

The rise of the laptop bombardier

Пише: Philip Hammond
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Do you remember Mark Laity? Ten years ago he was on British television virtually every evening, covering the Kosovo conflict from NATO headquarters in Brussels for the BBC. Described by Robert Fisk as ‘a sheep in sheep’s clothing’ (1), Laity faithfully relayed the claims of NATO spokesman Jamie Shea on the nightly news. Far too faithfully: after the war Laity quit his post as defence correspondent and went to work for NATO as Shea’s deputy.

Identifying so closely with an official spokesman that you want to work for him is unusual, but it is emblematic of the way that many journalists embraced NATO’s cause as their own. Explaining ‘Why Kosovo matters’, the Guardian said it was ‘a test for our generation’ (26 March 1999); columnist Polly Toynbee, describing NATO’s bombing as an act of ‘chivalry’ which could usher in a ‘new ethical world order’, said the war was a ‘test of our resolve to lay new foundations for policing tyranny’ (12 April).

As such comments suggest, for many commentators the significance of NATO bombing lay in what it said about the West. The war ‘blooded Tony Blair’, enthused the Independent, claiming that it showed he was ‘developing into a national leader of stature’ (12 June 1999). Similarly, the Guardian’s Martin Walker hailed the ‘potent generation of leaders’ who ‘lost their military virginity’ in Kosovo (7 June). In particular, the war was supposed to demonstrate what Walker called the ‘potent legacy’ of European values. The Independent’s Anne McElvoy gushed that the war would uphold ‘Western ideals’ and would help to create ‘a wider sense of what it means to be a European’ (24 March); in the Guardian Hugo Young predicted that ‘the value of “Europe” will be proved ... decisively by the Balkan outcome’ (3 June).

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The claim that the US-led bombing was somehow a confirmation of European values chimed with the statements of NATO leaders. As the missiles rained down, Blair said he felt that 'Europe is...a better place than it was before the military action began' (The Times, 5 June), while NATO's then secretary-general, Javier Solana, said the war was 'a defining moment ... for the kind of Europe we wish to live in at the beginning of the twenty-first century' (Daily Mail, 14 April). Yet in elaborating on these themes, journalists were more than mere mouthpieces for official propaganda: in their coverage of the earlier war in Bosnia, reporters had already written NATO's script for Kosovo.

Rather than simply reporting on the 1992-1995 conflict between Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims, many Western journalists had taken sides in the Bosnian war, agitating for tougher military intervention against the Serbs. Former BBC correspondent Martin Bell famously coined the term 'journalism of attachment' to describe this selective and emotive style of reporting which, he said, would not 'stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor' (2). By 1999, Bell's formula had become Blair's explanation of NATO's bombing as 'a battle between good and evil; between civilisation and barbarity; between democracy and dictatorship' (Sunday Telegraph, 4 April 1999).

Having felt frustrated for most of the Bosnian war at the West's pusillanimity, the laptop bombardiers of the press corps were thrilled by the idea, in 1999, that NATO was finally going to fight a proper war against the Serbs. Recalling with shame how Western troops in Bosnia had been 'forced... to scuttle around in armoured personnel carriers, dealing out charity', the Independent hoped that 'now that humiliation may be over' (25 March). Working themselves up at the sight of Western 'potency', liberal broadsheets started baying for blood. Even before the bombing started, the Guardian decided that 'air strikes are not enough' and called for a 'full-scale use of conventional force' (19 March). And later, as NATO widened its targeting to take in civilian infrastructure, the paper demanded a 'less conversational kind of war', complaining that too few people were getting killed because: 'We practically ring up the Serbs to tell them attacks are on the way so that they can get everybody out of the buildings.' (5 April)

Such was their enthusiasm for war that the media were incapable of accurately reporting the preceding diplomatic shenanigans that provided its justification. Western-brokered talks were portrayed as a genuine effort to resolve the long-running conflict between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. Yet these 'negotiations' presented a pre-ordained 'agreement', with an ultimatum to the Serbs that refusal to sign would trigger bombing. According to then US State Department spokesman James Rubin, the aim was 'to create clarity... as to which side was the cause of

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the problem... and that meant the Kosovo Albanians agreeing to the package and the Serbs not agreeing to the package' (3).

Initially, however, the Kosovo Albanians refused to sign, since the plan did not offer them full independence; whereas the Serbs accepted the political agreement, though arguing that it should be implemented by the United Nations rather than NATO. While diplomats worked on persuading the Kosovo Albanian delegation to accept the draft agreement, its terms were changed in ways which ensured its unacceptability to the Serbs. As a State Department official told journalists at the time, the US 'deliberately set the bar higher than the Serbs could accept' because they 'needed... a little bombing to see reason' (4).

As the bombing began, it was presented as a measure to prevent a refugee crisis. Rubin insisted that if NATO had not acted, 'you would have had hundreds of thousands of people crossing the border', and Tony Blair declared: 'Fail to act now... [and we] would have to deal with... hundreds of thousands of refugees.' (5) Once hundreds of thousands did indeed flee, NATO side-stepped this potential public relations disaster by insisting that the 'ethnic cleansing' of Kosovo Albanians was the result of a premeditated policy and would therefore have happened anyway. Right on cue, secret documents outlining just such a Serbian plan – codenamed 'Operation Horseshoe' – were revealed by the German government.

This supposed 'blueprint for genocide' was exposed as a fake concocted by the German intelligence services – but only after the war (6). At the time, with a few honourable exceptions, journalists enthusiastically repeated and amplified NATO's claims about genocide in Kosovo. Most needed little prompting, since they had already made up their minds that the Serbs were the new Nazis. Just as they had in Bosnia, reporters found 'a horrific echo of the wartime Holocaust' in Kosovo (Mirror, 1 April). On the same day that the Mirror was reporting 'Nazi-style terror', the

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heard 'chilling echoes of the Holocaust', the

Guardian

discovered 'grim new echoes of Nazi horrors',

The Times

described 'genocidal operations in Kosovo', and in the

Independent

, David Aaronovitch said that 'when you examine the views of the man and woman on the Belgrade tram, it is easier to see how so many Germans in the Thirties bought the Joseph Goebbels version of the world'.

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Like Aaronovitch, many explicitly demonised the Serbian people as a whole, rather than only their leaders. The Telegraph's Patrick Bishop suggested that "Serb" is a synonym for "barbarian" (26 March), the Sun said they should be 'shot like wild dogs' (14 April), and in the New Statesman

Steve Crawshaw claimed that 'many millions of Serbs' had 'become liars on a grand scale or gone mad, or both' (31 May). In the same spirit, BBC Newsnight's Jeremy Paxman proposed a programme of 'thoroughgoing imposed de-Nazification' for post-war Serbia (29 April).

At the end of the war, the BBC's Paul Wood proclaimed that 'for the Western allies, the steadily accumulating evidence of atrocities will be confirmation that this was a just war' (News night 14 June). In fact, the evidence did not bear out NATO claims that 10,000 or 100,000 or even more had been killed by Serbian forces. The true number of dead appears to have been closer to 5,000 – a figure which includes combatants as well as civilians, Serbs as well as ethnic Albanians (7). Yet even if all the atrocity stories had been true, it is hard to see how this would have justified the war, since the allegations related to the period when NATO was already bombing.

Somehow journalists 'forgot' that there had been no refugee crisis or humanitarian disaster until NATO started bombing. The BBC's Jeremy Bowen explained that 'Nato went to war so the refugees could come back to Kosovo' (16 June), and Channel 4's Alex Thompson crowed about 'the success of the US policy': 'After all, the President [Bill Clinton] fought this war so that these people could go home in peace.' (22 June) It was with some justification that the Guardian's Maggie O'Kane boasted of how 'it was the press reporting of the Bosnian war and the Kosovar refugee crisis that gave [Blair] the public support and sympathy he needed to fight the good fight against [Slobodan] Milosevic.' (8)

In promoting the case for war in 1999, journalists advanced many of the same arguments later made by Western leaders for invading Iraq, such as the idea that military action by a 'coalition of the willing' would uphold UN authority rather than undermine it. The Guardian complained that the UN's 'constitution is a recipe for inaction' (26 March), while the Independent endorsed Blair's assertion that 'when the international community agrees certain objectives and then fails to implement them, those that can act, must' (26 March).

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Indeed, in 1999 the Independent pointed to the example of Iraq as an argument in favour of intervention in Kosovo, comparing critics of NATO bombing to 'those who say that the sanction Saddam Hussein should face for trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction is a telling-off' (22 March). Back then it seemed so self-evident that Iraq ought to be bombed that this could be offered as a clinching argument in favour of also bombing Serbia. Today, the Iraq War has few defenders, but Kosovo is still widely regarded as a successful and 'moral' intervention. For that, we have the media to thank.

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<http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/6386/>

(1) [Taken in by the NATO line](#), Independent, 29 June 1999

(2) 'The Journalism of Attachment', by Martin Bell, in *Media Ethics*, by Matthew Kieran (ed.), Routledge, 1998

(3) Moral Combat: Nato at War, BBC2, 12 March 2000

(4) [Rolling Thunder: The Rerun](#), The Nation, 14 June 1999

(5) BBC News, 25 and 26 March 1999

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(6) 'Serbian ethnic cleansing scare was a fake', says general, Sunday Times, 2 April 2000

(7) [UNMIK Office of Missing Persons and Forensics](#), Press Release, 3 February 2003

(8) [Hacks versus Flacks: Tales from the Depths](#), Z Magazine, 1 August 1999