

War Reporters

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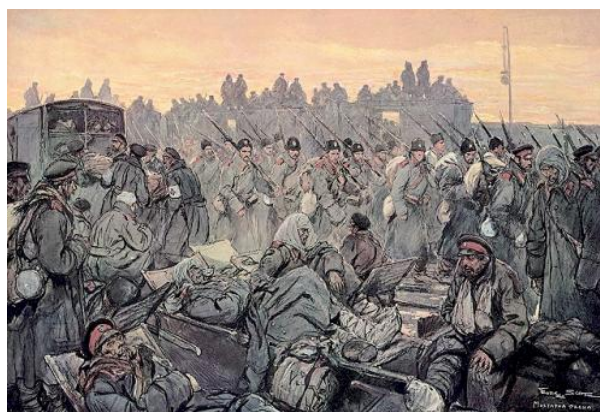
ABSTRACT

War reporters are intimately linked—in social, cultural and military, as well as in technological and economic terms—to the history both of the modern media and of modern war.

Whether they are anonymous or famous figures like Albert Londres, they offer the wider public their personal experience of the wars that they experience up close on a daily basis. Though controlled, censored or even used as propaganda mouthpieces, they nevertheless fulfill a 'mission': to inform.



Alan Wood, the war correspondent, typing his despatch in a wood outside Arnhem; with him are three members of the 1st British-Airborne Division. 18 September 1944



Paul E. Tomelin, The war correspondent Normand Eaves, at the microphone, and Norman McBain, at the controls, interviewing Jacques Dextraze, commanding officer of the Royal 22nd Regiment, Korea, 21 October 1951. Source: Ministère de la Défense nationale www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3397131



Georges Scott, 'A train coming from Çatalca brought back the injured and the sick. They are transported in ambulance cars which will take them to the hospitals. Fresh troops depart for the 'front' and pass those who are returning'. L'illustration, n° 3656, 22 March 1913 (watercolour). Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The Albert-Londres prize has been awarded to the best reporter in the written press since 1933 and to the best audio-visual reporter since 1985. These prizes pay tribute both to Albert Londres (1884-1932), war reporter and pioneer of international coverage, and to the journalists who have followed in his footsteps by making it their duty, as Edouard Hesley (Envoyé spécial) has put it, 'to see clearly, to strive to make others see clearly'. From the Crimean War (1853-1856) to the 2015 Ukraine conflict, they have participated fully in the rising influence of journalism through war, a media event of the highest order arousing widespread public interest. However, reporters have also been viewed as being too partial, contributing to disinformation and even to the spread of war propaganda.

Special correspondents: journalists at the heart of modernity

The destiny of the reporter is intimately linked to war and its development over the course of the modern period. Indeed, this profession is as much a cause as a consequence of the modernisation of war. The fact that the first reporters—such as Fenton, Robertson and Beato—appeared in the vicinity of the Crimean War was in part due to the fact that their voices could now be carried more efficiently thanks to the speed of steamboats, railways and the telegraph. Their work in the field, in conjunction with these technological developments, made the immediate spread of information possible. In an era of over-mediatisation of war, the job of the reporter has undergone profound changes. International news coverage has become omnipresent, transmitted by all available media. In a context of media competition, it now needs to follow events minute-by-minute, even at the risk of getting ahead of itself, while addressing an audience that has become more a consumer than a critic of news.

In nineteenth-century Europe, the war reporter was also part of a fashion for inquiry and investigation, whether

medical, administrative, legal or social. The new journalism appropriated these methods and tools. The first half of the twentieth century established the figure of the reporter around big names such as Londres, Saint-Exupéry, Kessel, Malaparte, Hemingway, Leroux and Tolstoy. A popular figure that reached its peak in the interwar years, the reporter even became a hero of fiction in successful novels—Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet competing to send their copy by telegram in Jules Verne's *Michel Strogoff* (1876)—or in the shape of Hergé's comic-book hero Tintin. Benefitting from the liberalisation of the press in the late nineteenth century, war reporting lent credibility to journalism.

After 1945, the profession followed a two-fold, paradoxical trajectory. On the one hand, reporters no longer became famous names unless they were themselves the victims of war. On the other, they increasingly became part of the news themselves: such was the case of Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in 2006, whose international fame owed much to her work in Chechnya. From then on, the war reporter would retain a specific place in the media landscape, as witnessed by the spread and success of biographical works retracing their careers and perpetuating the literary tradition of the first great reporters, such as Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *Le peintre de batailles*.

Journalists on a mission: the intermediation of war

The figure of the war correspondent is extremely varied. It covers a diverse range of terms: while, in English, the term 'war correspondent' seems the most pertinent, French makes little distinction between the terms *correspondant*, *envoyé spécial*, *journaliste d'investigation* and *reporter*. It also covers a wide range of profiles: men and women, professional journalists and writers, thinkers, soldiers and civilians; they might be famous, become so through their work, or remain anonymous.

All, however, are travellers with a spirit of adventure. Admittedly they are no longer systematically armed, as Albert Londres was when crossing Albania in 1915, but they remain at the heart of the action and participate fully in the experience of combat.

Taking on the 'mission' or 'duty' to report war, war correspondents accept the ambiguity of their perspective. They recount war, first and foremost, describe it and position themselves as witnesses and as narrators. Their ground-level narrative, built around a series of anecdotes, cuts across grand historical narratives, even if this also means embellishing them, and participating henceforth in the construction of myths, such as that of the 'trench of bayonets' in Douaumont based on an article by Cherfils. The war reporter also comments on war: its aims, its meaning, its absurdity. In the tradition of the nineteenth century, the reporter also undertakes an investigation in the manner of a historian of the present, even if often reproached for lacking critical distance from the events at hand. After all, reporters experience war on a day-to-day basis, in direct contact with combatants and civilians, perpetrators and victims. As such, they become the plaintiffs rather than the judges of the situation on which they report. Far from being simply columnists, they are authors, positioning themselves at the boundary between transmitting knowledge and emotions.

A profession between freedom and strong constraints

In form as well as content, writing in wartime in fact means describing wars. The means of covering war are as varied as the news media themselves. While written output remained the norm, images were used to illustrate reports from very early on. The tradition of illustration embodied by the drawings of Georges Scott or the front pages of the *Petit journal illustré* has endured in the drawings of Joe Sacco and the pages of the periodical *XXI*. The same is true of photography, whether used for illustration or as a discourse in its own right; the work of Robert Capa comes to mind. War reporting can also be broadcast on radio, filmed or put online, its formats varying according to the target audience: newspapers, (web)documentaries, etc.

'The first casualty of war is truth'. This phrase, attributed to the American Senator Hiram W. Johnson in 1917, reflects the constraints to which reporters are subjected. As such, their relationship to military personnel is complex. While they deprive the army of its monopoly of information in wartime—at least in terms of its diffusion—they constantly follow in its wake. This proximity results in a certain drift towards the instrumentalisation

of discourse, the control of information being vital for military strategy. While the French army has its own 'defence reporters' ('Reporters Défense'), the boundary between war correspondents and agents of propaganda has often been transgressed and continues to be blurred. The careers of Vassili Grossman and Konstantin Simonov are symbolic of such ambiguity. Following the advance of the Red Army, they published numerous articles that contributed to the mobilisation of opinion in the USSR during the war. More broadly, reporters contribute to shaping international feeling and to changing public opinion around the world or even participate fully in the process of ending wars, as shown by the example of Grossman's article 'The Hell of Treblinka', used as evidence during the Nuremberg trials.

Whether independent or special correspondents, war correspondents thus provide a direct and often unconventional perspective on the course of conflicts, thus fulfilling their primary role as intermediaries. As the spokespersons of conflicts, they sometimes also become the symbol of conflicts, picked out as hostages or as targets.

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