

THE FIRST CASUALTY

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 **Editorial**, 24 April 2016

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The Crimean War, in mid-19th century, introduced the world to the cardigan, the raglan jersey, and the balaclava head dress. It also introduced a new profession: the foreign correspondent. And almost immediately after the war the axiom "truth is the first casualty of war" was born because of the falsehoods spread by foreign correspondents on both sides, not to mention Tennyson's overheated and wrong-headed poem.

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Since then, as in any other profession, there have been capable and honest foreign correspondents and reporters who have been incompetent, ignorant or propaganda tools of their nation or their employers. Ernest Hemingway, a giant of American literature, didn't hesitate to color his coverage of the Spanish Civil War with propaganda for the side he favoured. A British daily reported that the Americans had been victorious at Pearl Harbor. Countless American foreign correspondents beat the Pentagon drum during the Vietnam War. More recently, "embedded" American journalists reported how the US forces had "liberated" Iraq.

Foreign correspondents can be notoriously uninformed and cavalier about the countries they report on: for example, the Middle East foreign correspondents of Western media who speak Arabic are as rare as atheists in Mecca. Most Western correspondents thus depend on local "minders" and a dubious local media to report what's happening. The situation has worsened in recent years as Western media have closed news bureaus around the globe and lone correspondents cover whole continents. This has given rise to the "airport reporter"... journalist who flies in to a hot spot for a few days and covers complicated conflicts with a few hundred words then flies away to chase another

conflict. Foreign correspondent Edward Behr's memoirs "Anyone Here Been Raped and Speak English?" say it all.

Considering the deteriorating condition of the profession, it's no surprise that many of its practitioners did a shabby job in reporting on the early April fighting between Azerbaijan and Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). As usual, East vs. West friction, national and corporate interests (Azeri oil more precious than Armenian blood), carelessness and sheer ignorance played a part in their coverage. And as on other occasions, the conflict was often covered in Manichean terms.

Here's how the anti-Armenian or indifferent foreign correspondents and commentators reported the war between Azerbaijan and Artsakh.

Rather than point out that the fighting erupted because Azeri forces had attacked Armenian positions, hostile-to-the-Armenians journalists wrote of "violence and shooting on both sides".

They said "both the Armenians and the Azeris spent enormous sums of building their armed forces" without mentioning that what Armenia spends is a pittance of what petro-rich Azerbaijan spends. In the past decade Baku has invested \$20 billion in its armed forces while the annual Azeri defense budget equals Armenia's total national budget. The journalists also didn't mention that impoverished Armenia has no interest in war and is forced to invest in its military in a failed attempt to keep up with the Azerbaijan martial profligacy. The equivalency was jarring.

The foreign correspondents talked vaguely of "numerous casualties on both sides" thus hiding the fact that the invading Azeris, who made the surprise attack and were better armed than Artsakh Armenians, suffered far greater losses in personnel and in weapons.

The foreign correspondents in many instances failed to mention that three Armenian soldiers were beheaded, and several unarmed and aged Armenian men were killed and mutilated in their homes. Perhaps the foreign correspondents didn't want to suggest proximity in Azeri and ISIS attitude and behaviour. Such a comparison would have painted the Azeris in pitch black and their leadership as war criminals.

The journalists wrote that prior to the recent fight there was almost daily shootings across the contact line. However, they didn't mention that almost in all cases the Azeris had initiated the shooting, forcing the Armenians to retaliate. They also didn't mention that no month has passed in recent years without Azeri President Ilham Aliyev or one of his senior military officers threatening to invade Artsakh.

While they occasionally talked about Azeri drones, many foreign correspondents omitted the fact that these very effective weapons, called Harop, were all imported from Israel. That country manufactures 40% of the world's drones. Mentioning Israeli complicity would have been a no-no in the Western media. In one instance one of these drones killed seven Armenian civilians in a bus.

To hide the David and Goliath aspect of the April fighting, these same journalists didn't mention that

the Artsakh fighters achieved victory without reinforcements from Armenia.

Although Azeri forces achieved very little in their costly blitzkrieg, correspondents who were anti-Armenian exaggerated the importance of the several hillocks the Azeris managed to take from the Armenian side.

The anti-Armenian media didn't mention the heroism of young Armenian soldiers who downed helicopter and drone with rudimentary weapons.

Not to offend Turkey, these same foreign correspondents failed to mention Erdogan's and Davutoglu's incitement for war against tiny Armenia. The correspondents also didn't mention that the Azeri defense minister had threatened to bomb civilians in Stepanakert, capital of Artsakh.

To depict the Armenians as the foe, the journalists made sure to mention that Russia had a military base in Armenia. Of course, they didn't say that Armenia was not only blockaded by the Turkbeijan Twins but was also threatened by 700,000-plus Turkish army, the second largest in NATO. In other words, the Russian military presence in Armenia is largely symbolic.

Some reporters even falsified the fighting in the '90s by claiming that the Azeris had fought the Armenians of Artsakh and Armenia, in addition to Russian soldiers. Not only did the Russian stop Armenians from advancing but the Azeris had hired Ukrainian pilots (\$1,000 per bombing mission) in addition to having brought Pakistani, Mujahideen, Taliban and other Islamic fighters to attack the small Armenian army.

To portray Azerbaijan as "peace-loving" some journalists said that Baku had cut its military budget by 40%. They didn't say that Baku was forced to do so because of the collapse of the oil market Azerbaijan depends on to stay afloat.

Another way of hitting the Armenian side—in a subtle way—is to call them "armed separatists who illegally control 20% of Azerbaijan" and Artsakh "a "breakaway region", "occupier" and "enclave". The use of "ethnic" to describe Artsakh Armenians is another gimmick. An ethnic group is by definition a minority. Artsakh residents are not ethnics. They are a nation--a nation which has lived in Artsakh for nearly 3,000 years. They are the settled indigenous inhabitants. The Azeris are the interloping Turkic/Tatar nomads. The reason Artsakh Armenians wrested the region from Azerbaijan during the collapse of the Soviet Union was because Joseph Stalin had given Armenian Artsakh to Azerbaijan to please Turkey, Azerbaijan's older brother.

To divert the readers' attention from the crux of the conflict, some journalists opined that President Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia needs a victory on the battlefield to improve his chances of continuing his reign past 2018. The same correspondent said Sargsyan is prepared to follow any Moscow directives where the now tense Turkey-Russia relations are concerned. In other words, nasty and belligerent Armenia threatens NATO. Of course no mention of the various NATO bases in Turkey, the establishment of a NATO base in Nakhichevan (another territory taken from Armenia by Stalin and

given to Azerbaijan) and Israeli access to Azeri airfields across from northern Iran.

In one instance a foreign correspondent wrote: "The number of incidents along the Armenian-Azeri line increased over the past year. On the Azeri side there is a civilian population that has not left its homes. They are subjected to Armenian fire, which is sometimes aimed at them one-hundred or more times a day." No mention that the incidents were ALWAYS started by the Azeris.

The same reporter ended his misleading report with: "Now that Azerbaijan has proved its military superiority, there is a chance for real diplomatic communication that could lead to an agreement." War is peace, petrol is a cleaning agent, and corrupt, dictatorial and belligerent Baby Aliyev is a modern Simon Bolivar.

What can Armenians in Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora do to counter the anti-Armenian reporting?

Armenia and Artsakh authorities should challenge foreign correspondents with the truth. They should write to them, to their bosses, and to the rival media. Armenian authorities should host these ignorant, biased, careless, unprofessional correspondents and provide them with knowledgeable and sophisticated guides.

Since the Armenians of Armenia and in Artsakh are not as well versed in English or French or Spanish or Arabic, the Diaspora should take over the role of letter writing to the media, including the increasingly effective social media. Young Armenians in the West should follow the coverage of Armenian affairs and send comments to news outlets. There is a silent media war going on the Internet between the Armenians and the Turkbejanis for the hearts and minds of the global public. We need more volunteers on our side.

When you write to the foreign media, back everything with credible facts; don't insult the writer or the media outlet; and keep your comment brief.

