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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Killed in Slovyansk, Andrey Mironov Sought Out Truth Despite the Costs

By Alice Lagnado

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correction appended:

Andrey Mironov, of one of the Soviet Union's last dissidents, will be buried tomorrow

Mironov, who after the Soviet Union's collapse became a dogged observer of the Chechen wars, was killed on May 25 in the eastern Ukrainian town of Slovyansk when he and an Italian journalist, Andrea Rochelli, came under bombardment.

In some of the first news reports that emerged, Mironov was named as the Italian reporter's translator. But he was much more than that.

Mironov was imprisoned in 1984 — Orwell's year — as he would call it, for photocopying and distributing banned books. His friend, journalist and former Irish Times International editor Seamus Martin, recalls how he was tortured by the KGB.

Those who remember Mironov
talk about his bravery but also
note how lightly he wore it.

"One interrogator made a rope from a towel, said he would hang him and asked him to write a suicide note. Andrey refused," Martin explained.

"The interrogator strangled him until he collapsed. When Andrey came to, he said that he felt he had won. "They were the weak ones. I was the strong one," he said.

Mironov was sentenced to four years in prison but released under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's administration after serving 18 months. As he told Martin, "At the Reykjavik summit with U.S. President Ronald Reagan, he announced there were no political prisoners in the Soviet Union. I watched him say this on the only television set we had in the Gulag."

After he was released, Mironov went on to work as a human rights activist, including as a member of the human rights group Memorial. He witnessed how the dissidents' struggle moved above ground after the fall of the Soviet Union and citied Russia's newly independent media as a major force for change.

"They are scared," he told Baltimore Sun reporter Deborah Stead, referring to the government authorities. "A Kalashnikov has a barrel of only 7.62 millimeters, whereas the 'barrel' of a television camera is bigger. That is the difference."

As well as his human rights activities, Mironov worked as a "fixer" — a casual name for a skilled job that entails translation, sensitive people skills, solid journalistic experience and a calm head in a crisis. In this way, he became known to many in Moscow's press corps.

Mironov also made a name for himself by surviving despite the odds. During the first war in Chechnya, he would wander around like a battered librarian, an intelligent mind ticking away steadily underneath a slightly dotty-looking exterior.

"Andrey roamed the decimated landscape with hair awry, glasses askew and his tattered notebook always at hand," Olivia Ward, a former Moscow correspondent for the Toronto Star said.

"Often he acted as a traveling scribe for State Duma Deputy Sergei Kovalyov — another fearless human rights advocate — recording the daily horrors. The pair were like the wandering truth-seekers of ancient times: dogged, disheveled, waving their lamp in the darkest crevices on the landscape of war."

Those who remember Mironov talk about his bravery in the face of danger but also note how lightly he wore it.

"I think Andrey saved himself from despair by laughing," recalled Ward. Once, a missile fell right by him as Russian forces attacked the Chechen rebels who were dug in nearby. Mironov could not stop laughing as he told Ward that he was waiting to die. But the shell failed to explode.

"Would you believe it," Mironov told Ward, chuckling, "they were trained and drilled on how to fire these things, but they did not even know the shells they were sent had expired."

On another occasion, when Mironov ended up in a police cell in Dushanbe with journalist Colin Peck, he confounded the reporter with his survey of their surroundings.

"Rather than discussing our exit strategy, he went into a nostalgic trance: 'No, no, no. This window is not the regulation height from the floor. Look at this: the width is wrong too,'" wrote Peck in a piece for the Rory Peck Trust, which supports freelance journalists.

Chris Hunter, former Russia correspondent for the Quaker journal The Friend, remembers how Mironov was able to understand conflict situations intellectually, yet also develop close personal and emotional bonds and relationships with those affected by those situations.

"I witnessed this a lot in Chechnya, where Andrey was well respected by those who knew him and where we met many times," said Hunter. Andrei was involved, along with Hunter, in the Yalta Initiative for Peace in Chechnya in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which brought together civil society leaders from Chechnya and Russia to promote peace and reconciliation.

"It was clear to me that he cared about people deeply and this was the main motivation behind his work to draw attention to the violation of people's rights and to demand that those rights be respected," Hunter explained.

Milana Bakhaeva is a monitor for Memorial in Grozny and knew Mironov for the past 10 years. She spoke to me by telephone from Chechnya.

"He was not aggressive at all; he was clever and cultured, but also he was a strong character who did not give up. Injustice was not acceptable to him and when the Chechen war started he could not stand aside."

I only knew Andrey a little, but he left a strong impression. He was sweet and a little shy when I first met him, and his nature contrasted sharply with that of many around him — politicians, journalists, petty officials. Unlike some of them, he was modest and never aggressive or boorish. He was a unique, precious person, and it is extremely painful that we have lost him.

Correction: An earlier version of this story said that Mironov and Rochelli were killed when they came under bombardment, allegedly from Ukrainian forces. It has since become clear that it is not yet understood where the bombardment came from.

Alice Lagnado covered the second Chechen conflict for The Times of London.

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