

Truth Under Siege: War in Yugoslavia

Barbara J. Fraser

"Truth Under Siege," a 1994 documentary film about dissident media in Yugoslavia during the war, portrays a side of the conflict that was rarely or never seen by outsiders ? the struggle of independent media to survive and convey a more balanced view of the conflict.

The segment of the film screened on the afternoon of 6 July is based on interviews with radio and newspaper journalists who chose to continue working independently. In presenting the film, Dina Jordanova, lecturer at the University of Leicester, pointed out that both international and state-controlled media tended to oversimplify the conflict, reducing it to three warring sides. In fact, she said, a large number of people represented a "fourth side" ? those who believed in a democratic, multicultural state.

International media, which shaped outside opinion and contributed to the imposition of sanctions, usually painted a broad ? or, worse yet, inaccurate ? picture. They also tended to demonize the Serbs. "They say the Serbs are bombing Sarajevo. I?m a Serb and I?m not bombing anyone," says one journalist, one of a number of Serbs who chose to stay in Sarajevo, at personal and professional risk.

In the film, journalists working for media including a radio station and DANI magazine describe their efforts to live as "normal" a life as possible, provide balanced coverage and maintain hope. "Neutrality is also a crime. That?s why we ? speak critically about all sides," one says.

Their efforts contrast sharply with state-controlled media, which suppress stories or give them an ethnic slant, paving the way for the ethnic separation that follows. "I blame the media for the war," one woman says in an on-the-street interview. "They promote their own nations and politicians." The government also attempts in various ways to control or suppress independent media. DANI finds there is no paper to print one of its issues, although there is still plenty for state-controlled publications. "I think we?re being warned that if we criticise them too much, there will be less and less paper for us," one staff member says. Independent journalists are also sometimes required to have special licenses. And the government finally finds a pretext for removing the radio station?s transmitter.

The film also documents the international sanctions that followed two highly publicised (but never completely investigated) attacks, one on a bread line and one on a market, that killed a number of people. Independent journalists were doubly sanctioned ? by both the government and the international community. "We can?t change the system alone ? we need other independent radio stations and newspapers to change the opinion of the public," one journalist says.

In one especially moving moment, a young journalist says that she refuses to think of the future, because she knows she could be killed at any moment. Others, however, say outright that their struggle is for the future, and for a democratic, multicultural state. "If this looks like a dream," one says, "then let us keep the dream, because one day it will be reality."