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RUSSIAN AUTHOR SPEAKS OUT ON GEORGIA

Arkady Babchenko, Russian journalist and author, spoke out against the conflict in Georgia at the Anna Politkovskaya Memorial Event at the Edinburgh International Book Festival today. Currently working as a journalist for Novaya Gazeta, he was unable to attend the event having been called away to report from South Ossetia, however in a specially recorded video message he spoke of his frustration of the lack of change in the thirteen years since he was a young army conscript in Chechnya. "The Georgian army had great technical equipment and in our army we have 18 year old boys. We are repeating the same mistakes we made in Afghanistan and in the first and second Chechen war. It is still the same. In Grozny our soldiers burnt to death in their tanks, and in Tskhinvali the same thing happened. Nothing changes, for me this is very difficult."

Recalling his own experiences in Chechnya, Babchenko explained why he had written his book, *One Soldier's War in Chechnya*. "Actually I don't see myself as a writer. For me, the stories about the war in Chechnya were a form of psychological rehabilitation. I didn't choose the topic – the topic chose me. I am not sure how I got caught up in this type of reporting – I actually wanted to write children's books, but I have been writing about the war now for nine years."

On stage in Charlotte Square gardens, Norwegian foreign correspondent Åsne Seierstad spoke of her concern for the children in Grosny who have known nothing but war. She told the capacity audience of a 12 year old boy called Timor who had lost his family in the war and was living on the streets. She said that the only thing that makes him feel good is killing – dogs, cats and pigeons. When asked why, he responded "It makes me feel strong and invulnerable". She went on to say "When childhood is destroyed by war, you can't put the pieces together with a warm bed and glass of milk. A war cannot be won in a minute, a day, or a month and the aftermath of war is paid for by the children and who they will become when they grow up."

In conversation with BBC Foreign Correspondent, Alan Little, Seierstad spoke about the changes in Russia since she first started reporting from Moscow in the early 90's. She felt there was a huge change in the mentality of the Russian people, following the sense of humiliation in the 90s when they felt they were living in a country with nothing to be proud of – the politics and the ideology fell apart with the fall of the Soviet Union, adding that Putin plays on the nationalism of the Russians, and the pride in the symbolism of the Mother Russia, leaving many citizens suspicious of foreigners, particularly the British who are heavily criticised in the Russian media. There is no free press, and nobody speaks out against the administration. Little commented "The Russian retreat from democracy has democratic support because the Russian people associate democracy with the chaos, poverty and corruption of the Yeltsin years."

The full video message from Arkady Babchenko can be seen on the Book Festival website – www.edbookfest.co.uk.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival ends on Monday 25 August, however there will be an autumn event with award winning Australian writer, David Malouf on Tuesday 23 September at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Tickets can be booked on-line on www.edbookfest.co.uk or over the phone 0845 373 5888.

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