THE FALSE DAWN OF CIVIL SOCIETY

DUNCAN REID Ponders some uncomfortable questions about law and order in contemporary Russia

EVERY nation and people has its favourite myths of identity: Australia’s are far too well known to bear repeating. One of Russia’s identity myths is that of the good tsar and the evil boyars. The good tsar genuinely wants to help his people, save them from their misery and destitution, but is surrounded by evil courtiers, Potemkin figures who construct facades, physical or metaphysical, so the good tsar or, as in Potemkin’s case, the good tsaritsa, may never see the real lives of his or her faithful subjects. Anna Politkovskaya cites the latest version of this myth at one point in her narrative. The putative good tsar in this instance is the current president, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin—a ruler, so the myth goes, who has the welfare of his people at heart but whose courtiers do not let him see the suffering of the people.

REVIEWED Anna Politkovskaya, A Russian Diary (Harvill Secker, London, 2007), $35; Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, Blowing up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror (Gibson Square, London, 2007), $34.95.
Anna Politkovskaya's *A Russian Diary* is a detailed documentation of the accelerated demise of democracy in Putin's Russia, and the failure of any emergence of a genuinely civil society. Though focused on the period December 2003 to August 2006, it looks back frequently to the beginning of the second Chechen war in August 1999 and the Dubrovka theatre siege in Moscow in October 2002. The apparent emergence of civil society was perhaps always a false dawn, but the stories of abductions and murders of suspected terrorists, the fast-tracking of alleged terror cases through the courts, the censorship and self-censorship of the media, the abuse of elderly citizens, the wilful disregard of the grief of the bereaved, and the criminalisation of the highest offices of government all point, for Politkovskaya, to the re-emergence of *homo sovieticus* in contemporary Russia.

Central to Politkovskaya's narrative is her interaction with families shattered by the school siege at Beslan in September 2004. Against the backdrop of the second Chechen war, this single event and the government's failure to respond appropriately have escalated the headlong retreat from an open democratic society. The declaration of *jihad* by tame, pro-Russian mullahs in August 2005 as part of the war on terror she sees as nothing but a reversion to Soviet methods of containing and exploiting religion. But, Politkovskaya remarks, 'For some of the Russian state's Chechen hitmen, this is very important. They feel much better with the backing of a Jihad. Much better means much less inhibited.' The upshot is that radical Islam goes underground.

The liberals and democrats of the early 1990s have become powerless to do more than cobble together 'festivals of democracy' where everything 'degenerates into a fruitless discussion about who is the most important person.' The 'most moderate and sensible voices' in the Duma have become the Communists, and their youth wing the National Bolsheviks, who march under placards of Che Guevara and are carted off to stand trial in cages. The few public figures who gain Politkovskaya's respect include Yelena Bonner, widow of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov; Garry Kasparov, the former chess champion who entered politics in 1995; and the now imprisoned former billionaire Mikhail Khordorkovsky. Referring to a hunger strike that Khordorkovsky embarked on, Politkovskaya remarks:

"Bravo Khordorkovsky! I didn't think he had it in him. I am glad I was wrong. Now he is one of us. Oligarchs do not go on hunger strike; it is people like us who do that ... In 2005, a hunger strike is one of the few ways of getting your protest noticed ... it is something any of us can do. We all eat. We can all not eat. What is more, you don't need to apply for a permit from the state before you can do it."
Why is a hunger strike potentially so effective? Because 'a hunger strike is not a
dialogue with the authorities, but with your fellow citizens.'

The real indicator of crisis for Politkovskaya is the unrestrained actions of
state-sanctioned gangs of thugs, the Nashi ('our lads') and the evidence of
extreme nationalism:

According to the January (2005) social survey … the slogan 'Russia for the Russians'
is wholly supported by 16 per cent of the population; 37 per cent consider that 'it
would not be a bad thing to implement it, but within reasonable limits'. \(16 + 37 =
53\) per cent fascism, because this policy cannot be implemented 'within reasonable
limits'.

Politkovskaya's sharpest criticism, and yet always mixed with painful under-
standing, is of the complacency of ordinary people:

We have emerged from socialism as thoroughly self-centred people … We do not
want to attract the evil eye of repressive institutions. We want to stay in the shadows
... [But] after all that has happened here in the twentieth century, it is perhaps
hardly surprising.

A *Russian Diary* puts questions to the Russian government that need to be
answered. The loss of confidence in the state, in elections, in the police, in the
institutions of trial by jury and the rule of law all need explanation. Above all
'there is the moral vacuum at the heart of the present political system in Russia,
and the failure of social solidarity:

This is not your enigmatic Russian soul; this is the long-standing tradition of living
a lie … mixed with a lazy refusal to take your backside off your chair in a warm
kitchen until they take the warm kitchen away from you. At that point you might
join a revolution, but not before.

And yet Politkovskaya does foresee revolution—eventually. The centre cannot
hold; the system cannot last indefinitely. But 'there will be no splendid revolu-
tionary breakthrough with oranges, tulips or roses', she says, referring to recent
constitutional changes in Ukraine, Kirghizia and Georgia. 'Our revolution, if it
comes, will be red, because the Communists are almost the most democratic force
in the country, and because it will be bloody.' One is reminded of Pushkin: 'a
*Russian* rebellion is a terrible thing, something I hope you never have to see'. And
the disaffected Islamic youth of Chechnya and Dagestan have been taking to the
hills for years now.

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Anna Politkovskaya was, till her untimely death at the hands of thugs in October 2006, a journalist with the newspaper Novaya Gazeta. Alexander Litvinenko was, till his untimely death by radioactive poisoning in November 2006, a retired KGB officer. His book, co-authored with historian Yuri Felshtinsky, and carrying the unfortunate, catch-penny title Blowing up Russia, is more focused on the role of the secret police and less focused than Politkovskaya’s Diary on a particular period. The authors propose a conspiracy theory of massive proportions with the secret police (currently known as the FSB, the Federal Security Service) at its centre and the first Chechen war (1994–96) as its brainchild and its instrument for convincing public opinion of the need for strong ‘anti-terrorist’ measures. This may seem rather far-fetched, and we can be tempted to dismiss the overwhelming mass of detail as the typical paranoia of the whistle-blower, except that it does tend to confirm the argument of Politkovskaya’s far more elegantly written Diary.

How different the picture here of the Russian secret police from Anna Funder’s picture in Stasiland of superannuated East German operatives, dreaming out their twilight years in unlisted blocks of concrete apartments, in a haze of nostalgia for the workers’ state. The difference? East Germany and its institutions were integrated into a going concern, a modern, democratic society with vigorous public institutions and, above all, active, independently minded interest groups, the hallmarks of a truly civil society. In Russia, there was the opposite of any such integration: the Russian Federation is the remnant of empire, and the old institutions appear simply to have been reincarnated. The FSB is old KGB, writ new.

Litvinenko and Felshtinsky end their book with a proposal: a draft ukaz, a proclamation, to be made by some future president of the Russian Federation, for the final dissolution of all agencies of state security, under whatever name. For such an idealistic hope, it is a remarkably detailed and specific prescription for the possible. Anna Politkovskaya concludes with a more generalised ‘what is to be done?’ Tackle poverty, end the disgraceful neglect of health care provision and the environment (at one point she draws attention to the appallingly low life expectancy in Russia, 58.5 years). Initiate a national campaign against alcoholism and drug addiction. End the war in the North Caucasus. Fix the humiliating social welfare system, ‘which barely allows a person to survive, with no prospect of living a fulfilled and dignified life’.

What is the message of these two books for Australia? An Australia in which the teaching and learning of the Russian language has been all but reduced to the status of a hobby? Wake up! Why do we so quickly forget Russia is a country with a North Pacific coastline, as much a part of our region as South Korea or Japan?
The False Dawn of Civil Society

Listen to what President Putin has said in answering a question from the author of *A Russian Diary* about the ecological effects of a new oil pipeline to the Pacific coast:

Let me draw your attention to the fact that our country lost five major seaports in the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In effect we became dependent on the countries through which our energy resources have to pass, and they abuse their geopolitical situation. We come up against this all the time. It is extremely important for Russia to have a direct outlet to other markets.

For ‘other markets’, read East Asia. This is another old Russian story. It is also the hurt pride of a former superpower licking its wounds and refusing the indignity of present humiliation.

And do we also forget that Russia is a partner in the war of terror—a war being conducted in Chechnya as much as Iraq and Afghanistan? Conducted with even greater potential than our own Western alliance of the willing to drive young, disaffected Muslims into the hands of the extremists. And conducted by an army whose major recent achievements seem to be to turn solid Siberian farm lads into paraplegics. We will have to deal, and continue to deal, with Russia. It could be the impoverished, desperate Russia, or the ugly Russia of nationalist skinheads in leather jackets, or maybe even both: a failed state with nukes. The claims of these books may seem far-fetched except for the incontrovertible fact of the recent brutal murders of two of the authors: Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko. Martyrdom has gained something of a bad name over recent years, but here are martyrs in the true sense, witnesses to beliefs so strongly held that they will not remain silent, and they speak louder now since their deaths than ever they did alive.