

Oriana Fallaci Dies At 76

BY TUCKER REALS

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Oriana Fallaci, a veteran Italian journalist and author who challenged world leaders in uncompromising interviews and recently drew criticism for her vehement attacks on Islam, has died, officials said Friday. She was 76.

Fallaci, who was diagnosed with breast cancer years ago, died overnight in a private clinic in Florence, said Paolo Klun, an official with the RCS publishing group, which published Fallaci's work. Klun said Fallaci, who lived in New York, had come back to her hometown days before as her condition worsened.

Fallaci had publicly talked of her battle against cancer, calling the disease "the alien."

A Florence native and former Resistance fighter, Fallaci started her career in journalism as a teenager.

She worked for two decades with L'Europeo, a now defunct news weekly that used to be among Italy's more prominent. But her work was often translated and published in the world's most prestigious publications.

As a war correspondent, Fallaci traveled the world covering hot spots, including the Vietnam war and the first Gulf War. In 1968, she was shot as she was covering an army massacre of student protesters in Mexico.

But it was her challenging interviews with world leaders that best defined her work and personality, including with U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Fallaci's questioning was abrasive and provocative, her writing style impetuous. She once famously said that all her interviews were really about herself.

"Why I agreed to it, I'll never know," Kissinger said of his session with Fallaci.

"Fallaci's manner of interviewing was deliberately unsettling: she approached each encounter with studied aggressiveness, made frequent nods to European existentialism (she often disarmed her subjects with bald questions about death, God, and pity), and displayed a sinuous, crafty intelligence," The New Yorker wrote in a profile of her this year entitled "The Agitator."

Fallaci had been reclusive in recent years, spending most of the time in her Manhattan apartment. Even during her trips to Florence she was never seen in public, and hardly made any public statements.

But she broke a decade-long, self-imposed silence with a long, brash essay published in Corriere della Sera, Italy's leading newspaper, shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The essay was turned into a book, "The Rage and The Pride," which sold over 1 million copies in Italy and found a large audience elsewhere in Europe. But it also drew accusations of racism and inciting hatred against Muslims.

In the book, Fallaci wrote that Muslims "multiply like rats" and said "the children of Allah spend their time with their bottoms in the air, praying five times a day."

A group in France unsuccessfully sought to stop distribution of the book, while two other associations requested that it carry a warning notice.

Her next essay, "The Strength of Reason," caused her to stand trial on charges of defaming Islam. The trial opened in June – she did not appear in court – and was still going on.

In indicting her last year, an Italian judge cited a passage of the book that reads: "To be under the illusion that there is a good Islam and a bad Islam or not to understand that Islam is only one ... is against reason."

"I have expressed my opinion through the written word through my books, that is all," Fallaci told The Associated Press after the indictment.

In the book, she accused Europe of having sold its soul to what Fallaci described as an Islamic invasion. It also took the Catholic Church to task for being what she considered too weak before the Muslim world.

Even though Fallaci called herself an atheist, she met with Pope Benedict XVI last year in a private audience at the papal residence of Castel Gandolfo. Fallaci had praised the pontiff for his statements urging Europeans to recognize their Christian heritage.

"I am an atheist, and if an atheist and a pope think the same things, there must be something true. It's that simple!" Fallaci told The Wall Street Journal in a recent interview.

Fallaci's stance had stirred such strong sentiments that an Islamic group expressed "relief for the death of one of the greatest heralds of racial and religious hatred."

"It's almost impossible to feel pity for somebody like Oriana Fallaci," Dacia Valent, a spokeswoman for the Islamic Anti-Defamation League, told the Apcom news agency.

Italian politicians from all sides praised Fallaci's courage in speaking her mind – some mourning the loss of an advocate of Western values, some distancing themselves from her recent positions.

Fallaci was not married and had no children. Information on funeral arrangements was not immediately released, but Klun said it would be strictly private.

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