Topics in Cultural Journalism:
Cataclysm: The Journalism of War, Terrorism, and Human Rights
JOUR-GA 2018
Fall 2016
Wednesdays, 6-9 p.m.
20 Cooper Square, 7th floor library

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“The fundamental experience of everyone who has lived through much of this [20th] century is error and surprise.” --Eric Hobsbawm, historian

This is a course about war and violence, ethics and human rights. We will look at some of the key political events of the 20th- and early 21st centuries, and try to understand how the world we live in came to be. And we’ll study how journalists wrote about those events, and were changed by them.

This class is predicated on two ideas: that historical knowledge is necessary for any journalist (and any citizen); and that journalists--far from simply writing the "first draft" of history--have, throughout the last century, created works of lasting literary, moral, intellectual, and historic resonance.

Throughout the term we will return to certain questions, including the changing nature of violence; the tension between nationalism and universalism; the question of “progress”; the emergence of disputed concepts such as "crimes against humanity" and "human rights." We’ll consider the ways in which “the face of war” in the 20th and 21st centuries changed—from “traditional” war to genocide to terrorism. And we’ll look
at the problem of violence from journalistic, political, and ethical perspectives.

Readings: All of these books are available, in paperback, at TK.

Articles will be xeroxed and distributed to you in advance. The syllabus may change as the term progresses.

Books to buy (listed in roughly chronological order):

**George Orwell, Homage to Catalonia [edition tk]**
**Martha Gellhorn, The Face of War**
**Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz (If This is a Man)**
**Ryszard Kapuscinski, Shah of Shahs**
**Tina Rosenberg, Children of Cain**
**Peter Maass, Love Thy Neighbor**
**Philip Gourevitch, We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families**
**Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull**
**Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower**
**Richard Engel, And Then All Hell Broke Loose [hardcover]**

Assignments:

Phrases such as “human rights,” “the right of self-determination,” “crimes against humanity” and “humanitarian intervention,” and words like “genocide,” “democracy,” “terrorism,” “fundamentalism,” “fascism” and “colonialism,” are frequently, and often opportunistically, employed in discussions of present-day world conflicts. How are these words used, and what—if anything—do they mean? Are they descriptions, weapons, indictments, or something else?

To think about this more deeply, each student will keep a file of feature articles found throughout the term, using as wide an array of sources as possible, in which one of these phrases or concepts is used. At the end of the semester, you will present your file to me along with an analysis of the pieces chosen and what light, if any, they shed on the contentious questions your chosen word or phrase claims to address. You will
present one such piece to the class and lead a discussion on it (a sign-up sheet will be circulated at the first class).

Response papers: For each week’s readings, each student will write a 250-350 word response paper. We’ll read these aloud and discuss in class. Please try to distinguish, when thinking about the readings, between your feelings and your thoughts: both are legitimate, but it is important to distinguish them.

Final paper: For your final paper, you will write a review-essay incorporating at least two of the books we’ve read in class and at least one that is not on our syllabus; you may also incorporate past or current articles. The paper should focus on one of the main themes we’ve discussed throughout the semester. We’ll discuss this more in class.

Our schedule:

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: George Orwell (Spanish Civil War)

Week 3: Martha Gellhorn (World War II, and aftermath)

Week 4: Primo Levi (the Holocaust)

Week 5: Ryszard Kapuscinski (Iranian Revolution)
   plus: current dispatches from Iran

Week 6: Tina Rosenberg (Latin America)
   plus: current dispatches from Latin America

Week 7: Peter Maass (Bosnian War)
Week 8: Philip Gourevitch, Jean Hatzfeld (Rwandan genocide)  
    plus: current dispatches from Rwanda

Week 9: Antjie Krog (South Africa)  
    plus: current dispatches from S. Africa

Week 10: Lawrence Wright, “Letter from Gaza,” the New Yorker  
    (Israel/Palestine)  
    David Remnick, “Seeds of Peace,” the New Yorker  
    plus: current dispatches from Israel & Palestine

Week 11: Lawrence Wright, Looming Tower (9/11 terror attacks)  
    plus: current dispatches from war on terror

Week 12: Looming Tower, cont.

Week 13: Richard Engel (Arab Spring)  
    plus: articles on ISIS, to be distributed

Week 14: Film: “The Square” (Arab Spring)  
    Final Thoughts  
    &: Final Papers Due