

War, Journalism and History

War Correspondents
in the Two World Wars



Edited by
Yvonne T. McEwen and Fiona A. Fiskén

With a foreword by
Phillip Knightley

War, Journalism and History is the first published work to examine an eclectic mix of correspondents during the two world wars who were prepared, often at great personal cost, to inform the public about the obscenity of warfare. Throughout both world wars the lack of credible information being dispatched from fighting fronts to the home front led to the creation of an information vacuum. The void was filled by war correspondents: the heroes, sometimes anti-heroes, of news reporting. This edited volume examines the lives and works of maverick war correspondents such as Richard Dimbleby, Vasilii Grossman, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, Albert Londres, Vera Brittain, and others who, whether through the use of pen or camera, typewriter or radio, tried to secure the integrity of wartime reporting and accurately record history in the making.

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He has honor if he holds himself to an ideal of conduct though
it is inconvenient, unprofitable, or dangerous to do so

— WALTER LIPPMANN

Journalist (1889–1974)

*For the men, women and children who paid the price for
bringing us the truth about the obscenity of warfare.*

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a wonderful capacity to face and solve professional and personal challenges and dilemmas. She is in one word, irreplaceable.

YVONNE MCEWEN

PHILLIP KNIGHTLEY

Foreword

The academics who took part in the War, Journalism and History Colloquium at the University of Edinburgh were delighted with the intellectual stimulation of the day's debate and the challenging new research and theories it produced. There was no reason for them to anticipate the historical significance of the occasion, for it is only now becoming apparent that the participants were describing and assessing a form of journalism that was already dying.

War journalism feels, like war, as if has been around forever. But it only really dates from the Crimean War of 1854 when William Howard Russell of *The Times* of London became the first civilian to send back to his newspaper reports of what was happening at the front. Until Russell came on the scene there were no reports at all or generals reported their own battles.

Russell's influence was enormous. For the first time a British army in the field was subjected to independent scrutiny and was found wanting. But Russell faced the problem that has haunted war correspondents ever since: how much could be told without endangering the war effort? As he wrote to his editor: 'Am I to tell these things, or hold my tongue?'

The editor told him to go ahead and those reports he did not use in *The Times*, no doubt from apprehension that the newspaper would be accused of being unpatriotic, he circulated among Cabinet ministers, a process that eventually toppled the government.

The military was quick to realize the danger that this new form of reporting posed to its very existence and fought back, denying journalists access to the front lines, refusing information, interviews, guidance, support and courtesy. 'Out of my way, you drunken swabs,' roared Lord Kitchener.

The military's methods became more sophisticated as it realized the war correspondents were here to stay and that it would have to coexist with them. Over the years it has tried censorship, appeals to the correspondents' patriotic instincts and, perhaps most successfully of all, recruiting the war correspondents into the overall war effort.

Owen Dudley Edwards, who was Reader in Commonwealth and American History at the University of Edinburgh, now Honorary Fellow, described in his presentation how Charles Masterman, head of the War Propaganda Bureau, organized a secret meeting of Britain's leading writers and journalists in 1914. They included Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, John Masfield, G. K. Chesterton, Sir Henry Newbolt, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells. Their recruitment into the war effort to write pamphlets, books and newspaper articles that promoted the government's view of the war was kept from the public until 1935.

The government was more direct with frontline correspondents. The six major ones were put into uniform and given honorary status of captains. They were provided with orderlies, lorries, cars, conducting officers and censors. When one of them asked General J. V. Charteris how much of an action he would be allowed to report, the General replied 'Say what you like, old man. But don't mention any places or people'.

They soon caught the mindset of the military they were supposed to be covering. One of them, Sir Philip Gibbs, wrote after the war: 'We identified absolutely with the Armies in the field [...] We wiped out of our minds all thought of personal scoops and all temptation to write one word which would make the task of officers and men more difficult or dangerous. There was no need for censorship of our dispatches. We were our own censors'.

The French were no better. Newspapers and reporters were subsumed into France's 'Union Sacree', that sacrosanct union of forces in France which conducted the nation's war. As described by Dr Tom Quinn, of University College Dublin, this system was so constricting that France's greatest journalist, Albert Londres, abandoned his attempts to cover the war and devoted himself to 'finding new measures of truth-telling'. He argued that censorship had an alienating effect on language and the nature of truth. So in a war-torn world where you could not believe what you read, the troops responded by printing their own newspapers in the trenches,

and poets and novelists began to grapple with the task of finding new ways of presenting the truth about war. Londres posed the question that has concerned journalists ever since: 'How close can the war correspondent get to the pain, or to the truth? In a world of disintegrating narrative, what are the possibilities for the creation of a new narrative?'

The search continued in the interwar years but the outbreak of the Second World War produced a major setback. The correspondents again became an integral part of the war effort and they were described by General Eisenhower as 'assimilated officers' or 'quasi staff officers'. A few were uncomfortable with the description. One, Charles Lynch, a Canadian who had been accredited to the British Army for Reuters, wrote, 'It is humiliating to look back at what we wrote during the war [...] We were a propaganda arm of our governments [...] We were cheerleaders. I suppose there wasn't an alternative at the time. It was total war. But, for God's sake, let's not glorify our role. It wasn't good journalism. It wasn't journalism at all'.

The debate was still going on fifty years later in Vietnam. American correspondent Michael Herr wrote that conventional journalism was the problem: it could no more reveal the Vietnam War than conventional fire power could win it.

British correspondent Gavin Young agreed. 'How can one depict the human facts of such a complete tragedy? What of the thoughts and feelings of the Vietnamese? How, if at all, have the Americans been changed by contact with the Vietnamese?' Young concluded, 'The Vietnamese War awaits its novelist'.

But news is meant to be instantaneous, especially with a twenty-four-hour a day continuous news cycle. It cannot wait for the reflections of the novelist. So the old dilemma remained – the military wanted to conceal all; the media wanted to reveal all.

The two sides thought about it and met to discuss it. At the meeting the BBC broadcaster, Sir Robin Day, said he doubted whether a democracy would ever be able to fight a war again, no matter how just, because of the way TV news would portray the horror of battle. The military took the warning seriously and the hunt began to find a way to manage the media in wartime. The United States led the way and the Department of Defense came up with a plan that it put into effect during the invasion of Iraq.

Its essence can be summed up in four points. Emphasize the dangers posed by the Iraqi regime. Dismiss and discredit those who cast doubt on these dangers. Do not get involved in appeals to logic but instead appeal to the public's hearts and minds, especially hearts. Drive home the message to the public: 'Trust us. We know more than we can tell you'. The Pentagon believed that this plan could not only shape opinion in the United States but all over the Western world. It was proved right.

A lot of thought went into controlling the correspondents. There had to be an appearance of openness and truthfulness. So briefings by officers trained to deal with the media were held at Central Command Headquarters. These briefings gave an official overall view of the war's progress. But correspondents clamoured for their own dynamic take on what was happening at the front and the freedom to report it. The difficulty was that every system that the Pentagon had tried for managing correspondents had aroused their ire precisely because the correspondents felt that they were being managed.

This time the military incorporated them into the national war effort by enlisting them and their organizations into the service of the country, exactly as it had done during the Second World War. In practice, this meant that the Pentagon offered media organizations, both American and foreign, the opportunity of 'embedding' a correspondent inside a specific military unit for the duration of the war.

The 'embeds' had honorary officer's rank and could wear uniform if they chose. Their unit provided them with accommodation, transport, food and protection. The 'embeds' accompanied the troops into action and could in theory write what they liked as long as it did not reveal information of value to the enemy.

But no matter how determined the correspondents were not to lose their journalistic objectivity and maintain their distance, once the war had started almost without exception they soon lost all distinction between warrior and reporter, and identified themselves with their unit, even to the extent of helping with the fighting. The relationship had come full circle and was back to World War One again. No wonder a disgruntled reader wrote to the editor of *The Guardian* newspaper saying, 'Despite scouring

two national newspapers every day, listening to the radio, surfing the web and watching TV news, I have absolutely no clue how the war is going’.

It grew worse. One American critic described the lack of sustained TV reporting on Afghanistan as ‘the most irresponsible behavior in all the annals of war journalism’. And when NATO attacked Colonel Gaddafi’s forces in Libya, it flew 26,000 air missions and not one of them was covered on TV. This means more illustrations were published at the time of the fighting in the Crimean War, more than 150 years earlier. This is a sad commentary on today’s status of modern war correspondents and raises the vital question: how much longer can they survive?

YVONNE MCEWEN

Introduction

News and gossip are sometimes indistinguishable. Particularly at times of national crisis, what the press does not provide, the rumour mill will readily invent. This was evidenced in the early days of news gathering when, during the American Civil War, the Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Wilbur Storey, instructed one of his correspondents to 'Telegraph fully all news you can get and when there is no news send rumors'. Oiling the wheels of the rumour mill is not just a wartime practice. However, as history demonstrates, the lack of credible information being dispatched from the fighting front to the home front inevitably lead to the creation of an information vacuum. Standing at the ready to fill the void were the war correspondents, the heroes, sometimes anti-heroes, of news reporting.

Arguably, it was the dispatches from the war in the Crimea by *The Times* correspondents, Thomas Chenery and William Howard Russell, that saw the beginning of an organized effort to report the activities on the fighting front to the home front. The correspondents wrote about the pitiful condition of the troops, the inadequacies of army leadership, and the appalling lack of medical and nursing care for the casualties. Writing during the Battle of the Alma, Chenery cynically observed the consequences of sending aged war veterans to care for the sick and wounded.

At the commencement of this war a plan was invented, and carried out, by which a number of Chelsea pensioners were sent out as ambulance corps to attend to the sick. Whether it was a scheme for saving money by utilizing the poor old men or shortening the duration of their lives and pensions, it is difficult to say, but they have been found in practice rather to require nurses themselves than be able to nurse others [...] The man who conceived the idea that the hard work of a military hospital could be performed by worn-out and aged cripples must have had slight knowledge of warfare or have profited little by experience.¹

The correspondents' dispatches infuriated the government and the military high command but the Editor of *The Times*, John Delane, advised them to 'continue as you have done, to tell the truth, and as much of it as you can'. The government eventually fell from power and the Secretary of State for War told Russell that it was his [Russell's] dispatches that were responsible for the collapse of the government. Emboldened by their ability to effect change, the press believed they had secured their role and a right to communicate to the masses how wars were being prosecuted.

Until the Crimean campaign, soldier-writers, with little mastery of war corresponding generally, wrote the dispatches from the front. This was the case in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), and in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815).

It has been said that it was Marlborough's victories in Flanders in the 1700s that first whetted the British public's appetite for the latest news from the fighting front but there is strong evidence to support the view that it was the English Civil War, and the political strife that led up to it, that was the beginning of conflict corresponding in Britain.²

While the Crimea saw the establishment of war corresponding, its birth can be attributed to George Wilkins Kendal, one of ten full-time reporters who rode with the United States Army into Mexico in 1846 to cover the Mexican–American War. Kendall was a businessman and newspaper proprietor. In 1837, along with a friend, he founded the *New Orleans Picayune* and, throughout the period of the war with Mexico, he was both soldier and journalist. He was the first newsman to take advantage of the developments in transportation and technology, and the combined use of fast-moving ships and the newly established telegraph, gave him the lead in the collection and distribution of news. In the same conflict, Jane McManus Storms, writing under the pseudonym of Cora Montgomery for the *New York Sun*, went behind enemy lines in order to file her first-hand dispatches. She was the only woman to cover the conflict and was in all probability the first female war correspondent, therefore leading the way for women to report future conflicts.³ Despite Arnold Bennett's acerbic critique on the standard of women's literary competence and their limited future in the field of journalism, not only did they become accomplished journalists but also during the First World War women were reporting on

its social and economic effects, and some were reporting from the front. By the outbreak of the Second World War, they had won the right to become accredited war correspondents and women such as Margaret Bourke-White, Martha Gellhorn and Lee Miller became household names.⁴

Throughout the First World War, the press was the principal medium of news distribution, although war photography was well established and film was beginning to make its mark. The war brought with it an unprecedented rise in the sale of newspapers and journals, and their importance to the public would never again be matched. In the early days of the war the Recruiting Department of the War Office sought permission from Lord Northcliffe, the newspaper baron, for the use of his newspapers to aid recruitment. Unimpressed by the efforts of the War Office, Northcliffe wrote to the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, complaining that 'The chief hindrance to recruiting is that whereas the German public are supplied with the work of photographers, artists, cinematograph operators, and war correspondents, our people have nothing but the casualty lists and mutilated scraps with which it is impossible to arouse interest or follow the war intelligently'.⁵

Two years into the war, on 6 December 1916, David Lloyd George was invited by King George V to form a government in succession to Asquith's coalition War Ministry. Just two days before he was deposed, Asquith had reason to believe that Lloyd George had been 'trafficking with the press' for political gain.

The significance of his statement should be seen in the light of the persons Lloyd George held his first meeting with as Prime Minister. For it was not with his political advisers but two influential newspaper proprietors, Sir George Riddell (later Lord), owner of the *News of the World*, and Lord Burnham of the *Daily Telegraph*. Lloyd George understood that his success and the success of the government's direction of the war effort could only be achieved by keeping the press on board and the public placated.⁶

With the development of radio and film after 1918, the prominence of print journalism in the dissemination of information diminished in the Second World War. The distribution of news by various media was a potent force in shaping national morale. The public wanted to see the truth in print and to hear it on radio but, as the columns of *Hansard* can

readily attest, British politicians, with their economy-of-truth philosophy, had different ideas. In this, there was perhaps more of a similarity between democratic and dictatorial regimes than leaders of the former would have cared to admit.

By 1940, Winston Churchill had come to believe that the spread of rumours was bad for national morale and instructed the Ministry of Information (MoI) that a wide campaign should be immediately put in hand against the dangers posed by rumours. In the early years of the war, the people of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland were desperate for information but there was a widespread belief that their wartime news was being manipulated to produce either distortions or over-optimism. Furthermore, information regarding the developments and prosecution of the war was hard to obtain and this led, at times, to public suspicion of the government's war aims. The remit of the MoI was to prevent panics, allay apprehensions, remove misconception and generally keep up public morale. The British press, cynical about the role of the Ministry, and equally frustrated by the lack of information, referred to the MoI as the 'Ministry of Disinformation'.⁷

If there were lessons learned from the First World War about rumour control, newsgathering and distribution, by the time of the Second World War, they had either been forgotten or ignored.

The printed word alone did not assuage the public need for wartime information. Developments in film and cinematography ranked as informative contenders. During the Crimean campaign, Roger Fenton, a society photographer and one of the founding members of the Royal Photographic Society, was dispatched to the war zone. His remit was political, his patronage Royal, for he arrived in Balaclava with letters of introduction from Prince Albert. He was appointed to neutralize the damning literary images of the war coined from the pens of correspondents. In a war of confusion and catastrophe, his photographs created the illusion of military calm and control. Fenton deliberately avoided taking controversial photographs, namely human and animal detritus on the battlefield, the squalor of the troops living conditions, and the appalling facilities for the care of the sick and wounded. While sections of the press, particularly *The Times*, were accused of purveying untruths and were castigated by politicians and the

military, Fenton's images were well received because he obligingly produced half the picture.⁸

Some five years later, The American Civil War proved to be a landmark in the history of photojournalism. With different mindsets and little political interference, the American Mathew Brady and the Scottish-born Alexander Gardiner were the first to bring the tragedies of the Civil War to the attention of the press and public alike. Despite the limitations of still photography in capturing the fast action of warfare, their photography captured the war in all its phases and locations, and was a remarkable accomplishment. Furthermore, Gardiner went on to produce *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (1866),⁹ which was the first published collection of Civil War photographs. It could be confidently argued that it was on the battlefields of the American Civil War that photojournalism in warfare was firmly established.¹⁰

As far as can be ascertained, the earliest moving pictures of warfare were produced during the Spanish–American War of 1898. Cinematography was in its infancy but short clips of images from the Boer War (1899–1902), the Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905) and the First Russian Revolution (1905) were made possible with pioneering developments in film making. By the outbreak of the First World War, front-line newsreel filming had achieved a degree of technical sophistication that allowed for lengthy film footage to be shown. Documentary films, such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), filmed by the cinematographers John Benjamin McDowell and Geoffrey Malins, lasted for over an hour. The main sources of newsreel information during the war years came from the *Pathe Gazette*, *Gaumont Graphic* and *Topical Budget*, which in 1917 was taken over by the War Office and run on propagandist lines as an outlet for official war films.

In the interwar years film production was prolific, and there was a corresponding rise in public attendance at the cinema. The quality of film-making, and the introduction of sound and colour, greatly improved the cinema experience. It was primarily from *British Movietone*, *Pathé* and *British Gaumont* newsreels that the cinema-going public obtained information about current events and the wider world. By the Second World War, film-makers nationally and internationally were using their skills to produce government propaganda documentaries, public-information

and morale-boosting films.¹¹ Reporting of the war was no longer the sole prerogative of the newspaper industry. However, the technological developments in the collection of news did not safeguard its freedom for distribution. As experienced in the First World War, dissemination of news was still carried out under government control and censorship.

Nonetheless, in both wars there was a cadre of men and women who were prepared to take considerable personal and professional risks for the freedom of expression and information. This edited volume is an eclectic mix of lives and experiences of individual correspondents, and the mediums through which they reported war.

First World War

Stephen Badsey's chapter on the World War One cameraman John Benjamin McDowell begins this volume on war corresponding in the two World Wars. McDowell is simultaneously one of the most influential British wartime figures of the twentieth century and almost unknown as an individual. He was the hero of British front-line newsreel filming on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918. In 1916, although a film producer as much as a cameraman, he volunteered to serve with Geoffrey Malins on the Western Front and remained there as the doyen of British official cameramen for the rest of the war. McDowell was involved in filming all the major documentaries of that time, including the extremely influential *Battle of the Somme*. Additionally, he was the senior cameraman at British general headquarters from April 1918 onwards. The film images that McDowell produced had a popular reception around the world and he shaped public perceptions of the war on the Western Front. As Badsey explains, the role of McDowell and his fellow cameramen was to bring an impression of the war as experienced by the ordinary soldier to the people back home.

Jenny Macleod describes one of the most colourful if not controversial correspondents in World War One. Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett was a gifted and