compatriots will ignore at their peril. Like the best reporters of conflict, she has talked to almost everyone involved: refugees, civilians, officials, combatants. She is better placed than perhaps anyone to deliver a verdict based upon what she has seen. So when she concludes, 'The only thing the methods of this war accomplish is to recruit new terrorists and resistance fighters, and to rouse hatred, calling for bloody revenge' (2003: 106) she has a right to be heard. For this is a conclusion which has wider implications for many more conflicts of our time. How many fighters in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Gaza might recognize this description as they sought to explain their own reasons for taking up arms? This is where Politkovskaya's work, like that of Grossman, transcends its particular cultural and historical circumstances. These are journalists who have hit upon something timeless about the human experience in time of war, and who have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to communicate it. Both Grossman and Politkovskaya would recognize the suffering which William Howard Russell witnessed in the catastrophic aftermath of the Charge of the Brigade, 'It was agonizing to see the wounded men who were lying there under a broiling sun, parched with excruciating thirst, racked with fever, and agonized with pain,' (Russell, 2008: 220). Both would recognize the sentiment behind Walter Cronkite's broadcast during the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War, 'To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion.' (cited in Carruthers, 2011: 105). Cronkite's use of the first person plural echoes Grossman's patriotism; his 'realistic, yet unsatisfactory conclusion' reads like an earlier, less bitter, version of Politkovskaya's warning about new 'terrorists and resistance fighters.'

For all the purpose of this article is to argue for wider reading and study of Grossman and Politkovskaya's work, on the grounds that its significance goes far beyond the periods of Russian and Soviet history which they describe, there is still something very Russian about their writing. Perhaps it is even this which makes it so valuable. Vartanova, seeking to put Russian media in their post-Soviet context, also makes reference to historical characteristics of Russian journalism. Her words are useful for understanding the wider cultural significance of the work of Politkovskaya and Grossman, and also give non-Russians an idea of the

expectations which Russian readers might place upon them, and other Russian journalists. Speaking of the early period of Russian journalism, in the 19th century, Vartanova says, 'Despite severe censorship pressures, Russian journalists, who were identified mostly as writers, laid down the foundations for public debates.' (2012: 135). The key word here is 'writers'. Surely it suggests a permanence, a greater cultural importance, than 'journalist' might. 'Writers' produce books which may endure for centuries. Journalism's main task is to relay, and perhaps interpret, what is happening today, or has recently happened. The oft-cited notion (usually credited to Philip Graham, former publisher of the *Washington Post*) of journalism the first draft of history obviously implies that there will, or at least that there should be, subsequent drafts. The words 'writing' and 'literature' include no such implication. Here too Vartanova is persuasive when she makes a further connection between literature and journalism in Russia, 'The Russian vision of literature presupposed a much broader social and cultural role for it than in other countries, thus often merging it with journalistic activity.' (2012: 136).

At times, as when Grossman's description of the 'thousands of peasants, men and women, digging anti-tank ditches' seems to echo the communal labour of Tolstoy's hay mowers, it is almost as if there is a conscious effort to reflect in daily journalism a part of the Russian language's great literary heritage. In 'Tell them: this War is senseless' (2001: 104-122) Politkovskaya describes a Russian officer watching cattle returning from pastures to their sheds for the night. He 'was obviously selecting a target', she explains, describing him standing in the way of the herd. Then

First the General shot the cow with his own gun. Then he lifted the body onto the armoured vehicle and, to the wails and laments of the cow's owner, ordered his men to drag it back to the field kitchen. (2001: 105).

While this is a factual journalistic account of casual cruelty (the General, it turns out, is not hungry, just fed up that he has not been paid – something for which the cow's owner is blameless), there seems to be an echo of an incident described in the work of an earlier chronicler of one of Russia's 20th century wars, Isaac Babel.

And turning round I saw somebody's sword lying within reach. A severe-looking goose was waddling about the yard, inoffensively preening its feathers. I overtook it and pressed it to the ground. Its head cracked beneath my boot, cracked and emptied itself. (1961: 66).

Babel's inspiration for his collection of short stories, *Konarmiya* (usually translated as 'Red Cavalry') was his time as a correspondent with a detachment of Cossacks fighting in Poland in the 1920s. Unlike the General, the narrator of the goose story does ask for the goose to be cooked. The General does not need the cow for its meat; the writer does not need to crack the goose's head with his boot. He tells us at the beginning there is a sword within reach. What unites them is their gratuitous violence.

Like Grossman and Politkovskaya, Babel paid a price for his writing. He died, still in his thirties, in Stalin's camp system. In the sense that they fell out with the political system of their time, Grossman and Politkovskaya were of their time. Theirs was a particularly Russian experience. In the sense that there are lessons in their work for anyone reporting on conflict, their journalism is timeless; international; invaluable.

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