

Behind the attacks on veteran journalist John Simpson

British government criticises BBC for its war coverage

Stuart Nolan, Barbara Slaughter
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Senior British government officials have denounced John Simpson, the BBC World Affairs Editor, for his supposedly "biased reports" about the impact NATO's bombing is having on Belgrade.

He has been accused of being "pro-Serb" and part of the "Milosevic propaganda offensive" for citing Serbian sources regarding the numbers of civilian casualties and damage caused by the NATO bombardment. Simpson is also charged with having been "grossly simplistic" by suggesting that ordinary Serbs were putting aside their differences with Milosevic to oppose the bombing.

The *Times* newspaper on Saturday April 17 describes private discussions in which officials used "strong language" against the veteran BBC reporter. The unnamed government sources describe Simpson's work as falling short of the "expected standards" of a leading journalist.

Labour Party ministers are said to be preparing to make a formal complaint to the BBC over reports by Simpson and other BBC journalists. In an earlier criticism about BBC coverage of the war, a Foreign Office official said, "The newspapers have been very supportive, but we are getting massacred by the broadcasters." (*Observer*, March 28).

Simpson is one of the few British journalists remaining in Belgrade. He has relayed reports about what he has seen and heard.

What is it that Downing Street objects to? On March 28, in a report entitled "Life under fire in Belgrade", Simpson stated, "But Serbs do not have to be ordered out of their schools or hospitals or factories to go and demonstrate against the West, as happens in Iraq. Here the feeling is genuine and it can break out at any moment." (BBC News Online)

Simpson's report contradicts NATO's predictions that the bombing campaign would strengthen opposition to

Milosevic. Simpson has warned of the dangers of demonising the Serbs and the consequences of ignoring the history of the region.

In a broadcast from Pristina on April 8, he reported that an attack on a local oil depot had destroyed the city's heating system. He added, "The worst damage is in the city centre. A telecommunications centre has taken a direct hit, and round about it other large modern buildings have been badly damaged--a bank, a social security office and a public library."

A question-and-answer programme with Simpson, hosted by BBC News Online, attracted 2 million visitors on April 14. The journalist explained, "I've spoken to a wide range of people here, many of whom took part in the 88 days of demonstrations against Milosevic two years ago, and they have all said that the bombing has put them behind him."

The campaign against Simpson began on the same evening that NATO spokesmen were denying responsibility for the bombing of Albanian refugee convoys. When introducing the news footage of the attack, Simpson pointed out that the Serbian authorities would not have allowed him onto the scene if they were not confident of the facts.

A previous report from Simpson that NATO jets had destroyed a passenger train on a bridge near Leskovac was later confirmed. Forced to finally admit NATO's responsibility for this attack on civilians, Cabinet officials aimed their fury at the veteran BBC journalist.

He came under similar attacks by the former Tory government for his broadcasts from Iraq in the 1990 Gulf War. Earlier this year, during the renewed bombing of Iraq, Alistair Campbell (Tony Blair's Chief Press Secretary), Defence Secretary George Robertson, and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook all lodged formal

complaints about the BBC's coverage.

In the first week of NATO bombing of Serbia, BBC *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman and John Humphrys of BBC Radio Four's *Today Programme* were also criticised. Downing Street officials advised Prime Minister Blair to pull out of a planned interview with Paxman, in what amounted to a formal protest, because they objected to his "sceptical tone". Humphrys was attacked for his regular use of the word "mess" when discussing NATO strategy during an interview with George Robertson.

In another interview, Robertson objected when Paxman said that "bombing Milosevic to the negotiating table" had failed. Robertson cut short the interview.

Simpson has received many international awards for his war journalism. His colleagues at the BBC have defended him. Richard Ayre, deputy chief executive of BBC News, said, "It is important that audiences are given a true account of the public mood in Belgrade, not simply an account of what NATO governments might prefer to hear." (The *Times*, April 16)

In the *Guardian* of April 17 Simpson defended himself, saying, "Impartiality of telling what's happening in front of you is bred into me. I've been in the BBC for 34 years now. I know how to have control over what I say or write." Simpson added that he knew far too much about the crimes of the Milosevic government to be taken in by their propaganda, "But I absolutely refuse point blank to put on all that easy chauvinistic stuff, talking about Nazis, fascists and evil empires. Facts speak for themselves."

In his regular weekly column in the *Sunday Telegraph* April 18, Simpson expressed contempt for his faceless critics in Downing Street. He said that the press in Yugoslavia had seized on the whispering campaign against him, believed to originate from Alistair Campbell. "They take it as a sign that for all its vaunted adherence to liberty, the British government is just as keen to control the media as Slobodan Milosevic is."

He continued, "This is my thirtieth war. I know very well how governments try to manipulate the media... There's a depressing pattern: when things go wrong British governments tend to lose their nerve. They get frightened at the thought of people getting independent, objective information so they start whispering about the personal abilities of the broadcasters. Anonymously, of course."

The attack on Simpson is a significant political development. Most British radio and television stations make no secret of their support for NATO's actions. Now

there is an attempt to silence one of the few remaining critical sources of information. The pressure being brought against the BBC comes precisely at the point when the true social and human implications of the war--in the form of NATO attacks on civilians, both Serb and ethnic Albanian--are being revealed. This makes the preservation and strengthening of the media's overwhelmingly pro-NATO role, and their promotion of lies and distortions to conceal the war's real aims, all the more necessary.

The attempt to suppress the few reports that provide a picture of the tragic consequences of the bombing can only mean that NATO is planning to intensify its attacks on civilians. Another article in the *Times*, "Clear targets: Why there can be no let-up in the bombing", makes apparent that the aim of the air attacks is the destruction of Yugoslavia. A further, less direct indication of this, is the appointment of Alistair Campbell to overhaul NATO's media strategy, in order that the Western governments can present a common front.

Campbell believes that some of the public relations fallout resulting from the NATO bombing of the Albanian civilian convoy could have been lessened if London, the Pentagon and Brussels had adopted a common line. He has advised NATO spokesmen to say nothing further on the subject.

The fact that the Labour government is seeking to prevent the public from having access to any critical reporting provides a clear warning of the danger to democratic rights presented by this war for working people all over the world. What kind of "free press" can there be, if the only information and views allowed to be disseminated are those of the government?

The neo-colonialist and militarist policies being carried out by the US, Britain and NATO against weaker nations such as Serbia are, in the end, incompatible with the exercise of basic democratic rights at home.

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