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REPORTING THE WAR, AN INTERVIEW WITH ALLAN LITTLE

Twenty years after the Yugoslav war, Allan Little talks about the challenges of reporting the conflict, and the duties of the war correspondent.

Interview conducted by *Jo Shaw and Igor Štiks*

Shaw: *You have often said that reporting from Yugoslavia during the dissolution and the wars was a unique experience, both professionally and personally. Why was this?*

Little: As a journalist you get used to flying into a crisis and flying out again pretty quick and developing a short term expertise and then leaving it behind and moving on. Well, what was unique for me in the former Yugoslavia was that I was there four years and at a defining moment in the history of that part of Europe and indeed of Europe itself. And so I did not fly in, observe a crisis, quickly analyse it, and fly out again. I stayed. Stayed and stayed and stayed... and learned about the unfolding nature of the crisis along with the citizens whose country was living through the crisis itself.

What eventually became apparent to me was the mismatch between the way the war was seen by much of the Western world, especially Western Europeans, and the way it was seen by those of us on the ground. It could easily be characterised by Western Europeans— and was by Western European governments— simply as a three-way, three-cornered ethnic conflict between three tribes who were either culturally or congenitally predisposed to dislike and hate each other. But what was more interesting to me was that I could see that there were different strands of the European tradition being played out, different kinds of political aspirations. One, for example, was a fairly straightforward ethnic supremacist mindset, that viewed the world from the perspective of bloodlines, membership of the tribes, confessional identity and ethnic identity, and rights of ethnic groups. On the other hand, you had a beleaguered and rather weakened force that did not define itself ethnically but aspired, in an imperfect way, to some kind of mainstream European citizens' democracy.

So, what was interesting to me as a journalist was the conflict between prevailing narratives: the narrative of 'all sides are equally guilty', which believes that these people have been living like this in the Balkans for centuries, versus what I believed was the case, which was that this is a battle between two different kinds of political aspirations, one which is similar to our own in Western Europe, and the other one, which is much darker in the European tradition. So the difficulty it imposed on me as a journalist committed to the idea of impartiality and neutrality was how to remain objective, impartial and neutral, while at the same time characterising it thus. How do you tell what seems to you the observable truth of reality without appearing to take sides? That was the big challenge for me as a journalist.

Shaw: *An important point to bring out is how different the Yugoslav experience of events post-1989 has been compared to the rest of Europe. Twenty years on, what sorts of things really stick in your mind, in your memory, of what happened at that time?*

Little: I suppose there are lots of tiny little anecdotes which I could relate to your question, but the overarching instinct in my mind is how enduring the appeal of national identity remains in Europe, as compared to other kinds of loyalties. And I remember, going back to 1989, is the very first time Alexander Dubcek appeared in public since 1968. For twenty one years his face had been banned in public, his voice had not been heard in the public

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discourse, and yet everybody recognised him. Everybody recognised him because people had kept private archives in their homes; people had kept private memories alive. When someone disappears from public view for twenty one years in an entrenched democracy like Britain, most people would not recognise them. Certainly, nobody under the age of forty would recognise them. But there was a private way of keeping Dubcek alive in almost every house in Czechoslovakia. What struck me about his first appearance on the balcony above Wenceslas Square, with around 400,000 people in the square, was the first word he spoke in public. The first word he spoke in public was not 'liberty' or 'democracy', or 'freedom'... it was the name of the country –*Československo*. And his five syllables bounced off us in these sonorous waves that rolled down and up the Wenceslas Square and bounced off the high walled buildings around us. And that is what made people cry.

Shaw: *And for Yugoslavia? What images do you remember?*

Little: Watching a procession of 40,000 people emerging from a forest after two days on foot, having been ethnically cleansed. Watching British troops watch them being ethnically cleansed. The ordinary British troops were appalled and dismayed, and horrified by what they saw, they wanted to do something. It offended every instinct of decency in them, but they were bound by their politically determined mandate. I can also recall one anecdote, which I have told before, about an old man in Bosnia. I asked him what had happened. He told me he had lost contact with his wife, they had to flee, his house had been taken over, the town had been taken over, he had to walk for two days. He said he was eighty years old and at the end I said to him: 'Do you mind if I ask if you are a Muslim or a Croat?' He said: 'I am a musician'. I remember feeling horribly compromised and ashamed by that, because this was a town full of musicians, bakers, electricians, and dentists and nurses, and carers, wives, husbands, daughters, uncles, aunts, nieces, and yet all we cared about was whether they were Muslims or Croats. Or, so it seemed. We had to reduce them to an ethnic stereotype in order to package them and make sense of their experience. And I felt compromised by that reality.

Another moment I remember was in autumn 1992, after the first months of the siege in Sarajevo, going to a hotel in the town, hotel 'Europa'. It was burned in May and some of refugees from Grbavica [a part of Sarajevo occupied by the Serb forces] and elsewhere had moved in. I remember seeing this old man who had moved there with his wife. They had cleaned up a little corner and had a mattress and few belongings. The walls of the room they were living in were still black and the room smelled sort of burned. And yet they had been living there all summer. And he was wearing a tie. He was living in these appalling conditions and yet he thought to wake up in the morning and put on a tie to look good. It was his way of, I supposed, saying no to surrender; we are urban people, we have standards. We might not have anything to eat, but I still can look respectable. I remember being very struck by that. But you can not get that into a news report, it does not make any sense if you try to. It was emblematic of the way in which the Sarajevo people and the people elsewhere tried to hold on to the basic decencies of urban life. It was about decency and dignity, above everything. So these are some of the little moments that strike you much more than many other major things.

A nation sabotaged

Štiks: *After Bosnia you went to South Africa, Zaire, Rwanda, and then Iraq and Afghanistan. What is it that makes the conflict in the former Yugoslavia different from these other cases?*

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Little: The interesting thing about the former Yugoslavia is that it was surrounded by states in Europe moving in the opposite direction very fast. They were moving away from dictatorship and communism, one party rule and communist economies very rapidly towards the European mainstream. They were embracing what they saw as their natural European destiny. The destiny they had been locked out of for forty years by the Soviet-imposed system. So the war in Yugoslavia happened at a time of unprecedented opportunity in eastern and south-eastern Europe. If you go back to 1989, probably, on paper, Yugoslavia was the communist country best-placed to make the transition to multi-party democracy and mixed economy. And yet it was deliberately sabotaged. That transition was deliberately sabotaged by a criminalised elite who saw a way of staying in power when every other communist elite was swept from power. And that was what made it so tragic, because the opportunity was there to move in the same direction as Poland.

Shaw: *Yugoslavia also had a very close relation to the EU in the 1970s...*

Little: Exactly. And the European Union was by the late 1980s acting in a very interesting way, acting as an exporter of the democratic values, institutions and systems. It had been absolutely key in lifting the southern European flank - Greece, Spain and Portugal – out of dictatorship and into democracy. It was now doing the same, or very similar, in Eastern Europe. And the invitation to Yugoslavia was there. And yet it was sabotaged. This is the best way to put it.

Štiks: *Are there any lessons from the Yugoslav conflict that we did not learn?*

Little: I would not presume to draw lessons on behalf of the people from the former Yugoslavia, but as an international community we learned that a certain type of humanitarian intervention could prolong the conflict without changing its outcome. We learned starkly that there is no much point in deploying peacekeepers where there is no peace to keep. In the end, if you steadfastly refuse to blame anyone until you can blame all sides in equal measure, then this is not impartiality. You are imposing a partiality of your own. And I think for many, many months, a couple of years– at least until 5 February 1994 –the international community was determined to be even-handed with all sides, to the extent that there was reluctance to blame anyone until all sides could be blamed equally. That meant that the ethnic cleansing, as a great criminal enterprise, went really unchallenged. It was allowed to succeed.

The duty of engagement

Štiks: *Going back to your own work, on the one hand, your work as a war reporter had an immediate impact on the public and decision makers as well, and on the other hand, as with your book *The Death of Yugoslavia*, co-authored with Laura Silber, it provided a necessary bridge for scholars and analysts to comprehend the events themselves once the dust had settled. Is this the role you think a war correspondent should perform? Or, put in another fashion, despite the risk that one exposes himself or herself to by going to the frontline, is engagement a part of the duty of a journalist?*

Little: I think engagement is the key to it. On the other hand, it depends on how you define 'engagement'. This term acquired a certain currency toward the end of the war in former Yugoslavia because of my colleague and friend Martin Bell. He talked about the journalism of engagement. I do not know what he meant because I always felt engaged. He was calling for a journalism of engagement. Did he mean advocacy journalism? Did he mean

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journalists saying ‘now we declare that it is time for that kind of policy’? I am against that. Personally, I am not going to take part in advocacy journalism. My conception of journalism is pretty straightforward, which is: you go to places, see what is happening and then you tell people. Sometimes you can only see a very small part of the picture, in which case you say ‘I can only see a small part of the picture, but I can tell you what is happening in this part of the picture because I have seen it with my own eyes’. You have to be very engaged indeed because you have to make decisions whom you are going to speak to, you have to make judgements about the trustworthiness of the accounts you are given, you have to make time to challenge and question, and look for corroborating accounts. Sometimes you have to make it clear if you saw something or you heard someone telling it. Are you an eye-witness or an ear-witness? Did you see it with your own eyes or it is just a rumour? When you are actually on the ground, it is about gathering corroborating evidence and trying to separate what people have heard from what people actually saw or experienced themselves. And that is largely what we were trying to do. I was not doing much of the diplomacy.

Štiks: *In some of your public appearances you said that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq put a lot of pressure on journalists when it comes to truly reporting what they see, because what they could see is a perspective almost imposed by the military, a form of embedded journalism. So, how do you see ‘embedded journalism’?*

Little: Embedded journalism is one of the important tools for reporting in the world as it now exists. You simply cannot go freely to Helmand province. You cannot get in a car the way in which we used to get in our car in Sarajevo, then negotiate our way through checkpoints until we found ourselves in Tuzla. You cannot do that anymore. It is absolutely impossible. So, the only way to get to somewhere like Helmand is to go with British or American troops. It is the only way not to get killed. But again, what you do, as you say, is a small part of the picture. Exercise scepticism, distance, and challenge the account given by the commanders you are with, and you say to your audience: ‘this is one small part of the picture, this is their account. Others will have different accounts.’ What is missing, however, is the perspective of the Afghan side. It is hard really to know what the Afghans genuinely feel. You cannot really tell much about what the Taliban are planning or doing, or what the argument within the Taliban is. We could do that with the Bosnian Serbs. This is because they wanted publicity. You could speak to Doctor Karadzic, you could speak to Biljana Plavsic and you could unpick their eventual rifts on a day-by-day basis. But, you cannot do that anymore in other conflicts.

A refusal to know

Štiks: *One reason for interviewing you is that you went a step further, it is not just reporting. You wrote the book that accompanied the TV documentary series that had a huge impact on people in the region and outside. Why did you go a step further and is there anything that you regret?*

Little: I did the book because personally I wanted to draw a line under the whole experience and try to draw together all the things that I had learned. Laura and I wrote a book partly to satisfy our own curiosity, because there were certain gaps in my knowledge that I wanted filled in. And what struck me most of all was that the Yugoslav state was very secretive and elites spoke to each other without the scrutiny of the public. There was a lot going on behind the closed doors of those elites. There were some absolutely unspeakable moments, incredible moments in the lead up to that famous Yugoslav presidency meeting in the basement of the army barracks when they tried to face down Stipe Mesic, and we learned out

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about those things only much, much later. At the time when we were trying to report about these events, they were matters of conjecture and speculation, because we were really getting only very little, snippets and rumours from a very closed system. So it taught me to be very sceptical about almost everything, even my own knowledge; do I really know? How much do I really know? But what is interesting to me is why those people had to be so honest with the research that went into a documentary and a book. And I think it is because we got them at a time when they still thought history was on their side, that they were on the right side of history.

Štik: *What about regrets?*

Little: Yes, I regret many things. I regret that in spring and summer 1992 I did not really, really chase the rumours and reports about the detention camps. In retrospect, when I found out the scale of what was happening there, I really wish I had made a bigger effort to expose that earlier. It came out in drips and drabs. International organisations knew about them, secretly, and passed diplomatic cables on them and this would leak out in bits and pieces and than it would be officially denied. I wish we had just got in our cars and gone and had a look. It would have been very difficult, but at least we would have made an effort. There were ways to find it out because some people had been released and were there available to give accounts of them. But again, what was happening was, there was a tremendous reluctance to believe. I interviewed an old man in France this summer, who had joined 'Free France' in 1940 and seventy years on he was reminiscing about his experience with 'Free France'. He came here to London to join De Gaulle and then went back as a regional official in liberated France. And I asked him if France is even now willing to be honest with itself about what happened in the 1940s? He looked uncomfortable and said 'Il y a un refus de savoir' – there is a refusal to know. There was a *refus de savoir* in Britain and France in the summer of 1992. People did not want to know that there were concentration camps in Bosnia. They wanted to believe that it was wild wartime rumour mongering. They wanted to believe that even if there were these detention camps, then all sides had them.

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