

Tales of a War Correspondent: Anna Badkhen

By [Ksenia Galouchko](#)

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Anna Badkhen **Kael Alford**

Anna Badkhen has covered conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kashmir, Somalia and the Middle East. Having grown up in Russia and worked for The St. Petersburg Times and The Moscow Times, Badkhen moved to the United States in 2004 and has since worked as a war correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle, The Boston Globe, The New Republic and Foreign Policy. This year she published two books — “Peace Meals” and “Waiting for Taliban” — both of which are journalistic accounts of the civilian lives implicated by war. Badkhen spoke to The Moscow Times about her new books, her growth as a war correspondent and what makes her return to conflict zones.

How has your life changed since you left The Moscow Times?

I left The Moscow Times in 2000 and started freelancing for American publications. When the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, the San Francisco Chronicle, which was one of the

publications I freelanced for, asked me to cover the war for them, so I did that and then very shortly was hired on staff and then worked as a staff writer for the Chronicle until 2007. I covered the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, Israel, West Bank, Kashmir, Somalia, and I moved to the States in 2004 because so much of my work was not in Russia that it just wasn't necessary to be based in Moscow anymore.

Was leaving Russia your own choice? Did you always want to be a war correspondent?

My husband is American, I have two children who had to attend English-language schools in Moscow, and honestly, traffic was complicated, they spent 3 1/2 hours every day in traffic. It also became increasingly difficult to work as a war correspondent in Russia. Society was becoming increasingly xenophobic. I can't say I myself felt the government pressure directly, but people seemed less open to the idea of speaking to American journalists and there was much less interest for my audience and for my publication in Russia. The American readers' interest transitioned to the coverage of Iraq, to a lesser degree to Afghanistan, other points in the Middle East. There was simply no need to be based in Russia. So I moved to the States. My husband works for The Boston Globe, and he was their Moscow bureau chief for many years, and we decided we could both move to Massachusetts, so he could work in Boston and I could continue traveling.

You have published two books this year. How are they different?

"Peace Meals" is a summary of the Bush decade. It's a travelogue about war and humanity, but it follows the trajectory of American-led wars in the Middle East and Asia, and in the Caucasus. I started working on that book in 2008. It was a product of scrupulous and hard work, a more traditional book. The other book, "Waiting for Taliban," is a result of a series of dispatches I wrote for Foreign Policy magazine that came out in the spring of this year, a travelogue about what is happening in Northern Afghanistan, why Taliban is returning, a very personal and very opportunistic series of dispatches. When I came back, my editor said, this looks like an e-book, and this was the first e-book that Foreign Policy put out, and it's been actually very successful, although there hasn't been traditional publicity for it. In late May we started talking about the e-book, and the e-book came out in September, so the turnaround time was much shorter than with "Peace Meals," and the book was much more immediate. Had this been a traditional book, it wouldn't have come out until late 2011-2012, by which time it wouldn't have been as expedient, with how rapidly things change in Afghanistan.

Who are the heroes of "Peace Meals"?

The book is about fellow travelers, so mostly about people who put me up or traveled with me — translators, drivers, local journalists. Replacement families that you accumulate when you are in a conflict zone, are very important to you. It's possible that your host family is the last family you're going to see, or the last family to see you alive. It's a tribute to all the companions I've had over the last 10 years.

Do you identify your political position in your books?

I very strongly identify that I believe in humanity. What I try to do is paint a very intimate portrait of people who moved me, so that my audience is moved by them as well and so that my audience can empathize with people who live in extreme conditions and therefore make

up their opinion of the world based on a more informed understanding of the world. It's very easy to dismiss conflict zones as these cartoon landscapes: There are millions of nameless and unsung people who were never named and will never be named, whom news reports refer to as nameless victims, almost as if they were nameless stage props. Whereas, in fact, each person who lives and perishes in the conflict zone has a family, has interests, desires, hopes, loves somebody, doesn't love somebody else. My task was portraying people who are generally seen as worthless because of where they are and because of geopolitical decisions often made by more powerful countries. Treating them as human, making them human, bringing them closer to my audience, making them easier for my audience to understand, this is why I do what I do, and this is what I think the book does.

What was your biggest shock of reality as a young war correspondent?

The biggest surprise was to understand how much humanity, joy and love manages to survive in the most extreme, dire situations.

It was a good thing. It was a surprise, but a good surprise. We need more war correspondents. We aren't hearing all the stories there are, and people who are telling these stories don't have all the outlets they need.

Next year I hope to return to Afghanistan in the winter.

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