

## Reporting Kosovo: Journalism vs. Propaganda

*Philip Hammond*

Throughout Nato's war against Yugoslavia, no opportunity was missed to contrast the propaganda emanating from Yugoslavia's state-controlled media with the truthful, reliable free press of the West. The contrast was used by Nato as a reason to kill civilians, when it bombed the Belgrade RTS television building in April; and by journalists as a way to brush aside criticism of British media coverage and Nato news-management.

As a demonstration of the vibrant diversity of Britain's unshackled media, take the stories written as reporters entered Kosovo alongside British paratroopers on 12 June, carried in the following day's Sunday editions. This is what James Dalrymple wrote in the *Independent on Sunday*, describing the town of Kacanik:

It looked peaceful and intact - except for the silence....There were no curtains, no ornaments, no door handles, no light fittings. Every item of value had been removed by the almost exclusively middle-class Serbian population and carried away in any vehicle they could beg, borrow or steal.

Each small community held a mystery. Who had lived here? Serbs or Albanians? What had happened to them? The only witnesses seemed to be the packs of emaciated dogs.

Leave aside the fact that, if he didn't know who lived where, it would be impossible to tell who had taken the door handles. And leave aside the question of how Dalrymple knows middle-class Serbs 'beg, borrow or steal' motor vehicles. Instead, compare his report with that of David Harrison, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*:

It was the silence that gave away the horror. At first sight the beautiful little town of Kacanik looked peaceful and intact....There were no curtains or ornaments. Even the door handles and light fittings had been removed. This was not random looting or small-scale pillage. Kacanik had been deliberately stripped of everything that could possibly be taken away by the remaining Serbian population and carried off in every vehicle they could beg, borrow or steal...

In most cases it was impossible to know if Serbs or Albanians lived there. The only witnesses seemed to be the roaming packs of pet dogs which had somehow survived in the wild for weeks, now emaciated and savage.

Though uncannily similar, there is one interesting difference. Where Dalrymple's report gives the impression that houses have been stripped by their departing Serbian occupants, Harrison apparently knows the missing curtains had been looted, and that the looting could not have been 'random'. Quite how this insight was gained remains unclear, particularly if dogs were the 'only witnesses'.

For Harrison the sound of silence evoked 'horror'. Others too had sensitive hearing. 'This is a land swept clear of people and the silence is haunting', wrote Ross Benson in the *Mail on Sunday*:

Not a child cries, not a mother calls out. Washing flutters neglected on the clothes-lines. And the houses stand empty...'It's eerie, isn't it?' said Lieutenant Nick Hook...

Benson's poignant, evocative, first-hand account was equalled only by Ian Edmondson of the *News of the World*, who wrote that:

...at the town of Kacanik, the convoy entered a land swept clear of people. The silence was haunting. Not a child cried, not a mother called out. Washing fluttered neglected on the clothes lines. 'It's eerie, isn't it?' said Lieutenant Nick Hook...

These reporters' apparent disregard for both journalistic standards and their usual cut-throat commercial rivalry presumably results from the fact that they were under the control of a Nato-run pool system as they entered Kosovo. Yet the existence of such a system was mentioned only once by one TV news bulletin (*Channel Four News* 11 June), in contrast to the way every single dispatch from correspondents in Belgrade carried the warning that it had been 'monitored by the Serb authorities'. The press did not mention the restrictions reporters were under at all. Instead, near-identical stories were presented as the unique eye-witness testimony of individual journalists.

The uniformity of the articles quoted above is simply the most glaring example of media coverage which, throughout the war, was highly conformist. The case of Kacanik is a particularly interesting one in this respect. Within 24-hours of these articles appearing, Kacanik had become the setting for an international media circus, as reporters jostled to get to the site of 'the first major discovery', a mass grave which might contain 'vital evidence of war crimes' (ITN 14 June). Reports from the site raised more questions than they answered. The *Independent* (15 June) reported that two bodies were buried under only a few inches of soil because the Serbs 'almost certainly ran out of time'. Yet they apparently did have time to place numbered wooden markers on the graves, to bury at least some of the bodies in coffins, and to dig empty graves 'for victims yet to come' (ITN 13 June). These peculiarities, and the fact the bodies were in a graveyard, were explained as the result of Serbs trying to 'cosmetically rearrange the site' to conceal the evidence of their crime (*Newsnight* 14 June). Estimates of the number of dead at Kacanik ranged from 81 to 172, but there was unanimity that the graves contained civilians massacred by the Serbs.

The BBC's *Newsnight* (14 June) uncovered evidence which threw doubt on the claim that Kacanik's graves contained civilian victims of atrocities: a letter, purportedly written by a Serbian soldier, recounting a battle near the town, in which 100 Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas had been killed. But the letter, shown to the BBC by a KLA officer, was presented instead as damning confirmation of Serbian war crimes against civilians. *Newsnight's* reporter, Paul Wood, mentioned that the letter 'talks about a battle', but then immediately countered this: 'The KLA say there was no such engagement and that this text can be about only one thing: the murder of civilians'. The KLA officer who had produced the letter then explained, in broken English, what it supposedly revealed about Serb depravity:

He feeled funny when he killed children, when he shot a Albanian with a 30mm calibre Praga. He write in the letter how is fun when he saw the Albanian chest was open from the calibre. You can believe it. The civilisation people, nation, can believe it, that exist human being who write and think like he does in this letter.

In fact the letter said no such thing. Not all the text was clearly visible on screen, but the passages dealing with the battle were: they ended with the line 'enough about me', and the letter's author then went on to ask after friends. Nowhere did he mention killing children or any other civilians. He wrote that one of the dead had been shot with the 30mm Praga, but in a tone of shock rather than 'fun': 'imagine a 30mm shell passing through your chest' (*zamisli granata od 30mm da ti prodje kroz grudi*). The letter did not resolve all the questions about the burial site at Kacanik, since it described how a bulldozer was used to dig a grave for the 100 ethnic Albanians killed in the battle. But it certainly did not confirm atrocities against civilians. It is easy to see why the KLA officer would have wanted to portray Serbs as bestial and evil, but it is less obvious why a BBC reporter should accept such a distortion of the evidence.

Contrast this style of reporting with Paul Watson of the *Los Angeles Times*. The only Western reporter to remain in Kosovo throughout the conflict, his articles consistently presented a more complex - and more credible - picture of the situation inside the province. [Watson's 31 May report from Kacanik](#) included an interview with Saip Reka, a member of an ethnic Albanian self-defence unit set up by the Yugoslav authorities in September 1998, and armed by Serbian police so they could help repel KLA attacks. But for British journalists, the idea that some ethnic Albanians could be pro-Yugoslav just didn't fit their idea of the war as a morality play in which the Serbs were evil, ethnic Albanians their innocent victims, and Nato the knight in shining armour. As one BBC reporter put it in urging tougher Nato action against Serbs, 'where is the middle ground between good and bad, right and wrong?' (16 June).

Facts which didn't fit this simple-minded picture were frequently downplayed, distorted or suppressed. *Newsnight* (18 June) interviewed a Serbian worker at the Dobro Selo mines, where a Serb driver had been abducted only four days earlier, and where the KLA had already taken over part of the mine complex. Asked about Serbs fleeing the area, he began by saying 'the Albanians are attacking' (*Albanci napadaju*). Yet the BBC's voiceover translation had him explaining that Serbs had taken flight 'as the Albanians come home'. The mass exodus of Serbs was seen as an expression of their 'ethnic hatred', not as a response to KLA violence and Nato occupation. Similarly, while the discovery of a 'torture chamber' at a police headquarters in Pristina made headline news, the discovery of a torture chamber in Prizren the following day was treated very differently. Standing in the empty Pristina police building, reporters speculated wildly about what atrocities might have been committed there before the Serbs left. But the Prizren torture chamber left nothing to the imagination: KLA soldiers were literally caught in the act of beating 15 suspected collaborators, and the body of a 70-year-old was found handcuffed to a chair. Apparently this was not so newsworthy. This time, no British newspaper carried pictures of the site; the *Independent*, *Express* and *Sun* ignored the story altogether; the *Telegraph*, *Times* and *Mail* buried it on inside pages; and the *Mirror* confined it to the last three sentences of an article headed: 'British tanks roll in to halt final Serb rampage' (19 June).

Reporters have found it hard to sympathise with the tens of thousands of Serb refugees fleeing Kosovo. One BBC reporter described them as leaving 'with their lips sealed, taking with them the dark secrets of ethnic hatred' (16 June). Matt Frei, sent by *Newsnight* to watch the exodus, seemed to relish the opportunity to gloat:

Imagine the Serbs' reversal of fortune today: the rulers have themselves become refugees, shedding tears of departure and stashing the loot - two phones in the back of the car. Brutality has given way to self-pity. Overnight, the villains think they've become the victims in this war. (16 June)

Even as they fled with whatever possessions they could carry, Serb civilians were self-pitying 'villains' who deserved no compassion. It seems entirely obvious that Nato would not be regarded as protectors by the people they had been bombing for weeks, yet the Serbs' distrust of Nato seemed to perplex many Western reporters. 'But why don't ordinary Serbs trust Nato?' the BBC's Kate Adie asked one Yugoslav soldier, before her interview was cut short by incoming gunfire. She concluded that the problem was not the bullets whistling past the camera, but that 'fear is infectious' (17 June). Another BBC correspondent observed simply that 'they didn't want to wait to welcome Nato to Kosovo' (11 June). As attitudes hardened even further, the Serb refugee columns were said to conceal war criminals, while even civilians had to share the collective guilt after tolerating 'genocide'.

Journalists have seized on every grisly discovery in Kosovo with a certain relief. As *Newsnight's* Paul Wood proclaimed: 'for the Western allies, the steadily accumulating evidence of atrocities will be confirmation that this was a just war' (14 June). Yet even if all the atrocity stories were true and the official British estimate of 10,000 dead was accurate, this would not justify Nato's war, since all the allegations of atrocities relate to the period when Nato was already bombing. To present them as a retrospective justification relies not just on questionable evidence, but on the implausible premise that Serb attacks were not motivated by anything other than a fiendish master plan for genocide. Attacks on Serbs, if they are reported at all, are mitigated by being described as 'revenge attacks'. Would it not be just as reasonable to regard violence against ethnic Albanians by Yugoslav forces as a reaction to both KLA insurgency and Nato bombing? Similarly, the return of ethnic Albanian refugees to Kosovo was hailed as vindication of Nato's cause. The BBC's reporter explained: 'This is why Nato went to war: so the refugees could come back to Kosovo' (16 June). Channel Four's Alex Thomson enthused about 'the success of the US policy': 'after all, the President fought this war so that these people could go home in peace' (22 June). Somehow reporters have forgotten the chronology of events: there was no refugee crisis or 'humanitarian disaster' until Nato started bombing.

One of a handful of exceptions to the general trend, Robert Fisk, divided his fellow reporters into 'sheep' and 'frothers'. In fact many journalists managed to be both at once, combining slavish subservience to Nato spin with self-righteous moralism. In this, they took their cue from the British Prime Minister, who talked incessantly of a 'just war' between 'civilisation and barbarity'. The historian of war reporting Phillip Knightley has noted how this crude Good versus Evil framework turned warmongers into peacemakers in Kosovo:

In Kosovo the media tend to believe everything the military tells them because the military has stolen the moral high ground by claiming it is anti-war. It bombs

in the name of peace, to save or liberate, so those who object are the war-mongers, appeasers, Nazis. (*Independent on Sunday* 27 June)

The photograph chosen by almost every newspaper to accompany the story of Kacanik was of a young female soldier sorrowfully contemplating the graves.



NATO troops: pretty girls...

...and caring guys

Earlier in the war, Nato's role was illustrated with pictures of soldiers playing with refugee children and bottle-feeding babies. While contrived to tug our emotions, such pictures also carry another message: the most powerful military force on earth is really just a bunch of pretty girls and caring guys.

As the bombs and missiles rained down we were informed by Nato leaders that this was 'not a war', and when it ended every newspaper found the same word to describe the occupation of part of a sovereign country by foreign troops: 'liberation'. This was a fitting climax to a media crusade which had frequently turned reality on its head in an utter dereliction of what journalism is supposed to be. It would seem that one casualty of the Kosovo war was British journalism, although some sources maintain it was already long dead. In its place we have propaganda.