

CHRISTIANE AMANPOUR



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Throughout the Bosnian War, journalist Christiane Amanpour reported from the front line, witnessing the violence of a bloody civil war and the genocide which unfolded in Srebrenica. Her experiences raise challenging questions about the role of journalists and media organisations during situations of conflict and genocide.



'I do actually think that when journalists do their duty and tell the story and report the truth, that it does eventually make a difference.'

Christiane Amanpour was born in London in 1958 and was raised in Tehran, Iran, before moving back to the UK aged 11. She studied journalism at university in the United States and has had a prominent career as a news correspondent.

It was during her time working at the American TV news network CNN that Christiane was sent to report from the Bosnian War. Regularly appearing on national news, Christiane travelled around the country, witnessing the violence as it unfolded.

In 1992, as Yugoslavia disintegrated, the Bosnian government declared independence. This was resisted by the Bosnian Serb population who saw their future as part of 'Greater Serbia'. In an attempt for political domination the Bosnian Serb forces conducted a campaign of terror. Muslims and Croats were forced from their homes and detained in concentration camps, such as the notorious Omarska camp, and many were murdered and subjected to sexual violence and rape.

Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia was the scene of the longest siege in modern warfare. From April 1992 to February 1996, the city was encircled by the Serb-controlled army. Christiane witnessed the terrible effect that the conflict had upon the city's residents, particularly children and other civilians who endured shelling for nearly four years.

Foreign journalists who reported on the conflict often based themselves at the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo – a place which became infamous due to its proximity to 'Sniper Alley' – one of the most dangerous areas of the city. In an interview from 1993 Christiane reflects:

'I was asleep one night last fall when I heard this awful whistling noise near my room at the hotel. It was a 105-millimeter mortar shell from a howitzer, apparently mis-aimed. It landed in a room two doors down from mine - but it didn't explode, although it demolished the room from the sheer impact. If it had exploded, it would've been over for me.'

For Christiane, it was important to cover the conflict despite the dangers of remaining in a war zone. At the start of the conflict, few international journalists covered the story, although this changed as the war progressed and there was increasing attention from media outlets and governments around the world.

One of the most remarkable moments from Christiane's time covering the Bosnian War came in 1994, a year before the genocidal massacre at Srebrenica, during a live news conference with the President of the United States, Bill Clinton. Appearing by video link from Sarajevo, Christiane accused the President of a 'lack of policy' and 'constant flip flops' when dealing with the unfolding situation. Clinton appeared frustrated by the question and defended his approach, but the moment has since come to capture the ethical question of the role of journalists, particularly in times of war and genocide.

In July 1995, against the backdrop of the ongoing civil war, Bosnian Serb forces led by Ratko Mladić descended on the town of Srebrenica, which had been declared a 'safe zone' by the United Nations. This did not deter the Bosnian Serb troops from forcing women and children onto trucks and buses, separating out the men and boys to be killed. In 2015, Christiane reflected on watching Serbian footage of Ratko Mladić handing out sweets to children, laughing with his soldiers and reassuring civilians. She said, 'It is one of the most chilling pieces of video I've ever seen in my life.' Shortly after the footage was taken, around 8,000 Muslim men and boys were killed in Srebrenica in what remains the single largest mass murder in Europe since 1945.

With journalists from around the world reporting on the desperate situation in Bosnia, Christiane felt a personal responsibility to share the experiences of the people affected by violence and genocide. Reflecting on her experiences during the 20th anniversary of the genocidal massacre at Srebrenica she wrote:

'As a young reporter, Bosnia is where I found my voice. As a person who had been taught the values of freedom, democracy, human rights, religious and ethnic tolerance – to see all that under mortal threat in Bosnia – Sarajevo, Srebrenica and all the other villages, towns and cities – was formative. I resolved to do what I could to fight it – through my words, our pictures and our huge and powerful platform.'

Christiane's approach to covering the war in Bosnia prompted some people to question the role and responsibility of news correspondents, with some accusing her of taking sides and overstepping traditional boundaries of journalistic objectivity. Both at the time and in the years since, Christiane has defended her approach, arguing that on the ground in Bosnia it was her moral responsibility to give a voice to those who were being killed in the genocide.

In her own words: 'Objectivity I believe means giving each side their hearing but not treating each side the same. Not drawing a moral equivalence which would be a false equivalence... The forces who are bombarding, besieging and shelling a city full of civilians do not have the same moral standing as those who are being bombed, shelled, starved and besieged.'

Christiane still works for news network CNN International, covering global affairs and interviewing people from around the world. Her experiences in Bosnia were formative for her career and Christiane continues to debate journalistic ethics, human rights and world affairs.

Find out more... Genocide in Bosnia: hmd.org.uk/bosnia