



BOOK REVIEWS

PHILIP HAMMOND and EDWARD S. HERMAN (eds), *Degraded Capacity: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis* (Pluto Press, London, 2000), 222 pp., ISBN 07453-1632-8 (pb), £14.99

This volume marks a significant milestone in the analysis of the role of the media in conflict. The focus of the analysis is Kosovo, but the critical analysis can be applied to other post-Cold War conflicts. What makes this book so remarkable is the scope of its comparative approach, which includes critiques of the reportage on Kosovo in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Norway, Greece, Russia and India. In the non-NATO countries, the study finds, there was widespread hostility to NATO policy. Within NATO, with the exception of Greece, 'the media provided a solid and uncritical phalanx of support for war' (p. 200).

The particular methodology adopted in *Degraded Capacity* is one of case researcher as advocate. The authors go far beyond indicating how their findings might be extrapolated and interpreted. Rather, they advocate strongly for the anti-interventionist position. This is value-driven research, which is perfectly acceptable in the world of qualitative research. As long as the phenomena (here, media reports and images) are accurately described, the researcher can interpret them through his/her own lens and push for acceptance by the reader. As an illustration of advocacy-driven research, the volume is quite strong.

The main value uniting the authors is a strong sense of anti-imperialism. Anti-imperialist anti-interventionists oppose the particular forms of American and European humanitarian diplomacy that have arisen in the aftermath of the Cold War, contending that hegemonic democracies use the rhetoric of humanitarianism selectively to validate the projection of their own military power and economic dominance. In the liberal democracies leading military interventions, media-driven public support for humanitarian intervention is crucial for politicians to accept the political risk of military engagement. In the Balkans, David Chandler in *Degraded Capacity* observes, 'the international politicisation of the Bosnian War meant the moral language of human rights shaped the course and conduct of the war itself' (p. 25). In giving victims a human face, journalism played a key role in the moralizing of the Kosovo conflict.

Were journalists reporting on Kosovo misused by opportunistic politicians or are they blameworthy collaborators? *Degraded Capacity* comes down firmly on the side of the collaborator theory. The authors assert that the media did not adequately explore the relationship between the intervention decision and

political opportunism. In the lead essay to the volume, Diana Johnstone illustrates this problem. She writes:

According to the official version, Kosovo had a problem, and Nato [sic] provided the solution. In reality, Nato had a problem and Kosovo provided a solution. Nato's problem was to find a new *raison d'être* in the absence of the 'Soviet threat'. (pp. 7-8)

Some journalists would contend that their job was merely to report the facts, and that the kind of political analysis the authors in *Degraded Capacity* suggest would have turned them into advocates. Even if they just stuck to the facts, however, *Degraded Capacity* argues that most journalists got Kosovo wrong. The authors decry journalists' uncritical acceptance of public information put out by NATO and other governmental actors. In their jointly written chapter, Edward Herman and David Peterson go so far as to state that 'CNN served as NATO's de facto public information arm during operation allied force' (p. 120). Herman and Peterson make a convincing case that CNN reporters 'internalised acceptance of Nato's aims, language, and frames of reference' (id.). As a result, CNN and other mainstream media rarely departed from Nato's perspective.

Another problem concerns selectivity, that is journalists calling attention only to certain humanitarian catastrophes that are in the interests of the Western imperialism. Many journalists are proud of the role they play in exposing and publicizing atrocities. They would argue that inherent in any news coverage is selectivity. That politicians pay more attention to some news coverage of crises over other coverage (and thereby encouraging even more news stories on the same topic) is not the fault of journalism, but of politicians.

None the less, through their many specific examples, the contributors to *Degraded Capacity* solidly ground their argument that the media played a partisan role in shaping public opinion over Kosovo. For example, Nick Hume speaks of the media 'nazifying the Serbs' (p. 70). This phenomenon did indeed exist and it is important to expose it. Yet, Hume's conclusion that the comparisons of Serbs to Nazis was always a deliberate attempt to create support for the NATO bombing is open to question. What Hume sees as a conspiracy may just be sloppy reporting. Similarly, what other authors see as the media's uncritical acceptance of official spin may just be a sign of lazy reporters.

As NPR's Tom Gjelten has noted with respect to war reporting in Bosnia, the duty of journalists is 'to describe the conflict objectively and completely, without regard for whose interests [are] served by [the] reporting' (Tom Gjelten, *Professionalism in War Reporting: A Correspondent's View*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, New York (www.ccpdc.org/pubs/gi/gjfr.htm)). Complete reporting, Gjelten says, demands not policy prescriptions, but inclusion of context. 'Good war reporting will put developments into a historical and political context and identify root causes of conflicts' (id.). Here is where journalism as a profession failed with respect to Kosovo. The authors of *Degrading Capacity* point to many ways in which NATO countries oversimplified and distorted history, obfuscating the cause of the conflict.

This book does raise serious questions about the ways in which partisan journalism contributed to the course of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. But it also exposes the lack of professionalism demonstrated by many war reporters

in Kosovo and the eagerness of politicians to capitalize on media sensationalism of victims and demonization of the enemy. Scholars interested in South European society should take heed of the powerful role played by journalism in conflict.

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THANASIS D. SFIKAS and CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS (eds), *Ethnicity and Nationalism in East Central Europe and the Balkans* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999), 432 pp., ISBN 1-85521-913-1 (hb), £50.00

This collection of essays originated as papers delivered at a conference at the University of Central Lancashire (UK) in September 1995, the contributions having been revised and updated and additional essays commissioned specially for the volume. The collection explores fairly well trod territory: the emergence of national movements and the process of nation-building in East Central Europe and the Balkans, the vicissitudes of nationalism under 50 years of communism, and the implications of the resurgence of nationalism for democracy and ethnic relations in the region today. The strength of the volume lies more in its historical and empirical findings than in its theoretical or conceptual insights, for which the authors rely principally on existing scholarship. A further strength is the uncommon source material on which many authors draw for their findings, much of which is unlikely to be familiar to any but the native scholar.

The 12 essays in this volume are grouped into three sections: a historical overview of nationalism in East Central Europe and the Balkans from the early nineteenth century to the present; the plight of ethnic minorities in Poland, Slovakia, Albania, and Bulgaria; and nationalism in the former Yugoslavia. The common threads that tie these essays together are weak, however. As a result the volume is little more than the sum of its parts and the reader will be inclined, therefore, to engage with it in an 'à la carte' fashion.

A greater degree of coherence is achieved within sections, the first and third in particular. Thanasis Sfikas's overview of Balkan national movements in the nineteenth century is a useful complement to Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman's treatment of nationalism in post-communist societies. While the first sees the process of nation-building and national unification as having achieved positive gains, notably emancipation from the Ottoman Empire, the latter views nationalism as a major threat to democracy—a theme that is echoed throughout the volume. Spencer and Wollman's essay deserves a place on the syllabus of any course concerned with contemporary European ethno-nationalism. The authors provide a lucid survey of theories of the nation state and nationalism as well as a succinct account of the development of nationalism in Eastern Europe—noting correctly, as not all contributors do, that socialism did not always suppress nationalism but often accommodated and fostered it. The essay is marred, however, by an irritating lack of correspondence between the text and the endnotes.