

Media Cleansing: Dirty Reporting Journalism & Tragedy in Yugoslavia, by Peter Brock

Book Review

By [Edward S. Herman](#)

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Review by Edward S. Herman

This important and valuable book complements perfectly the superb volumes on Yugoslavia by Diana Johnstone (*Fools' Crusade*) and Michael Mandel (*How America Gets Away With Murder*). Johnstone provides essential history and context to the Balkan wars, analyzing the indigenous participants, their backgrounds, motivations and strategies, and the very important role played there by external interveners (the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim diaspora and PR firms, Austria, Germany, the United States, and the UN and Yugoslavia Tribunal [ICTY]). Mandel provides an outstanding study of the recent U.S. aggressions and the role and abuse of international law and the ICTY in facilitating those aggressions. Brock focuses on the role of the media, which like the NATO powers and ICTY were "co-belligerents," doing yeoman service in advancing the program of the individuals, groups and governments that wanted war. "Embedded" journalists did not start with the Iraq invasion-occupation; *voluntary* embeds were a dominant feature of the Western media in the Balkans conflicts.

The huge irony that Brock reveals so clearly is that the media co-belligerents, pushing relentlessly for more aggressive action, supposedly in the interests of stopping ethnic cleansing and killing, played into the hands of parties with a political agenda that assured and produced far more ethnic cleansing and killing than might have taken place without their bellicosity and war propagandist service. The same irony is clear in Johnstone's and Mandel's volumes that deal with the ends and means of the indigenous and external participants. The focus on "justice" as opposed to peace, and the demonizing of the Serbs and making them the unique group needing punishment, was the vehicle used by Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic and his close associates, and Clinton/Albright and Kohl-Genscher and their associates, to prevent a peaceful settlement—most importantly in backing out of the 1992 Lisbon Agreement—and to work incessantly to get NATO to intervene militarily on behalf, first, of Izetbegovic and the Bosnian Muslims and then the Kosovo Liberation Army and Kosovo Albanians. Brock shows that the media served these pro-violence and anti-peace ends relentlessly and effectively.

He argues convincingly that this was a model case of "pack journalism," and also of what has been called "advocacy journalism" or "the journalism of attachment." The journalists were quickly convinced that good was fighting evil, or that it was obligatory and less risky to

take this as a given, and so they joined the pack and became advocates attached to the supposed good side and their victims. This was aided in the Balkans by the fact that most of the journalists didn't know the language or history of the area, and that, because of the threat of bodily harm in trying to do real journalism, they tended to congregate in protected areas—many of them, as one cynical observer noted, only reported what they saw “150 meters on either side of the Holiday Inn” (General Lewis MacKenzie).

This made them dependent for “news” on one another and on the official sources happy to service their needs. As they stayed in the part of Sarajevo controlled by the Bosnian Muslims, they, along with U.S. officials, were the main sources of news, and as Brock notes they were hardly aware of the existence of a large Serb population in Sarajevo, some 50,000 of whose members left or were driven out of the city. The pack were even unaware of the exodus of the Jewish population of Sarajevo (pp. 131-3), quietly threatened by the dominant Muslims and recalling well (like the Serbs) the murderous behavior of the Muslims and Croats in the era of Nazi rule during World War II.

The pack journalists in Sarajevo (and elsewhere in the Balkans) were thus highly manageable, knowing the broader truth in advance, dispensing with notions of substantive objectivity and balance, and on the hunt for stories that would both confirm the institutionalized bias—and therefore please their editors at home—and advance the cause that they advocated and for which they campaigned. Journalists like David Rieff, Roy Gutman and Ed Vulliamy openly acknowledged that they were campaigners for more aggressive NATO intervention (i.e., war), and they were by no means alone. But this meant that they had ceased to be serious journalists who would check out the facts and claims of all sides and provide a full and fair picture of the complex events in the struggle. They would instead gravitate to stories that advanced the cause and would treat them with uncritical zeal. As another cynical observer described it, this meant that Izetbegovic “could play them like a Stradivarius,” and in effect use them as agents of Bosnian Muslim propaganda and disinformation. (The more “balanced” Roy Gutman was played like a Stradivarius by the Croatian information service and U.S. Embassy as well as Muslim authorities.)

This pack and bandwagon process fed on itself. As it focused only on the victimization of the Bosnian Muslims, featuring grim pictures and stories of their suffering, ignoring Serb victims and context, and aided by the parallel agenda and bias of the ICTY and Western political establishment, the party line of almost exclusively one-sided evil was steadily reinforced. (Former State Department official George Kenney's research disclosed, however, that “the percentage of each population base killed was roughly identical,” and even an ICTY-sponsored study found Serb deaths not far below their proportion of the Bosnia-Herzegovina population—see Ewa Tabeau and Jacob Bijak, [“War-related Deaths in the 1992-1995 Armed Conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Critique of Previous Estimates and Recent Results,”](#) *European Journal of Population/Revue européenne de Démographie*, June, 2005). Gullibility and the demand for more spectacular showings of evil encouraged increasingly irresponsible reporting and claims of victimization in “rape camps” and Auschwitz-like “death camps.” The books of these journalists would be what Brock calls “victim epics,” with politically correct selective victimization based largely on witness evidence supplied by partisan sources that was regrettably “unconfirmed.”

Brock has a detailed and convincing deconstruction of the claims of rape camps and rape as a Serb military tactic and exclusive (chapter 5). While certainly never denying Serb rapes, he shows that there is not the slightest evidence that Serb rapes were more numerous or

organized than those of Bosnian Muslim or Croatian forces. He points out that the documentation of Serb rape victims is more extensive and of better quality than that of victims of Serbs, despite the sizable resources put into collecting evidence of the latter. The Serb data just never could attract the interest of the pack (and the same was true of the pack's treatment of Serb dossiers of war crimes and prison camps in which Serbs were victims). The bias confused the media—Paul Lewis writing in the *New York Times* on “Rape Was Weapon of the Serbs” (Oct. 20, 1993) noted that a UN report had identified “800 victims by name,” but Lewis failed to mention that they were Serb women. The estimates of 50,000 or 20,000 rape victims of Serbs were based on no evidence whatsoever, and the belief that rape was a special Serb crime rested strictly on the overwhelming political bias of the pack and superior public relations and propaganda activity of the Croats and Bosnian Muslims. (A January 1994 UN report evaluating all the documentation on rapes, excluding evidence from the Serbs, listed 126 confirmed victims. This finding did not interest the media.)

The media role in this hysterical propaganda barrage, with the best of the reports noting that the claims are “unconfirmed” (!), was a scandal, reflecting a media completely out of control and justifying UN official Aracelly Santana's comment that “I've never seen so much lack of professionalism and ethics in the press.” The UN representatives and British officials dealing with the media in Sarajevo looked upon the pack with contempt as a destructive force, some of them even calling its members “the reptiles.”

Brock also has a very good discussion of the famous photo of Fikret Alic, taken at the Trnopolje transit camp in August 1992, another fine illustration of the quest for denigration of the enemy and the lack of scruple of Western reporters and media. He shows that the three British reporters, two from Independent Television News (ITN) and one from the *Guardian*, sought out the uniquely emaciated man among the camp residents, and carefully arranged for a photo that made it look as if Alic was enclosed in a fenced prison, the reporters having deliberately placed themselves behind four strands of rusted and sagging barbed wire, strung haphazardly between two posts, with a thin chicken wire mesh hanging beneath, with Alic on the other side. “The cameramen and layout editors cropped the photos of Alic so that the three or four strands of barbed wire were emphasized.” There was no barbed wire fence around the camp, which was a transit facility and not even a prison encampment, and the refugees in the camp were even free to leave.

But the Fikret Alic picture was quickly seized upon by the Western media, and juxtaposed with pictures of Belsen and Auschwitz, and the media featured this “death camp” with frenzied indignation and thoroughgoing dishonesty. Compelling evidence by Thomas Deichmann that the photo was a propaganda fraud led to a journalistic bloodbath: “The reactionary attacks from pack-journalism's interventionists commenced with fury and gusto,” and led to a libel suit and bankruptcy of the British magazine *Living Marxism* that had published Deichmann's article. The suit was lost by *Living Marxism* not on the ground that the facts in the article were wrong but rather that it had not been proved that there was an intent to deceive—the huge deception, which happened to fit both the biases of the reporters, editors and Western establishment, was inadvertent!

This deceptive photo worked wonders in advancing the demonization process and war agenda, and though based on serious misrepresentation it was not correctible in the mainstream and remains alive today (in Emma Brockes' recent attack on Noam Chomsky in *The Guardian* she mentions that ITN won its libel suit on this topic, but she failed to note

that it was won on the question of intent, not on the question of whether the facts relating to the photo were misleading). And the pack journalists would provide a steady stream of followup negatives, always one-sided and stripped of context, and often falsifications. Brock has a number of pages that simply list misrepresentations, sometimes photos of victims identified as Muslims but actually Serbs (see pp. 30-32, 122-4, 170-2), and dozens of illustrations of blatant bias are scattered throughout the book. Brock also shows how regularly the pack journalists would report on Serb attacks on various towns—e.g., Goradze, Mostar, Bihac, Vukovar, and Struga—never mentioning either the fact that the towns had previously been ethnically cleansed of Serbs, or that the Serbs were retaliating for recent attacks emanating from these towns. The decontextualization and misreading of the recent sequence of events was standard reportorial operating practice, resting on bias plus uncritical dependence on Bosnian Muslim or Croat sources. (On lies regarding the Serb attack on Goradze, pp. 75-76; on Vukovar, pp. xiii-xv; on the remarkable effectiveness of Croat propaganda and lack of integrity of AP and other Western sources at Struga, pp. 42-45; on Michael Gordon's lies on the numbers in Serb concentration camps, pp. 80-81).

Brock notes that there were dissenters from party line pack journalism, but he shows that these were quickly attacked and marginalized, in a familiar process. This is the "media cleansing," that permitted the triumph of "dirty reporting." Brock himself, having written an article critical of the already closed party line media coverage back in 1993 ("Dateline Yugoslavia: The Partisan Press," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1993-1994), was harshly assailed by members of the pack, and the publisher of his article was also put under pressure and threatened for this deviationism. George Kenney, a former State Department official working on the Balkans, who had quit because of insufficient U.S. intervention in the ongoing wars, changed his views and became a serious critic of the party line. Kenney, like Brock, was quickly subjected to nasty attacks and dropped by the BBC and U.S. mainstream media as a commentator on the Balkans struggle. Even Lt. General Michael Rose, the UNPROFOR commander in Sarajevo, was subjected to slashing attacks by pack members, who resented his frequent confutations of pack disinformation, and who, as campaigners for the Bosnian Muslims, were angry at the failure of UNPROFOR to bomb the Serbs (see Brock's crushing analysis of Peter Jennings' biased, ignorant and nasty attack on Rose—"The Peacekeepers—How the UN Failed in Bosnia," ABC, April 24, 1995, at pp. 175-6; and on Jennings' and ABC's journalistic abuses more broadly, p. 173).

Perhaps the most interesting case was that of David Binder, who writes a Foreword to Brock's book under review here, and who was the most experienced and knowledgeable *New York Times* reporter working in the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s. Binder, however, was not a party liner, having witnessed and reported on the Kosovo Albanians attempts to drive Serbs out of Kosovo in the 1980s and who recognized that important elements of that community were striving for ethnic purification. But with the firming up of the party line in the 1990s his insistence on sometimes reporting items putting the Bosnian Muslims or Kosovo Albanians in a bad light was looked upon with disfavor by his editors. In one notorious case discussed by Brock, Binder wrote an article based on the testimony of numerous qualified UN and military insiders that pointed to the Bosnian Muslims as the source of the bomb that killed mainly Bosnian Muslim civilians in Sarajevo in the Markale market bombing of February 5, 1994, but which helped sell more aggressive NATO actions against the Serbs. The Times refused to publish the article, which forced Binder to resort to a Swiss newspaper, *Die Weltwoche* and the journal *Foreign Policy* ("Anatomy of a Massacre," Winter 1994-95).

Eventually Binder was removed from reporting on the Balkans in favor of reporters like Roger Cohen, Carlotta Gall, Marlise Simons, and John F. Burns, who were prepared to toe the party line—and sometimes disseminated lies, but only lies that reinforced the party line and its biases (see the discussion of John F. Burns below). The treatment of Binder was reminiscent of the removal of Raymond Bonner from reporting on Central America in the 1980s, after Bonner failed to stop sending in copy on the murderous operations of the U.S.-supported Salvadoran army. The firing of Bonner was widely seen as a warning to journalist deviationists; the removal of Binder and the attacks on Brock and Kenney had a similar chilling effect.

Under the pack system, and with the triumph of the demonization process and simple Manichean world view of the struggle, there was a massive voluntary embedding and collapse of journalistic standards. The rush was on to illustrate villainy at all costs, a process also notorious at the end of the Kosovo war in June 1999 when NATO-country pack journalists rushed into Kosovo searching for rape victims, dead bodies, and stories of Serb atrocities. In this environment journalistic fraud flourishes and gullibility is great, making the journalists sitting ducks for interested propagandists. If Bosnian Muslim officials claimed 200,000 Bosnian Muslim victims in 1992-1993, that was swallowed uncritically by the media (and Clinton) despite implausibility, inconsistencies, and doubts expressed by the likes of George Kenney. This figure persists up to today—see the editorials “Bosnia, 10 Years Later” in the *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 2005 and “Bosnia’s Slow Progress,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 29—despite repudiation even by ICTY-sponsored sources, which have lowered the number for deaths on all sides, civilian and military, to something like 100,000. (See the Tabeau/Biljac study cited earlier.) We may recall the history of the figure of 2 million murdered by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, first provided by Jean Lacouture in early 1977, then acknowledged by him to have been created out of the whole cloth, but accepted and persisting up to today. The rule for demonized enemies is that the worst is believable and can be institutionalized even if demonstrably fraudulent.

Brock shows that it was a regular practice for the media to swallow and transmit without verification Bosnian Muslim official and even ham radio station claims of deaths in various battle zones. These were almost always inflated or entirely false, but the media took the bait, and while disappointed to find later that they had been gulled, neither issued corrections nor learned to be cautious. There were no real costs for the journalists or media in making errors damaging to the demonized enemy

Brock is at his best in analyzing the work of John F. Burns of the *New York Times* and Roy Gutman of *Newsday*, who shared the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for journalism for their work in Bosnia. Brock shows that this award is a perfect manifestation of the corruption of the “journalism of attachment” and of the Pulitzer award system, which is an index of the corruption of journalism more broadly. The Burns case is the more dramatic, and even funny, as Burns got the award based in large part on a long Times article that focused on the confession of a Bosnian Serb prisoner of the Muslims, Borislav Herak, who confessed to having murdered 29 Muslims and raped eight women. Burns’s article was billed as offering “insight into the way thousands of others have died in Bosnia.”

Burns, who was well-known at the time to be an Izetbegovic favorite, had been given quick access to Herak, along with a Soros-funded movie-maker (whose presence at the interrogation was never acknowledged in the Burns report). Herak appeared very frightened, told his story to Burns “partly in the presence of prison officials,” and after one session asked Burns to get the prison authorities to promise not to beat him after his

testimony! There was no corroborating evidence in corpses or eyewitnesses to his alleged crimes, and a fellow Bosnian Serb arrested with Herak had said right away that Herak was lying. Both Burns and the movie-maker suppressed the fact that Herak had accused UNPROFOR head, Canadian General Lewis MacKenzie, of having raped Bosnian women in a local bordello. Burns acknowledged to MacKenzie that this would reduce Herak's credibility and spoil the story, but he suppressed the information in violation of professional standards and in support of lies that he should have known were lies.

Several years later Herak recanted, claiming that he had been tortured and forced to memorize his confession lines. Shortly after this admission two of his alleged murder victims turned up alive. The Times, in reporting on the appearance of the two supposed Herak victims, said that this was an embarrassment to the Bosnian Muslim government, but it found nothing embarrassing in the incident to the *New York Times*, and there has been no move by the Pulitzer award committee to remove Burns' Pulitzer award based on a confession under torture with compromising evidence suppressed.

Brock has quite a few other illustrations of Burns' violations of journalistic ethics. Burns pioneered in alleging 200,000 Muslim deaths in the warfare as early as July 1993, up from his estimate in April of 140,000; and, "venturing less and less outside Sarajevo, [Burns] consistently reported the government's inflated casualty counts during the war." On the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour (Jan. 10, 1994) Burns upped the ante to 300,000 killed and 900,000 wounded. (For other Burns lies, misrepresentations and suppressions of evidence, pp. 77-80, 187.)

Brock's analysis of the work of Roy Gutman is equally devastating. He shows compellingly that Gutman was not A **Witness to Genocide** (the title of Gutman 1993 book based on his dispatches from Bosnia), but rather an agent of propaganda provided, directly or indirectly, by parties with an axe to grind. Many of his sources were not witnesses but purveyors of hearsay evidence from alleged witnesses. Gutman treated his sources uncritically; even speaking at one point of "reliable rumors." He rarely demanded—and even more rarely obtained and supplied—any corroboration to allegations of Serb abuse. If the Bosnian Muslims and Croats claimed 100,000 prisoners in Serb prison camps that was enough for Gutman; the fact that the Red Cross estimated that there were only some 10,000 prisoners in the camps of the Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims taken together was of no interest to him; their finding meant that his preferred larger number was "unconfirmed." His business was making the case against the bad guys, and he didn't just cut corners in making that case, with the help of his badly compromised sources he wrote works of fiction that had some "unconfirmed" elements of reality.

Gutman located most of his sources with the help of Croatian, Bosnian Muslim and U.S. Embassy intermediaries, most extensively from the Croatian Information Center (CIC), a government propaganda agency whose work Gutman found to be "more or less scholarly." Gutman claimed to have met a major propaganda agent of the CIC, and Gutman source, Jadranka Cigelj, "by chance," but he admits to having gotten a number of witnesses (or purveyors of witness hearsay) from Croatian "charitable foundations" and the U.S. embassy. As one critical journalist (Joan Phillips) put it, his death camp stories "are based on very few accounts from alleged survivors. They rely on hearsay and double hearsay. They are given the stamp of authority by speculation and surmise from officials."

Gutman was very free in using analogies to Belsen, Auschwitz and references to "death camps" and "concentration camps," "deportations," and estimates of Serb death camp

killings running up to 5,000, although his word usage and numbers varied based on probable audience knowledge and receptivity. The lack of scruple here was marked, and misstatements were frequent. "It was like Jews being deported to Auschwitz" was a lie, as there was no evidence whatsoever that Bosnian Muslims moved around by the Serbs were going to gas chambers. Phillips notes that the 350 journalists who rushed into Bosnia looking for death camps "didn't find them, nor did they find any evidence that they existed." There was in fact never any evidence that treatment in the Bosnian Serb camps was any worse than that in the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim camps, that were of no interest to Gutman.

Brock's detailed analysis of Gutman's work (pp. 87-116) is a compelling study in journalistic malpractice that should be read by every student of the media, especially given the fact that the outrageous performance that Brock describes here resulted in a Pulitzer prize, shared by Gutman's rival in disinformation John F. Burns! Gutman didn't relish any analysis by Brock, warning him by e-mail that his *Witness to Genocide* could "not be quoted under any circumstances." He didn't even relish exposure at the Hague, refusing to testify there, where he would have had to deal with cross-examination.

Brock's book has many other good things in it, like a discussion of the role of George Soros, public relations firms, Germany, the Vatican, and of course the Tribunal as an instrument of NATO. It is a very important work filling a needed gap in the critical literature on the Balkans wars and enlightening on the work of the mainstream media. It is a sad commentary on the intellectual culture that this book, like that of Johnstone and Mandel, which contests an institutionalized party line, will be ignored in the mainstream.

Equally troubling, just as neither Johnstone nor Mandel was reviewed in the supposedly "left" *Nation*, *In These Times*, *Progressive*, and *Mother Jones*, there is a good chance that Brock will join them in being bypassed in favor of less "controversial" works. This is a testimonial to the ability of imperialism to make an official party line on an imperial project unchallengeable even on its purported left. This is hegemony at its finest.

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