

INTO THE STACKS

Of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Correspondents

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If the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk, what are we to make of the recent flurry of popular histories about foreign correspondents? In 2021, with *You Don't Belong Here*, Elizabeth Becker told us “How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War” in Vietnam, and Judith Mackrell gave us the stories of “Six Women Writers on the Front Lines of World War II” in *The Correspondents*.¹ The year before, Nancy Cott, the pioneering scholar of U.S. gender history, explored the intertwined biographies of interwar journalists Dorothy Thompson, Vincent Sheean, Rayna Raphaelson, and John Gunther in *Fighting Words*.² And then, in 2022, Deborah Cohen, an acclaimed historian of British and European cultural politics, subbed the relatively obscure Raphaelson out of Cott’s quartet and added in H. R. Knickerbocker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning European correspondent in *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*.³ (Cohen also elevates the role of Frances Gunther, John’s wife, who suffered from crippling writer’s block but was perhaps the most interesting thinker of the bunch.) When two leading, accomplished historians at the height of their games write essentially the same book, you know that something is in the air. So what era’s eclipse are these works marking?

At first blush, they seem a simple elegy for the golden age of print journalism. On one level, these books are romantic accounts of plucky journalists willing to ride planes, trains, and automobiles beyond the lines, to interview dictators without fear, to speak uncomfortable truths to power. They did so while working for powerful newspapers with a reputation for objectivity, an unassailable economic model, and a deep well of political clout.

We all know that era is done and dusted. The mass media has broken into a network of niche publications, partisanship and polarization rule the day, and the legitimacy of the “mainstream media” has crumbled. Most importantly, the economics of journalism have collapsed, a result of the evaporation of advertising monopolies at the close of the millennium. From 2000 to 2014, the number of journalists in the U.S. fell by a staggering 40 percent. It is perhaps no surprise that historians have begun to look back at journalists—their erstwhile rivals as political scribblers—with nostalgia and affection, that they feel some obligation to preserve a memory of the way things used to be.

Yet if the goal is to keep the candle burning during the dark ages of “fake news,” to paint inspiring portraits of heroic journalists toiling for stolid, dependable news organizations, these authors have gone about it in a funny way. For the simple fact is that there is surprisingly little bread-and-butter reporting in these books. Given their focus on war reporting, Becker and especially Mackrell do pay attention to the ins and outs of getting accredited for the front. But apart from that, the rhythms of the beat system, the rigmarole of filing and editing, the

¹Elizabeth Becker, *You Don't Belong Here: How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War* (New York, 2021); Judith Mackrell, *The Correspondents: Six Women Writers on the Front Lines of World War II* (New York, 2021).

²Nancy Cott, *Fighting Words: The Bold American Journalists Who Brought the World Home Between the War* (New York, 2020).

³Deborah Cohen, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: The Reporters Who Took on a World at War* (New York, 2022).

organizational logics of the newsroom and the newspaper and the broader media ecosystem are largely absent from these works.

Indeed, with one or two exceptions—Claire Hollingworth, say, or Sigrid Schultz—the central characters in these books were not the sort of workaday, anonymous reporters that constitute the spine of the news industry. They were commentators, interpreters, *writers*. While they published in newspapers and magazines, they were chasing greater glories; an awful lot of these histories is less about the writing of newspaper stories than it is about the writing of books: Helen Kirkpatrick's reporting on the Munich conference became a polemic (*This Terrible Peace*); Sheean wrote the best-selling semi-memoir *A Personal History*; Frances Fitzgerald, the wealthy, well-connected daughter of a Central Intelligence Agency deputy-director, whose mother was having an affair with Adlai Stevenson, turned her magazine coverage of Vietnam into the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fire in the Lake*.

Even when their words were published in magazines and newspapers, the pursuit of self-expression was their dominant mode. Martha Gellhorn's articles on World War II for *Colliers*, Mackrell notes, were almost diaristic. Dorothy Thompson, a central pole in both Cott and Cohen's books, was "becoming a commentator rather than a reporter"; she soon won a thrice-a-week column in *The New York Herald Tribune* in which she could opine freely (her column alternated with Walter Lippmann's).⁴ John Gunther, the other pole of Cott and Cohen's quartet, was a more conventional reporter, but his name would be made by his big, middlebrow books on the foreign scene. His early years working the Chicago beat feature here primarily as a rite-of-passage to be endured and overcome, a form of restriction to be transcended. When Sheean lost *his* job as a reporter, he welcomed it as a blessing, a form of liberation. He would, in the old Marxist idiom, be doubly free: free to report as he liked, free also of institutional support.

One leaves the books with the odd sense that far from representing some lost past, these journalists would not have felt all that out of place in today's media landscape, in which personalized voice is the coin of the realm and freelance precarity the path to fame for a select few. For they *were* the select few of their time; today they would be pampered members of the commentariat, not unemployed journalists. Dorothy Thompson's Substack is surprisingly easy to imagine.

It is significant, of course, that these journalists traveled the world, that they felt a moral duty to witness the great geopolitical clashes of their time. They mattered, to both themselves and their biographers, at least as much for what they saw, as what they said. "I'll never see enough as long as I live," Gellhorn wrote to Hemingway.⁵

Historians, too, are obsessed with seeing—they want to see, and to let their readers see, the past. And the authors of these books use the eyes of their correspondents to depict an era of grand geopolitical drama. The rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, the Indian independence struggle, and D-Day all feature, if not in a new light perhaps, then at least in vibrant detail. Through the eyes of her journalists, Cohen provides a particularly moving depiction of political violence in the waning days of Red Vienna—a fine example of how to use historical witnesses to recreate time and place and mood. And the varied itineraries of this diverse cast of characters mean we see less familiar things, too: the Rif War, interwar China, the Cambodian front of the war in South-East Asia.

These are books, in other words, less about the history of journalism, told through the example of the foreign correspondent, than they are about the history of foreign relations, told through the eyes of journalists.

Undergirding them is a belief that the journalist matters because they bring the world home to the American public, and through that act help to produce a more just and democratic

⁴Cohen, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*, 198.

⁵Mackrell, *The Correspondents*, 237.

American foreign policy. Cott makes most explicit the contemporary worries animating her history: “Americans again are divided, as in the interwar decades, on the question of international responsibilities versus inward-facing nationalism.” Her quartet of correspondents were admirable because they “alerted fellow Americans to tie their own fates to that of the rest of the world.... [and] urg[ed] Americans to face global responsibilities.”⁶ The contemporary threat is not the collapse of the news media, but the rise of Trumpist nationalism. What is ending is not journalism’s golden age, but the American Century.

It is telling that three of these books return to the clash with Fascism—the founding moment, oft-mythologized, for the rise of American global hegemony. And the focus on the journalist to tell this story is not surprising, for the figure of the journalist was crucial to the construction of the very moral categories that still define liberal internationalism’s guiding ideology. There is evil in the world, and the U.S., as a liberal superpower, is an indispensable guardian of freedom and justice. But it is also a democracy, its foreign relations driven by domestic public opinion. This makes the attitudes of the American public—fickle, selfish, unreliable—crucial to the global balance of power. Which in turn makes the foreign correspondent an actor with unique leverage over the tectonics of the global order.

It was a set of beliefs certainly shared by the correspondents in these books. I “imagined public opinion as a solid force,” Martha Gellhorn said, “something like a tornado, always ready to blow on the side of the angels.” “She fully believed,” Mackrell continues, “that if she wrote about Spain with sufficient clarity and power, America would be persuaded to drop its neutral stance and would help bring this war to a just conclusion.”⁷ Writing about Catherine Leroy, the French photojournalist who covered the Vietnam war for *Life*, Becker strikes a remarkably similar note: “Every photograph [Leroy] took that caught a moment of agony or triumph had the potential of generating a public reaction that might move global politics and make history.”⁸

In the ideology of liberal internationalism there was thus a close nesting between the idealization of American foreign policy and the idealization of the independent, international reporter. Each provided intellectual justification for the other. The censorship of the foreign correspondent was, like the unfortunate canary in the coalmine, the first sign that a foreign regime was becoming a threat to the international order. The journalist taught the public how to act in the world, which led to an American foreign policy that was morally righteous, and that also, on the way, affirmed the moral clarity of the early journalism. At the center of it all was the act of individual witnessing.

It is a vision of global politics that invests an awful lot in the moral and political judgment of the foreign correspondent. In the case of a clear evil like the concentration camps, bearing witness may be enough. But much of foreign relations is murkier, and working out when and why we should trust the interpretation of the journalist is a difficult problem. Why did journalists get it right in 1939, but so wrong in, say, Vietnam in the 1960s? What can that tell us about the best ways to ensure the public will be adequately informed about the world, and that foreign policy will be rational and just?

These books do not particularly help us answer these pressing questions. One might be tempted to say something about “objectivity”—to suggest that the journalists of the interwar years saw the world more clearly than their Cold War heirs. But that assessment does not fit all that well with the journalistic practice of the foreign correspondents depicted here. Objectivity was “shit,” thought Martha Gellhorn.⁹ “Above all else,” observes Cohen, her quartet of journalists “shared a common cause: the conviction that the ideal of journalistic objectivity

⁶Cott, *Fighting Words*, 1, 325.

⁷Mackrell, *The Correspondents*, 45.

⁸Becker, *You Don’t Belong Here*, 21.

⁹Mackrell, *The Correspondents*, xvi.

revered by their elders and editors had to yield to a different, more personal sort of reporting.”¹⁰

Even those most committed to objectivity, like John Gunther, were hardly cautious fact-checkers. He wrote at a furious, impossible pace—4,000–5,000 words one day on Argentina, the same again the next on Uruguay. It was little wonder that his coverage was superficial. He admitted to Frances—who thought he had a two-dimensional mind—that he did not know the first thing about Asia. Yet he hoovered up factoids and details on a whirlwind trip to fourteen countries, organized them into book of 600 pages, and sent them off to the printer without too much critical engagement. An old flame living in Shanghai had told Gunther, on a lark, that the Chinese never sweat. She was tickled pink when he repeated it in print. Such were the costs of this mode of journalism, in which journalists recently air-dropped into complex political conflicts had to quickly play the role of both omniscient guide and moral compass. Gellhorn was ignorant about Finland when she began covering the winter war; Leroy knew “next to nothing” about Vietnam when she first began reporting from the country.¹¹ One sometimes feels that it was a miracle that these journalists ever got to the nub of any political issue.

Deborah Cohen is the most attentive to the paradoxical fact that her correspondents got at the truth of the interwar crisis in part because they rejected objectivity in favor of personal reporting and a “sort of freewheeling go-where-I-please attitude.” Why was this a successful mode of knowledge production? According to Cohen, her correspondents thrived in a brief window of time in which this sort of intuitive, subjective, literary, interpretive journalism just *worked*: “Drawing bright lines—deciding what the ‘truth’ was—became a much more difficult enterprise absent Hitler and his lot.”¹² The journalism may have been superficial, even sloppy sometimes, but the geopolitics were simple—an appealingly ironic take, but hardly a way to think our way through the problem of what makes foreign reporting legitimate. In fact, it relies entirely on the stark morality of the interwar period to legitimize the accuracy of the journalism. For Cohen, like Cott, is ultimately more interested in embedding her journalists in a story about the end of American isolationism and the defeat of Nazism than she is in the history of journalism.

There is one important sense in which these books do make a serious contribution to the history of journalism. They put women at the center of the history of international and war reporting—the most “masculine” of domains—and reveal the pervasive sexism that structured the midcentury news industry. Women were denied the right to report from the front during World War II, because the armed forces believed the presence of a woman would so disturb the men as to undermine discipline. (And the ability to comfortably go to the bathroom. Clare Hollingworth was denied accreditation by one Lieutenant Colonel on the grounds that a whole battalion had recently become constipated; they were allegedly too embarrassed to move their bowels with a woman nearby.) Becker shows that the Vietnam correspondents spread rumors about women journalists in Saigon and sought to have Catherine Leroy expelled from the theater. Editors and publishers were loath to hire women into important roles. On top of that, of course, came the accumulation of all the day-to-day discrimination of the period, nicely documented in these books in infuriating, if sadly unsurprising, detail. When Gunther was to visit Knickerbocker, for instance, “Knick” was keen to play the gracious host: “Maid can also be furnished in type desired, please name age, weight, height and character of mammary glands preferred.”¹³

Yet interestingly, even the feminism of the books—with all of its attention to gender hierarchies—tends to place organizational structures in the background, to reduce politics to a

¹⁰Cohen, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*, xxiii.

¹¹Becker, *You Don't Belong Here*, 8.

¹²Cohen, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*, 408–9.

¹³Cott, *Fighting Words*, 279.

matter of individual will. It makes some sense given the context. For the women at the center of these books, the act of reporting—of developing a respected career as a worthy member of the profession—must have felt like an act of individual success, accomplished by oneself, over the resistance of one’s peers. Tellingly, the characters of these books, formed largely in the period between the first and second wave, did not understand themselves to be feminists. In fact, they were frequently hostile to feminism, especially in its more solidaristic forms. “I don’t believe in women’s liberation,” Kate Webb, the New Zealand-born Vietnam War correspondent was quick to assert.¹⁴ Virginia Cowles thought the women’s movement was “aggressive and humorless and loud.”¹⁵ Dorothy Thompson, who was close friends with the libertarian Rose Wilder Lane, was likewise dismissive of any effort to identify her as a feminist icon. She was just a successful individual.

The personal politics of these journalists, their self-understandings, their style of writing, the biographical method of the authors—all serve to train our focus on the subjectivity of the individual correspondent. And because these individuals were such habitual and prolix self-narrators, because they were prolific diarists and searingly honest letter writers—about their therapy, their love lives, their hopes and dreams and frustrations—their biographers have been gifted a remarkable source base. This quartet of books features enough alcoholism and adultery to power a shelf of midcentury novels or a *Mad Men: Foreign Correspondents* spin off. The books are thus a wonderful window into the social politics of their age. And they provide readable, engaging accounts of a particular mode and sensibility of international reporting.

But centering the subject is not the only way to write the history of international journalism. One could also center questions of structure and organization, of both the network and the news ecology. Some of the most interesting new scholarship on the history of international journalism focuses on precisely such problems: Kathryn McGarr’s exploration of the social and organizational pressures shaping foreign relations journalism in Cold War DC; Dina Fainberg’s comparative history of Soviet and U.S. correspondents across the Cold War; Vanessa Freije’s recuperation of the efforts of Latin American journalists to construct a more democratic international news economy in the 1970s.¹⁶ Embedded in Erik Linstrum’s kaleidoscopic study of the way that information about violence in Cyprus, Kenya, and Malaya circulated in postwar Britain is a fascinating account of reporting from these colonial conflicts—a potential model for U.S. scholars seeking to think about the “domestic” public sphere in the context of the violent militarism of the Cold War “periphery.”¹⁷ These are academic studies, doing different sorts of work than the collective biographies under examination here, and for a different audience. Yet the contrast is striking, and one wonders if it would be possible to close the gap, to blend the approaches.

Indeed, one can glimpse traces in these collective biographies of some of the many hierarchies that shaped the broader terrain in which these journalists worked. There was the power of the publisher over the hiring reporter: Dorothy Thompson famously lost her job for supporting FDR; Gunther, reporting for the *Chicago Daily News*, was instructed to balance his coverage of the early months of Hitler’s rule. (“The whole paper,” complained Gunther’s editor, “has been loaded with anti-Hitler copy for two weeks.”)¹⁸ There was the risk, familiar to us after the United States’ 2003 invasion of Iraq, that embedding journalists with military units

¹⁴Becker, *You Don’t Belong Here*, 153.

¹⁵Mackrell, *The Correspondents*, 370.

¹⁶Dina Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents: Soviet and American Reporters on the Ideological Frontlines* (Baltimore, 2020); Kathryn McGarr, *City of Newsmen: Public Lies and Professional Secrets in Cold War Washington* (Chicago, 2022); Vanessa Freije, “The ‘Emancipation of Media’: Latin American Advocacy for a New International Information Order in the 1970s,” *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (July 2019): 301–20.

¹⁷Erik Linstrum, *Age of Emergency: Living with Violence at the End of the British Empire* (New York, 2023), esp. ch. 5.

¹⁸Cohen, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*, 159.

would create forms of dependence and identification and perspective that would shape the coverage of military conflict. And there was the relative privilege of the American journalist, floating high on the back of a strong currency and free to roam the world to act as the eyes of the American public.

But these four books do not develop these themes. The fact that American journalists sometimes relied on local stringers gets occasional mention, but the fact that foreign journalists had basically no capacity to get *their* voices into the U.S. media is unexplored—a deep asymmetry with real consequences for American knowledge of the world. To center such problematics would be to emphasize the ways that even the midcentury press fell short of liberal, democratic ideals, and in ways that may have overcome the capacity of even the bravest journalistic witnesses to force the public into a sharper global awareness.

And lurking deeper in the background are even thornier problems, about how much American foreign policy has ever been based on deep public engagement with humanitarian crises abroad, about how often it has been driven by elite self-interest in spaces sheltered from democratic oversight, and how often it has been based not on a rational reckoning with the facts on the ground, but with the way those facts have been refracted through simplistic moral frameworks developed by journalists and then thrust upon a distracted, divided polity. Doing so would also require asking difficult questions about the extent to which journalists could effectively dissent from an entrenched policy agenda without sacrificing their legitimacy.

It may even require questioning the very scale and shape of America's global interests and commitments. In 1945, the Hutchins Commission on Press Freedom—an august collection of intellectuals brought together to make sense of the crises of American public opinion—articulated the problem of foreign journalism in the American Century most starkly. The U.S. was plainly taking on a role as a global superpower, but how to ensure that it would do so with democratic legitimacy? “To ask the American people in their exercise of power through opinion to make up their minds concerning the border conflicts and nationalist and imperial demands in Transylvania, Singapore, Iran, Ecuador and Iceland,” the Commission observed sharply, “can be done with confidence only if we have unusual and wholly responsible means of popular adult information and enlightenment on these matters.”¹⁹ Even at the height of the liberal order, at the moment of fascism's defeat, the Commission did not think such a mechanism yet existed—and clearly wondered if it ever could.

For all that we learn from these four books, rich in detail about the lives of their fascinating characters, there is thus still much to be done as we struggle to make sense of the informational structure of the globalizing world. A critical history of international journalism will need to think yet more deeply about questions of power and knowledge and democracy, to pay yet further attention to the organizational and institutional factors that pattern the international flow of information, as well as the role of the American public within the global order. Such histories will not only help us clarify the inner structure of liberal internationalism, such as it was; they will remind us of the many ways that even the midcentury press fell far short of democratic, globalist ideals. And in so doing, they may also help us imagine new forms of international journalism adequate to the many crises currently roiling both the global order and the American public sphere.

¹⁹Sam Lebovic, *A Righteous Smokescreen: Postwar America and the Politics of Cultural Globalization* (Chicago, 2022), 156–7.