



The Engaged Outsider: Politkovskaya and the Politics of Representing War

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"The truth, if it is to be believed, must be authored by those who have suffered its consequences." – Michael Ignatieff[1]
"Truth... is itself a representation" – Edward Said[2]

Chechnya was catapulted to the world stage in 1994 when Russian troops invaded Grozny. Jokar Dudayev, the first president of independent Chechnya, had announced Chechnya's independence years earlier and refused to sign a treaty which would tie him to the Russian Federation, but no one paid attention to his declarations of independence until Russian bombs leveled Grozny with more than sixteen times the air power used by the Serbs during the siege of Sarajevo. Russian and Western journalists flocked to the new war zone. Freshly emerged from its Communist cocoon, the Russian state did not make any effort to stem the flow of mass media representations of this as a dirty war.

'Chechnya' became a symbol of anti-colonial resistance to imperialist might as Chechen freedom fighters captivated journalists around the world with their courage, muscles, and urban warfare. The war-torn republic became a Western bourgeois utopia where freedom-loving mountaineers lived and died for what they believed in. During the first war, from 1994-1996, reporters around the world united in singing the praises of the Chechens, offering them up as an example to other nations struggling for freedom and sovereignty. To awed observers, most of them Western journalists, Chechnya was not only a success story, but an allegory for the meaning of life.

Then the second war came. A series of bombs exploded in Moscow apartment buildings, Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev invaded Dagestan, and Moscow responded with air strikes many times harsher than those used during the first war. The difference between the first and second war lies not only in the greater degree of brutality the second time around, but also in the nature and extent of media representation. If the first war was overreported and

overexoticised, the second war was underreported and almost entirely forgotten, even by Russians.

Ten years later, the Chechens have no sovereignty, romantic accounts by Western journalists have given way to sober analyses by political scientists,[3] and the war continues, taking ever more insidious, underground forms. What went wrong? Why did the West so easily overcome its infatuation with Chechnya's struggle for freedom? At what point did admiration for the freedom fighters give way to boredom and disaffection?

Just five years ago, Shamil Basayev was praised by Western journalists as a fighter for freedom. Now, he is written off as an international terrorist by commentators on all sides of the political spectrum. While Basayev's radicalization is beyond doubt, the question to ask is how did a struggle for freedom and self-determination become as debased as the Russian colonial conquest in the nineteenth century? This question has been considered many times over from the perspective of political, social, and historical reasons. The significance of media representations is often asserted but rarely explored. Clearly, media representations can foment hate, but what about more subtle reactions, such as ignorance, complacency, and helplessness? In this article, I will explore these less visible reactions and the imagery that accompanies them. It is my belief that there is a relationship between the degradation of the Chechen resistance – particularly its shift from a secular struggle for independence to an entrenched battle driven by money and guns – and the representations of their struggle which have gained currency in the West.

Etymologically, representations imply a distance from the original, their humble status in the realm of repetition. On the other hand, as Edward Said points out in the above epigraph, there is no truth that is not itself a representation, for truth by definition represents itself. This is an ontological necessity, not an accidental association. Representation is thus both false (in the sense of far from the original) and real, if true can indeed be considered the opposite of false. If reality originates in representation, as Said's words suggest, then the truth or falsehood of a particular representation matters less than its political import, or at least the two categories belong to an equal plane of significance. Thus, the scope of my endeavor is to examine not so much the real-world context of war representations as their political meaning.

I will limit myself here to analyzing the internal dynamics of representations by Western and Russian sources, rather than attempting to write a history of the entire Chechen conflict. The theories of representation which I outline in this article inevitably remain in the realm of hypothesis. I will restrict myself to texts and their theoretical

implications. I believe that an analysis of ideology provides the best point of departure for understanding the problem of representing war. We must begin by stepping back from the frontlines and examine our categories of representation, our stereotypes and imagination, our mistakes, clichés, and truisms. Particularly when the object of representation is little known, expectations dictate outcome; the ostensible subject matter is often a mere medium for prejudice, politics and exoticizing projections. If we desire more informed and responsible representations, our first task is to revise our categories of perception.

My purpose in bringing up the example of Shamil Basayev is to suggest the narrative trajectory of the West's romance with Chechen freedom fighters. In the context of war journalism on Chechnya, admiration for the other is often founded more on ignorance than knowledge. Such ignorance is neither blissful nor merely naïve; it has real-world consequences. Concentrating on this example, I argue that it is no accident that the representation of the Chechen wars in Western journalism has reproduced the trajectory of Basayev's own politics.

Representations produce politics as much as they reflect them. To test my thesis, I will explore in the following pages the connection between politics and representation in the work of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian ethnographer Valery Tishkov, and Western journalists. Finally, I will suggest ways of creating modes of representation which probe deeper than the one-dimensional images dominant today, even among well-informed journalists and scholars.

I view the journalists whom I discuss here more as composers of texts which can be classified according to various modes of representation than as individual authors. The purpose of my critique is not so much to discredit or praise the writers as to examine the problems posed by the genres in which they write.

ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITY AND THE LIMITATIONS OF OBJECTIVITY

Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power (1998) by British journalist turned scholar Anatol Lieven is widely considered to be the most authoritative account of the first Chechen war. One contemporary reviewer argued that "Anatol Lieven has written a book of great importance for understanding not just the Chechen conflict but the entire course of post-Soviet politics... it is one of the most important books on post-Soviet Russia." [4] Another reviewer in the influential academic journal *Central Asian Survey* wrote of Lieven's book that it "is quite simply obligatory reading for anyone desirous of

understanding the problems of Russia today and interested in its likely destiny.”[5]

Lieven’s book is broad and ambitious in scope. As the title suggests, it argues that Russia’s defeat during the Chechen war marks the decline of the Russian empire. Perhaps inevitably, the author’s expertise is in Russian politics. (The same could be said of nearly every reporter and commentator on Chechnya.) The limitations of such intellectual horizons are evident in the preface that frames his book. Lieven writes, “For a non-Chechen outsider, the underlying reasons for developments within Chechnya are habitually shrouded in several layers of opacity: anthropological, religious, and indeed criminal.”[6] Thus, Lieven’s opening statement on the Chechen war suggests three keys to unlock the Chechen character: anthropology, religion, and crime.

Following Lieven’s cue in the section of his book devoted to the Chechens, I will examine the use made of the first “key”: anthropology, or what James Clifford has called “ethnographic authority.”[7] In the pages that follow, I trace Lieven’s manipulation of authoritative ethnographic discourse to “master” the Chechen people.

Lieven notes in his book that when he was living in Chechnya during the war, he lacked the “deeper anthropological insights” that he gained afterwards when he had the opportunity to read more broadly in the anthropology of primitive peoples.[8] If before his encounter with anthropological texts, Lieven was inclined to understand Chechens in merely human terms, ethnographic authority provided him with a more useful account of Chechen society. In his ethnographic account of the Chechens, Lieven draws on his reading in anthropology to compare the Chechens on their culture and traditions to the Berbers, the ancient Greeks (Spartans, Athenians, and Homeric heroes), Native American Indians, Roman warriors, and the Zulu tribes of southern Africa, all in one chapter. Like the Chechens, all of these societies are for Lieven, and for much of his intended audience, *a priori* primitive, “semi-tribal” warriors, and “loosely ‘anarchistic.’”[9]

What is most stunning in Lieven’s account is the extent to which ethnographic discourse allows him to write of a people he lived with intimately for two years as though their individual identities were entirely determined by the mechanics of history. Consider, for example, the following set of truisms, quoted by Lieven and taken from Anthony Wallace’s essay “Psychological Preparations for War” in a book whose title testifies to the “policy relevance” of anthropological discourse – *War: The Anthropology of Armed Conflict and Aggression*.

Lieven uses Wallace's words to explain the origins of the Chechen war:

All human societies, and the societies of many of the higher primates below man, are observed to exist alternately in two states [Wallace defines these two states as "relaxed" and "mobile"]... a people with [a certain kind of] character type will respond with anger, determination, fear, or whatever affective state is desired by the communicating group.[10]

Beyond the scientific jargon, the meaning of such statements is not difficult to decipher. National groups can be assigned character traits and relied on to behave in predictable ways. Though mentality-based arguments such as this one seem inadequate in most scholarly contexts, psychological dialectics are more acceptable when applied to "primitive" ethnicities. Representational categories which would be outlawed in most humanities discourses are adopted in political science and journalistic discourse (Lieven's book is a merger of the two genres) as *de rigueur*. Descriptions of ethnic conflicts thus become enmeshed in a neocolonial discourse founded on the inequality between the object of representation in, for example, literary criticism (families, individual consciousnesses, the mores of "developed cultures") and the more primitive subjects of the "harder" sciences. Thus, tribal nations like the Chechens are reduced to a single character type and analyzed by military strategists when they wish to predict how the natives might respond.

Lieven views the Chechen experience of war as a disengaged outsider. His impression of the Chechens is a case study in the aesthetics of exoticism. Lieven writes, "I have come to look on the Chechen people" – note the use of a collective noun – "almost as on the face of Courage herself – with no necessary relation to justice or morality, but beautiful to see." [11] It is perhaps not accidental that such admiration is coupled with a readiness to dismiss the Chechen people from the modern world.

Lieven's representation of the Chechens at war can be productively analyzed as an ethnographic encounter. In his recent book on Chechnya, Valery Tishkov, director of the Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences and former Russian Federal Minister of Nationalities, calls the following concluding passage from Lieven's chapter on Chechen society "anthropological reductionism." Lieven tells us that

[the Chechens] are a nationality having no identification with the state and society in which they live, and no motivation whatsoever to conform to its laws; equipped with ancient traditions which are in contradiction to those of

'enlightened,' 'pluralist,' and 'progressive' liberalism; with social forms which make them opaque to outside investigation; internally cohesive, and remarkably efficient and ruthless in pursuit of their aims. One might almost say, to adapt a phrase of Robert Musil's, that if the modern Western bourgeoisie could dream, it would dream Chechens.[12]

What makes possible such a simplistic treatment of an entire culture in a book which draws on a range of Western scholarship and openly alludes to postcolonial analyses such as Edward's Said *Orientalism*?[13] Lieven's writing is but one example of an entrenched and systematic mode of discourse that extends far beyond the Chechen wars. This is the discourse of ethnographic authority which enables one-dimensional representations of the 'tribal' other.

Contemporary journalistic descriptions of the Chechen 'nationality' read as though they were lifted from Evans-Pritchard's 1940 book, *The Nuer* (1940), an ethnographic account of this indigenous ethnic community from the Sudan. Consider the following quotations from Evans-Pritchard, which apply the grammatically singular 'is' to a plurality of people, as though all Nuers comprised a single, indivisible unit:

The lack of governmental organs among the Nuer, the absence of legal institutions, of developed leadership, and, generally, of organized political life is remarkable.

The ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character, for it is impossible to live among the Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them. The Nuer is a product of hard and egalitarian upbringing, is deeply democratic, and is easily roused to violence. His turbulent spirit finds any restraint irksome and no man recognizes a superior.[14]

Chechens under the Soviet Union were bilingual, educated and indoctrinated into the tenants of Marxist-Leninism to the same extent as any other Soviet citizen. While Evans-Pritchard's characterization of the Nuer is paternalist and ethnocentric on its own terms, such a description applied to contemporary Chechen society is nothing short of absurd. Certainly, Chechnya was and still is a largely rural culture, and Chechen traditions have been preserved to an unusual extent compared to the cultures of other minorities of the former Soviet Union, but the generalizations offered by Western journalists are at best applicable to a particular period in Chechen history (long ago) and a particular part of Chechnya (far away).

The ethnographic account of the Chechen people in terms of "stateless anarchy" and "military democracy" may have a basis in

reality, or may be the product of creative myths, as Tishkov claims. Of greater relevance than the "truth" of their particular ethnographic representations is the scientifically unjustified and politically motivated application of these clichés to a contemporary setting. The result is an alliance between political power and ethnographic authority in the Western journalistic representation of the natives.

Tishkov eloquently explains what is wrong with Lieven's brand of ethnographic objectivity:

The logic of such... neocolonial reductionism suggests a group that deserves sympathy, support and protection. By citing poorly proved or even fictitious data on the ways in which their culture differs fundamentally from those of others, and by rejecting commonalities, this kind of anthropology creates myths of its own.[15]

The immediate effect of "reductive anthropology" may indeed be to elicit "sympathy, support, and protection" for an otherwise forgotten group, but ethnographic reductionism reaches beyond that. The reader who encounters the Chechens through Western accounts may at first feel sympathy for the "internally cohesive, and remarkably efficient and ruthless" people, but ultimately the effect of his ethnographic essentialism is the opposite of what Tishkov predicts. The ethnographic other is never the equal of the expert who writes him into being, and therefore the empty glorification of the Chechen people (and particularly of the Chechen resistance) is bound to backfire. Not only does the contemporary community of political scientists and journalists from the West explain everything noble about the Chechens in terms of their essential ethos; as Tishkov demonstrates, in this poli-scientific discourse, Chechens' failures are reduced to ethnographic data as well. Tishkov quotes from two scholars of the Chechen wars, whose views have gained wide currency in the West:

Chechens lack a tradition of suprafamilial political organization and in this respect may be regarded, however unpalatably, as a premodern society. The result has been a catastrophic social implosion that has engulfed all of Chechnya, and within which the current war is merely the latest phase.[16]

Pace Tishkov, such characterizations of the Chechens as a "premodern" "uncivilized" tribe ultimately do nothing to aid their cause and are as harmful to the average Chechen as the Russian propaganda which describes them with equal simplicity as a nation of bandits. Western estrangement resembles a romantic infatuation; it has little to do with love and everything to do with the emotions of the observer. In "rejecting commonalities," to use Tishkov's words, an essential

inequality defines relations between the journalist and the native; ethnography creates an otherwise nonexistent distance between the viewer and the viewed. Clearly, the natives would be better off without the Western version of love. The following quotation from a recent review of a journalistic account on the Chechen war indicates just how unhelpful the prevalent paternalistic attitude is for the victims of the war:

Any serious study of the Chechens simply has to pay attention to the way in which raiding (now transformed into various kinds of organized crime) and utter impatience of higher authority are deeply imbedded in their tradition. Many of us who covered the Chechen War came to love the Chechens for their courage, endurance and style [sic!], but unfortunately, this aspect of their character simply cannot be downplayed in any serious or objective account.[17]

Chechen “courage, endurance, and style” is but the logical flipside of the image of Chechens as a raiding and innately criminal culture. In the above quote, the ethnographic discourse of Western superiority usurps the authority of common sense and allows for a degree of simplification when discussing the Chechen people which a journalist would hardly permit when discussing more “developed” nations.

The stance of the disengaged outsider creates around itself a field of objectivity that inhibits perception. Some commentators have mistaken the Western fetishization of Chechens for respect,[18] but journalism that operates inside this tradition unwittingly underwrites a hegemonic point of view. While at times it may enable us to see through the hypocrisy of official Russian rhetoric, it simultaneously forestalls any attempt to protest bloodshed. The disengaged outsider leaves the reader who wishes to resist genocide stranded in a sea of *realpolitik*. Objectivity in this context is merely a way of separating the viewer from the viewed. It does not bring us closer to suffering, to the truth authored by the internal experience of war.

Every genre has its ossified structures and historically cultivated blind spots. This paper is an argument for a more engaged and less bloodthirsty form of war journalism, for a methodology of writing about bombs, rapes, and the people who endure them in a way that does not exoticize the experience of those who suffer or flatter the self-congratulatory feeling of difference on the part of many readers. War journalists must find a way not to be mere “packagers of brutality”; such a characterization is a gesture of despair containing its own aporia.

Journalism, particularly war journalism, ought to seek political change. At the very least, I believe that when journalists seek change

without relying on regressive, colonial structures of feeling, they make a difference both more immediate and larger in scale than any critic or theoretician of representation (such as myself) can offer. The British journalist Edmund Morel, for example, was instrumental in ending the genocide of Africans in the Congo by Belgian officers at the beginning of the twentieth century.[19] Even when journalism cannot change a government's policies and practices, at least it can affect the hearts and minds of readers and citizens under that government. A better-educated readership means a more responsible state and a government which hesitates before waging gratuitous wars or committing genocide.

Journalists have this advantage over academic theorists: their intended audience is a broad circle of readers and their engagement is with a subject in the flesh rather than a metadiscourse. I offer my critique of Western journalism on Chechnya not in the spirit of censorship or to push for more academic forms of writing, which would likely be less engaging if written with perfunctory hypersensitivity to abiding by the "correct" representation. What I wish to suggest is how journalism can represent the other while at the same time not sinking into reductive dichotomies and becoming itself a packager of brutality.

It is commonplace to criticize journalists for exoticism and sensationalism, and in the transnational context, few will be surprised to discover that the lesser-known peoples of the world are frequently portrayed in simplified terms. The war journalist is simultaneously "embedded" and "alien." Such an observation will contain no revelation for the consumer of war journalism. Beyond critiquing the excesses of popular wartime representations, I would like to propose an alternative mode of vision, another way of engaging with the traumatized victim. In the context of Chechnya, there is at least one woman, who, even though an outsider, provides a more effective way of responding to war than we have seen thus far.

THE ENGAGED OUTSIDER

The Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya offers a counterexample to the borrowed ethnographic authority of Western journalism. Her explicit goal as a journalist was not simply to provide objective documentation but to incite political change. For her, the Chechens were not entirely other, and her encounter with them does not fit inside the frame of ethnography. For Politkovskaya Chechens behavior could not be traced to their mentality, their "military democracy," or "stateless anarchy." Politkovskaya related to Chechens as humans rather

than a clan; she identified motives for their behavior in their social circumstances rather than centuries-old ethnographic data. She refused to be merely reporter passing through a bloodbath, eager for footage of dead bodies and rubble, before moving on to the next war. Her books are the only journalistic accounts of the Chechen Wars which romanticize neither Chechen nationalism nor the power of the Russian state nor the authority of the journalist's representation.

In the Western ethnographic tradition, such common ground between the participant observer and the native is often a source of despair for the Western observer, enchanted with the strangeness of a foreign land. When the noble savage fails to live up to his innate simplicity, the Western viewer is forced to confront a new, unwished for aspect of himself. Levi-Strauss, for example, writes in *Tristes Tropiques* of his disenchantment with the natives: "I had been looking for a society reduced to its simplest expression. That of the Nambikwara was so truly simple that all I could find in it was individual human beings." [20]

Anna Politkovskaya suffered the consequences of her engaged mode of reporting. She was arrested, abused, and fled into exile in response to death threats. [21] On a more mundane level, her invitation to speak at the 2003 Frankfurt Book Fair, where Russia was the guest of honor for that year, was withdrawn at the insistence of Vladimir Putin, who made her banishment a condition of his visit to Frankfurt. She received numerous awards for her journalism in the West, including by such mainstream publications as *Time Magazine*. However, in Russia, outside a small circle of human rights activists commonly branded fanatics, she was regarded with suspicion, even among Russia's intellectual elite. (The Russian writer Tatyana Tolstaya is known to despise her, and she was often accused of being in the pay of Chechen rebels.)

Politkovskaya did not subscribe to the notion of journalistic objectivity. Nor did she attempt to penetrate the cultural essence of the Chechen people. (As we see above, such diametrically opposed programs often go hand in hand.) She did not occupy the center of her narrative nor did she erase herself retrospectively from her representations. Rather than occupying the authoritative space of the disengaged outsider or the privileged space of the packager of brutality, she was simply herself, a writer caught up in the process of representation.

Politkovskaya emphatically disassociated herself from the genre of war journalism. She rejected the label war correspondent because for her it denoted a person who travels the globe for hotspots, in search of stories and experience. In his introduction to the English translation

of her book *A Small Corner From Hell*, Georgi Derluguian situates Politkovskaya in a literary tradition extending from Tolstoy to Chekhov, in which the belletristic writer functions as society's conscience. The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin has described this facet of the Russian literary tradition in the following terms:

In Russia, social and political thinkers turned into poets and novelists, while creative writers often became publicists... no Russian writer was wholly free from the belief that to write was, first and foremost, to bear witness to the truth: that the writer, of all men, had no right to avert his gaze from the central issues of his day and society.[22]

While contemporary Russian culture is for the most part shaped by Western postmodern skepticism and the economic imperatives of the market, Anna Politkovskaya was one of the few Russian writers to draw her inspiration from this tradition. She called the genre in which she wrote "the journalism of action." This form of journalism aspires to effect political change, not merely to dissect the latest atrocities for a bored public. As Berlin's remarks suggest, this genre did not by any means originate with Politkovskaya but is rooted in a rich, if currently neglected, Russian tradition.

What does Politkovskaya's participatory thinking look like on paper? What textual strategies does she use to make a difference? First, she reads language literally. The manipulation of language through euphemism is the target of many of Politkovskaya's critiques. She insisted that political leaders said what they meant rather than what they would like their audience to hear. When they refused to speak directly, Politkovskaya "translated" their words into common speech. Finally, she adopted a dialogic position in relation to her subjects and audience. Her consciousness inevitably filtered what she saw and wrote, but she did not cross herself out as a participant in the events she wrote about. Towards the end of this paper, I will consider how Politkovskaya's dialogic voice might help us to conceive of a new kind of intellectual, one who does not merely speak truth to power but actually changes the discourse of the public sphere.

STRATEGY ONE: THE NAÏVE READER

For political change to occur, the linguistic assumptions of hegemonic discourse must be overhauled. In this context, Politkovskaya's representational poetics is the most salient aspect of her oeuvre. How did she achieve, through language, the possibility of enacting political change through representation?

As a corollary to her engagement in material reality, Politkovskaya was wary of the figurative abstractions of public discourse. She read language literally, and even at times reapplied metaphors in ways that made visible their true meaning. One of her favorite targets for close reading was Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. Yeltsin withdrew Russian troops from Chechnya in 1996 and signed a peace treaty with the Chechen separatists, which granted the republic de facto independence and officially ended the first war. More than two years of relative calm in Russo-Chechen relations were shattered in early September 1999, when a series of explosions in Moscow and other Russian cities killed over 300 people.[23] While on the campaign trail after Yeltsin's resignation, Putin made a speech which galvanized public opinion in support of another invasion of Chechnya. His most memorable words were a promise to "waste the bandits in their shit-houses,"[24] or, as some translations have it, to "flush them down the toilet." His words can be said to have inaugurated the second Chechen war.

Politkovskaya applied Putin's metaphor to a Chechen refugee whose fourteen-year old son was killed by Russian troops. Politkovskaya writes: "her son was... just plain 'flushed' in the literal sense, by the direct hit of a shell into a village outhouse... [the soldiers] understood why the boy was going down the path to the far corner of the yard, and they fired a shot. Just for fun, but at the same time, fulfilling the direct order of their president." [25] Unannounced irony is the literary device at work here. Politkovskaya's narrative persona writes as a naïve believer in language's surface meaning, as though words were the building blocks of reality rather than tools manipulated by political leaders.

Another example of childlike reading occurs in *Someone Else's War*. Toita, one of Politkovskaya's informants, writes a letter on behalf of families living in the Vedeno region, asking for help and protection. Politkovskaya reports that Toita "sent this letter to the Russian and Chechen government, then to the Russian Parliament, and finally to MCHS, which saves them." [26] MCHS is the abbreviation for the "Ministry for Crisis Situations." Clearly, Politkovskaya is using the word "save" ironically here. Politkovskaya here equates the doublespeak generated by officialdom with truth in order to defamiliarize for the reader the commonplace lies of official discourse. War cannot be explained in the terms of everyday life, so Politkovskaya resorts to the filter of naïve perception to interpret for us the otherwise uninterpretable.

In Politkovskaya's hands, language is not only a receptacle of meaning; it is equivalent to action. Putin's promise to "waste the

bandits" is wrenched from the sanitized and abstract context in which the media has framed it. Often, tough talk such as Putin's is attractive only when its literal content is ignored. Whereas Western journalism uses context to distance the reader from the subject, Politkovskaya's context is language, which she used to explore the impact of abstractions on everyday life.

STRATEGY TWO: FIGHTING EUPHEMISM

In *A Dirty War* (1999), Politkovskaya's first book to appear in English, she asks herself why Russian society is so silent regarding the second Chechen war: "Where are the human rights activists? The intelligentsia, the conscience of the nation?"[27] Her answer indicates that the state has silenced the nation and in effect won the war by manipulating language, euphemizing for the sake of deception: "There is a war going on, but those taking part continue to be described as no more than 'participants of an anti-terrorist operation.' As long as there is no legal qualification of these events we shall pretend there is no war." [28] He who controls discourse determines the reality that discourse is supposed to describe. In contrast to the first Chechen war under Yeltsin, Putin and his advisers delegated the task of representing war to themselves. The number of casualties and injuries for Russian soldiers has been documented by the group Mothers of Russian Soldiers as three times larger than the official number, but, as Politkovskaya points out, bodies matter less than words when it comes to justifying war. An "anti-terrorist operation" excludes the possibility of senseless bloodshed, and any evidence to the contrary is easily discarded. Politkovskaya writes that "The information war has been won, but... the battle for human souls has been completely lost." [29] Her words indicate that a hazy relationship between rhetoric and reality is a precondition for a popular war.

The logic behind the state's manipulation of language through euphemism is brought out clearly in a chapter devoted to the impoverished condition of Grozny hospitals, where amputations are performed without anesthetics and with saws instead of appropriate surgical implements. Politkovskaya invokes again Putin's "anti-terrorist operation" and defines it in a way that would (or at least should) make him shudder: "a punitive mission directed against one ethnic community, which now requires hardly any more ammunition, just the patience to wait for the inevitable outcome." [30] The "inevitable outcome" is, of course, annihilation.

According to Politkovskaya's poetics, the purpose of euphemism is to evade responsibility. Hospitals are not built because, according

to the official media, they were never destroyed. It doesn't matter if bombs have exploded inside operating rooms, and soldiers enter upon whim and shoot anyone who looks suspicious. Such is the logic of euphemism which Politkovskaya points to when she writes: "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?"[31] One of Politkovskaya's most effective textual strategies is to reverse the logic of euphemism; she counters the manipulation of words with their literal content.

STRATEGY THREE: THE DIALOGIC ENCOUNTER

Politkovskaya's writing is a challenge to falsely objective political discourse of both Western and Russian journalism. She argues that the Russian public is able to "turn a deaf ear" to the suffering of Chechens because "the war has completely ceased being personal and has turned into several talking-head generals on the TV screen." [32] Rather than showing footage of war, the media has taken to interviewing generals and other "experts" on the "Chechen problem." In waxing eloquent about security threats, terrorism, and territorial integrity, the talking heads enable Russians to forget about Chechnya as a material reality.

Politkovskaya assumes the position of an engaged outsider in her writing, and thereby brings her subjectivity into the public sphere along with the subjectivities of those she writes about. In the introduction to Politkovskaya's most recent book *Someone Else's War, or Life Behind the Barrier* (not yet translated into English), her editor Svetlana Gannushkina describes Politkovskaya's discourse as one that goes beyond objectivity:

In offering this book to the reader, we understand that it does not offer a complete picture of everything going on in Chechnya. An objective analysis of this war... is the business of experts and a job for the future. Politkovskaya writes simply of what she sees and feels. *Her writing shows us how to see and how to feel.*[33]

Politkovskaya's books are filled with vignettes from the lives of Chechens and Russians living "behind the barrier." She interviewed soldiers and civilians tortured by those same soldiers. She did not pretend to objectivity. Her biases are quite clear and frequently articulated. Politkovskaya's purpose, however, was not to propagate her views. Her narrative focus and the burden of discourse lie with her characters. In his book on Dostoevsky, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin argued that the dialogic thickness of any good work

of fiction casts the author's ideological conclusions in a sometimes contradictory, but always subordinate light. He called this subversion of writerly authority through characters' speech and other contingencies of novelistic discourse polyphony. Politkovskaya's writing is polyphonic in Bakhtin's sense.

Unlike her fellow war journalists, Politkovskaya did not discuss the appropriate way to deal with the "Chechen syndrome." She did not concern herself with Russia's territorial integrity or any other hot issue in the public sphere. Politkovskaya's policymaking was mediated by her politicization of the personal. The personal is in and of itself not a category worth valorizing, and it has its own empathetic limits. Here, I do not use it to refer to an internal, as opposed to external, mode of perception, but rather to represent, however insufficiently, Politkovskaya's resistance to regimentation. In relating suspiciously to the old hierarchies and canned truths whose hegemony is still largely unchallenged, Politkovskaya imported an individual vision into a discourse enmeshed in the illusion of its own objectivity. The content of public discourse is itself determined by the interests of those in power, so to limit herself to, for example, merely refuting the stereotyping of the Chechen resistance as an entirely "terrorist" movement would not be the most effective way to challenge such logic.

We have already seen how Politkovskaya adopted a defamiliarizing and naïve tone of voice (often juxtaposed to a stringent critique) in her refusal to enter the public sphere on the public sphere's terms. In place of policy relevant discourse, Politkovskaya offered a Bakhtinian view of the author's position vis-à-vis her audience and subject matter. Dialogism need not constitute a withdrawal from politics; it is but a more complete engagement with the world. Though it does not speak directly to the policy makers, it has a greater capacity to change the public sphere because it is directed against the discourse that makes war (and the prejudices supporting it) a tool inflicted by the powerful upon the weak. Even a well-intentioned consideration of the Chechen war via the interests of the state (such as we find in most popular journalism) has the unintentional effect of consolidating state power. Instead of this kind of concession, Politkovskaya presents us with the possibility of participatory thinking.[34] This means thinking as a mode of change, thinking thoughts which affect the reality we observe.

Politkovskaya's dialogic voice alienated her from her complacent Moscow life. She countered journalistic objectivity with willed estrangement. Politkovskaya created a third space for herself, neither wholly objective nor subjective, which freed her from the limitations implicit in any form of monologic thinking. Politkovskaya's stance as

the engaged outsider allowed her to capitalize on the potential of all aspects of her position. Politkovskaya rarely wrote about herself. In her self-representation as an author, she lived a divided life. Her children, her living conditions in Moscow, and her past were all utterly irrelevant to the life she led in Chechnya. Describing her life apart from the war, she writes, "even close friends don't believe my stories after my trips to Chechnya, and I have stopped explaining anything and just sit silently when I'm invited anywhere." [35] In a caption beneath a picture of herself in her office, Politkovskaya writes that she does not consider her Moscow office at the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* to be her real home: "I'm there only rarely, and when I'm there I feel out of place [*kak to ne po sebye*]." [36] Politkovskaya's position in relation to the object of her representation recalls the words frequently cited by Edward Said in defense of his own choice to live the life of an exile: "The man who finds his homeland still sweet is a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign." [37]

The flexibility of her writing self is in part indicated by her use of pronouns. Politkovskaya's second book of dispatches from the second Chechen war opens with an account of crossing the border into Ingushetia with a group of Chechens. Their path is obstructed when Russian planes start to drop bombs on them. Politkovskaya points out that the planes are flying at close enough range to make out their faces, and that it is clear they are civilians making their way to a refugee camp. The man with whose jokes she opens the book is killed during this attack. Politkovskaya's narrative differs from a typical journalistic account of war in her refusal to distinguish between herself and the civilians: "*we* are lying on the autumn grass," "*we* are the people caught in the bombing," "*we* didn't do anything wrong" are the first lines in the book. [38] The outsider versus insider dichotomy relied on by Western writers dissolves here in the face of a tragedy which gives rise to a new kind of representation.

In a chapter about the abominable classroom conditions for Chechen children, Politkovskaya writes about the indifference of the Russian administration towards their fate. Tellingly, she writes: "Russia has abandoned *us* again." [39] Politkovskaya's decision to elide that distinction between us and them constitutes a refusal to perform upon the Chechens the same genocidal calculus that Russia has performed on them.

Politkovskaya, of course, did not follow the path of facile identification with the Chechen people. She recorded the many times that Chechen children shied away from her simply because of her Slavic exterior. Some ran away in terror, others were filled with hate. Of a

four-year old girl whose father was raped and tortured by Russian soldiers, Politkovskaya writes that she “stares at me with horror.”[40] The girl’s mother explains to Politkovskaya that her daughter “can tell you’re not one of us.”

Politkovskaya’s antagonistic relationship to her outside self keeps the fear of inauthenticity at bay. Often, people writing about foreign cultures and experiences alien to them define the limits of their engagement with the subject by labeling themselves outsiders and assuming a resolutely disengaged stance. Such people would claim that, because their engagement can never be pure, they might as well give up the attempt. Sometimes such disengagement is motivated by a conscientious fear of falsely representing another’s voice. At other times, however, self-consciousness is merely a pretext for indifference. Regardless of the motive behind the detached stance of the objective journalist, the effect is the same. Such writing sells itself to the disengaged reader; reading an account of war from the perspective of an outsider becomes a way of leaving the question of engagement behind.

Of her three strategies of resistance, it is Politkovskaya’s self-positioning as an engaged outsider that has changed the most from her first to her second book. Though comprised of dispatches published only two years before those in her second book, *A Dirty War* is at times written from an ethnocentric Russian point of view. Politkovskaya was always adamantly opposed to the Chechen War, but her earlier work tended to highlight the Russian experience of the war at the expense of the Chechen experience and her argument for peace appealed primarily to Russian self-interest.

In his review of *A Dirty War* for the *New Left Review*, Tony Wood criticizes the earlier Politkovskaya on the ground that her “freedom to speak a tainted truth is meager compensation for lives lost and ruined.”[41] Even while he calls her “one of Putin’s harshest and most principled critics,” Wood believes that Politkovskaya’s writing is symptomatic of a larger Russian tendency to see the war from a hegemonic perspective.

As Politkovskaya gained more confidence as a writer, however, her writing ceased to reproduce stereotypes. Perhaps also the length and brutality of the Second War increased her skepticism and hostility to the Russian side and caused her to view the Chechen resistance in a new light. Whereas Wood criticizes Politkovskaya in her first book for grouping Dudaev, Basaev, and Maskhadov[42] into the same camp, her second book opens with an encounter between her and a man she meets in Europe, whom she informs that his house has been destroyed by Russian bombs. Her friend is in fact Akhmed Zakaev,

Maskhadov's Special Representative to Europe, another man labeled a "terrorist" by the Kremlin.

Perhaps Politkovskaya initially believed that she stood a better chance of mobilizing the Russian population against the war by appealing to their self-interest. At the time, she may have been right, as much of the Russian population was strongly against the first war. However, in her second book, Politkovskaya neglected the politics of expediency in favor of the politics of engagement. She sought to shape her audience rather than cater to their prejudices. By comparing Politkovskaya's writing to more standard journalistic accounts, we learn that the difference between politics and propaganda does not reside so much in their relationship to the audience as it does in the relation between the writer and her subject matter. The politically engaged writer is herself shaped by her subject, whereas the propagandist is axiomatically disengaged from the object of representation. Propaganda's self-representation depends on the myth of objectivity.

Ultimately, Politkovskaya's talent for seeing with her own eyes gave way to a less mediated vision, or rather the result of mediation in Politkovskaya's case is a richer, more complex mode of representation. Politkovskaya did not place the Russian reader between herself and the Chechen people. Politkovskaya was in the end not a spokeswoman for the Chechens, nor did she aspire to become an honorary Chechen. Clifford Geertz writes in *Available Light* that "to discover who people think they are, it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives." He is discussing here the task of the ethnographer in representing the native. Politkovskaya's journalism offers another strategy of representation: political engagement. Just as her politics made possible a more complete knowledge of the other, familiarity enriched her politics. It is impossible to conceive of Politkovskaya as a writer apart from her dialogic relation to her text and subjects. Her mode of representation belongs to the category of the engaged outsider, who creates through language a new space for cognition. With Politkovskaya, words think into being the reality of estrangement.

If *A Dirty War* is about the impact of the Chechen Wars on the Russian people, *A Small Corner of Hell* chronicles genocide from the other side of the barrier. The change in Politkovskaya's stance is indicated by the title of her third collection: *Someone Else's War, or Life Behind A Barrier*. The designation of the Second Chechen War as "-someone else's" indicates how deeply alienated Politkovskaya was from the Russian side. Politkovskaya no longer positioned herself on neutral territory. The Chechens had been cordoned off from the world, and she moved along with them to the other side.

REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Once the world has been rendered strange, there is no longer any firm ground from which to issue a critique of any side involved in the war. The starting point for critique must be created; no podium exists as a given from which the engaged outsider can preach. How can a war journalist make peace through representation? How can we permanently restructure representations in a way that challenges the status quo of war and make it more difficult for the disengaged to excuse themselves from caring?

The range of representations of the Chechen conflict makes palpable the value of estrangement. Objective journalists who identify too closely with official discourse lose their ability to separate themselves from the sources of power they are supposed to critique. On the other hand, those who ignore official discourse completely risk turning themselves into packagers of brutality. Only the engaged outsider can resist the lure of officialdom and represent war as something more than a commentary on authorial consciousness. Politkovskaya's work enables us to perform a nearly impossible task; someone else's suffering need not be subsumed in the act of representation. The disengaged outsider is an estranged participant in the world she describes. Politkovskaya did not consign herself to the world she wrote about; she did not reconcile herself to its double standards and hypocrisies. Instead, she participated in it with both distance and engagement, and thereby worked to change it.

Academic critiques of ethnographic representations often neglect to note that narrative interest, rather than reactionary politics, is the prime motivating factor in simplified, sensationalized and overly exotic representations. In critiquing a representation of the other for its imprecision or incorrect assumptions, we tend to forget that correctness, including political correctness[43] and theoretical soundness, are not the only values that make a difference. Without narrative interest, a non-hegemonic representation of the other is of little value because it fails to engage the witnesses, which, in the case of war journalism, are the readers.

Often, when we redress the imbalance of power between the native and the observer, the narrative interest of a text is lost because the hegemonic assumptions on which it relied were the means by which the reader recognized himself and identified with the author. Is it possible not only to be "representationally correct" but to write well? The example of Anna Politkovskaya proves that aesthetics and ethics are intertwined in writing. However, "good writing" cannot be reduced

to a political formula. The aesthetics of engagement vary according to the demands of time and place.

The canons of taste always benefit from revision. It is our job as critics to probe and dissect the politics of representation, not simply to reach a more accurate and informed vision but because representation is the source of human action, the stimulus for war, and the condition for peace. People – including politicians – act on what they see. To rephrase Said, truth is a sum of representations. The more representations a particular truth can accommodate, the more angles of vision it responds to, the closer that truth comes to providing a political solution to the problem of war. Thus, it is possible, via a journalism of engagement which encompasses not only the privileged outsider but embraces anyone who wishes a different, better, world, to make peace through representation.

The most common response to war, and this is equally the case with war journalists, is to construct a theory for why it happened according to the hindsight generated by a distant retrospective mode, and to confine that analysis within the bounds of acceptable parameters. We compare one war to another; we consider various military advantages and weaknesses, but if such analyses make a difference, their impact can only be to reinforce the dictum that might makes right. Policy analysis rarely ends a war. It is hardly necessary to argue, in light of the genocides of past decades, that the old methods for representing war – in other words, our imaginative strategies for conceiving of the other – have failed us.

What would a more engaged journalism look like? Central to this question is an investigation of the value of the category of difference in a cross-cultural context. In his book, Lieven assumes that an ontological gap divides the premodern Chechen from the modern Western reader and from their Russian antagonists. Lieven does not intend the “premodern” epithet to register pejoratively, but his label nonetheless turns Chechens into an anthropological artifact. Obviously, this mode of distancing cannot serve as a model for journalistic engagement.

Nor do I deny difference categorically, for it is a crucial aspect of the way a war journalist positions herself. With Chechnya, as with any other colonial or postcolonial situation, the erasure of difference cannot be made in good faith, for that would deny the salience of the power hierarchy which has structured Chechen-Russian relations. To be sure, the lines dividing the colonized from the colonizers are often blurred, the colonized sometimes collaborate with the state (consider, for example, Akhmed and now Ramzan Kadyrov) and the colonizers may align themselves with the colonized. But this does not affect the

asymmetry of power. Even when difference is merely a social and historical construct, it is inescapable and insurmountable.[44]

Thus, we cannot simply remove difference from Lieven's account and produce the true Chechen. Perhaps we can remove the Western gaze, but we are still left with ineluctable and irreducible difference. At best, difference is an invitation rather than a barrier. The invitation is one that Politkovskaya accepted. In doing so, she extended the boundaries not only of herself, but of the society in which she lived. Let us hope that others will follow her example.

NOTES

- [1]Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*. Quoted in Valery Tishkov (*Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 214.
- [2]Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 272.
- [3]In addition to the books mentioned in this essay, other important journalistic accounts of the Chechen war include Anne Nivat, *Chienne de Guerre: A Woman Reporter Behind the Lines of the War in Chechnya*. Translated by Susan Darnton (New York: Public Affairs, 2001); Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001); and Vanora Bennett, *Crying Wolf: The Return of War to Chechnya* (London: Picador, 1998). The best analytic account is Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).
- [4]Thomas Barrett's review on H-Russia (June, 1999).
- [5]George Hewitt in *Central Asian Survey* (Sep 1999). The second most widely cited account of the first war is Carlotta Gall and Thomas DeWaal, *A Small Victorious War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). Gall and DeWaal's book is a more traditional journalistic narrative; they avoid Lieven's extended analysis of the causes and solutions to the Chechnya conflict. In my view, *A Small Victorious War* is the best English-language introduction to the Chechen conflict.
- [6]Anatol Lieven. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1998), p. ix; henceforward referred to as CT. Another book concerned with the Balkans which follows Lieven in its manipulation of ethnographic objectivity is David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).
- [7]The term "ethnographic authority" and much of my theoretical foundation derives from James Clifford's essay "On Ethnographic Authority" in *Representations and Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Henceforward referred to as WC.

- [8]Paul Rabinow notes in his essay for "Representations are Social Facts" in *Writing Culture* that "an experiential 'I was there' element establishes the unique authority of the anthropologist: its suppression in the text establishes the anthropologist's scientific authority." WC, p. 244.
- [9]CT, p. 325.
- [10]CT, p. 329.
- [11]CT, p. 22.
- [12]CT, p. 354. Quoted in Tishkov, p. 221.
- [13]CT, footnote 27, p. 422.
- [14]Quoted in Renato Rosaldo "From the Door of his Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor" pp. 77-97 in WC, pp. 94-5.
- [15]Tishkov, p. 221.
- [16]Tishkov, p. 222. Tishkov is quoting the scholars Enver Kisirev and Robert Bruce Ware in their manuscript *Social Tradition and Political Stability in Dagestan and Chechnya: Developments since 1999*.
- [17]Anatol Lieven, "Review of John Dunlop's *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*." *Europe - Asia Studies* 51 4 (June 1999): 720-2.
- [18]See Robert Cottrell's review of *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* in the *New York Review of Books*: 45 14 (September 24, 1998).
- [19]For a short account of Morel's efforts through journalism to expose King Leopold and his officers, see Karl E. Meyer, *The Dust of Empire* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), pp. 14-7.
- [20] Quoted in James Clifford "On Ethnographic Allegory" pp. 98-121 in WC, p. 112.
- [21] For background information on Politkovskaya's relationship to her native country, see Artyom Vernidoub, "Threatened Journalist Flees from Russia," *Gazeta.ru*, October 18, 2001 and David Hearst, 'Anna Politkovskaya, Russia's Whistle Blower,' *The Guardian*, March 16, 2002.
- [22] Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*. Edited by Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (New York: Penguin, 1978), pp. 265-6.
- [23]Though the Russian government immediately blamed "Chechen terrorists," they have yet to produce any evidence of their responsibility in the bombings. Several scholars have pointed to evidence which suggests FSB [i.e. KGB] involvement in the bombings. See David Satter, *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State* (Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut, 2003), pp. 24-34.
- [24]The Russian is "mochit v sortire." "Mochit" is criminal jargon for kill, and a "sortir" is an outhouse.
- [25]Anna Politkovskaya, *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*. Translated by Alexander Burry and Tatiana Tulchinsky. Introduction by Georgi Derluguian (University of Chicago Press Chicago: Chicago, 2003), p.131; henceforward referred to as SCH.
- [26]Anna Politkovskaya, *Chuzhaya Voina, ili Zhizn za Shlagbaym* (Zakharov: Moscow, 2002), p. 13.

- [27] Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya* (Harvill: London, 2001), p. 49; henceforward referred to as DW. I have slightly altered the translation. A tentative suggestion for a writer whose stature and significance runs parallel to Politkovskaya's in another part of the world is Amira Hass who reports on the West Bank and Gaza for the Israeli liberal newspaper *Ha'aretz*. See her book *Reporting from Ramallah*, edited and translated by Rachel Leah Jones (Semiotext(e): Los Angeles, CA, 2003).
- [28] DW, p. 50.
- [29] DW, p. 67.
- [30] DW, p. 219.
- [31] DW, p. 219.
- [32] SCH, p. 130.
- [33] *Chuzhaya Voyna, ili Zhizn za Shlagbaym* (Zakharov: Moscow, 2002), p. 6. My translation and emphasis.
- [34] The term is Mikhail Bakhtin's. See his *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 18.
- [35] SCH, p. 42.
- [36] Anna Politkovskaya, *Vtoraya Chechenskaya* (Moscow, 2002, the first picture after page 160. My translation.
- [37] Said tells us that the words are those of the twelfth century monk Hugo of St. Victor, and that he first encountered the quote in the writings of Erich Auerbach. See Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, p. 185.
- [38] SCH, p. 32; my emphasis.
- [39] DW, p. 260; my emphasis.
- [40] SCH, p. 51.
- [41] Tony Wood, 'Putin's Colonial War' in *New Left Review* 11, September-October 2001. Available at <http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR24511.shtml>.
- [42] Most scholars of the Chechen conflict view Dudaev, who was killed in 1996, as a secular Muslim at best, motivated primarily by nationalist ideology. Of the three political leaders, Basaev is most inclined to resort to "terrorist" tactics. Maskhadov is the legally elected President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and was recognized as such by Russia in 1997, though Yeltsin changed his position towards Maskhadov before the Second War. In terms of their political inclinations and relationship to Islam, the difference between the three leaders is quite stark.
- [43] I have in mind here Vincent Crapanzano's critique of Clifford Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" in his essay "Hermes Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description" in *Writing Culture*, p. 51-76, though I believe this problem is endemic to most otherwise brilliant attempts to overcome essentialism. What should be remembered when a critic undertakes to "unmask" ethnographic description is that philosophical sloppiness is often a source of narrative interest and makes a text readable in the first place. Without the hermeneutical sins Geertz so freely commits, would anyone find his essay interesting enough to comment on? And if political incorrectness creates greater intrigue than discourse purged of essentialism, then what does that say about the relationship between aesthetics and politics?

[44]To say so is not to bow to the theory of “ancient hatreds”; it is rather to follow the example of Edward Said and others to draw attention to the institutional and political inequalities that structure the production of cultural representations.