



## ATROCITIES

# Spin doctors of war

*In a civil war, as in any marketing campaign, it's important to get third-party endorsement for your story. Karl Waldron reports on the PR of conflict*

It would have been perhaps the worst atrocity so far in a war where horror follows on horror; Serbian irregular snipers paid the equivalent of £300 for every child kill they achieve. The story was related by Steve Watt, a volunteer aid worker.

"They target the children," he said, "because of the money and because they are easier to kill. With their small size, the bullets make a bigger mess."

Mr Watt's words were transmitted—along with his claimed statistic for 11,000 child injuries from gunshot wounds and some 400 child-deaths—on Sunday, the BBC's morning radio news service, *The World This Week-end* and, perhaps most importantly, on *News-Hour*, the World Service flagship news programme the following day. They were thus read into the record for a potential English language audience of 300 million listeners worldwide.

And the story is almost certainly not true. No one imputes any ulterior motive in Mr

Watt's relating what he had been told by Croats and Bosnians in his brave journey in a truck convoy on the road to Sarajevo; but one does have to question the BBC's editorial judgment in the manner of its transmission.

Like many others of its genre, this story had its origins in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but owes more than a little in its passage to Croat/Bosnian, and now international, folklore to the outpourings of a PR company's fax machine in Washington DC.

While origins of atrocity stories are frequently difficult to discern in war, the history of this one, unusually, can be traced. It first gained its credence in the Croatian media and, like many others from both sides of the conflict, it has little or no first-hand substantiation.

It made an appearance in an article written by Irtse Zortic, a Bosnian Muslim journalist working for a Croatian newspaper, the contents of which were subsequently repeated in other Croatian newspapers and formed

part of a news broadcast transmitted by Radio Croatia International.

The service, which peppers its broadcast with items of blatant propaganda passing as "news", is treated with disdain by the western media. But like all international broadcasts, it is monitored by the BBC at Caversham, whose operators hear its other favoured subjects—Serbian salt mines operated with Croat and Bosnian slave labour and Kardish militia fighting, for huge sums of money, for the Serbian cause.

The Caversham monitors record important information from the airwaves in the *Summary of World Broadcasts*. One said recently: "Frankly, much of what we get from all sides in this conflict is unusable, useless. Unless it is a speech or something like that, it usually finds its way to the bin." Which is what happened to Zortic's story.

Zortic stands by his story, but admitted last week that he was given it by the Croatian Information Ministry. In a private interview, and that he made no further checks. "Who

could I ask?" he says. "You can't expect us to ring them [the Serbs] and believe them when they say it isn't true." But the tale, which is so widely accepted as fact in Croatia as to be described as an "old chestnut" by a senior western journalist covering the Yugoslav conflict, owes much to an earlier communication from the fax machine in the offices of Ruder and Finn in Washington.

Last week, Rhoda Paget from the company admitted to assisting in disseminating the "Cash for a Corpse" story. "We were told it by a minister in the Croatian government. We merely informed them of its importance and have never checked its honesty. Neither do we have the resources to do so. Frankly, it's just not our job. It's the journalist's job to check them out . . . but it came to notice by a surprising route." Ruder and Finn's "job" is to handle the PR account for the governments of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina at a cost of US\$18,000 (£9,700) a month, while British lobbying company, Ian Greer Associates, act in a similar regard "on behalf of Serbian interests", their undisclosed fee paid by a "syndicate of Serbian businessmen".

According to John MacArthur, publisher of *Harpers magazine*, and author of a book, *Second Front*, on the subject of public relations and propaganda in the Gulf war, it is the American company that is currently doing the better. "The relative success of these companies in getting horror stories into print is critical to the setting of the international political agenda," he says. "They affect votes in both the Security Council and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe by altering the mind-set of an electorate who would never dream of reading a UN resolution. They establish the conditions which make it possible to be involved in a war."

MacArthur points to the success of PR company Hill and Knowlton in promoting the "Dead Kuwaiti Babies" story, in which Iraqi troops were alleged to have taken Kuwaiti babies out of their incubators and left them to die on the hospital floor. The story relied on the testimony of an eye-witness who subsequently gave televised testimony to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. The "eye-witness" was subsequently revealed to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to Washington who had been "told" about the killings by witnesses who have never since been produced.

"If this had been known at the time," John Edward Potter, senior Republican on the caucus said, "she would have not been allowed to testify". But the story of the boy was not published until January this year, nine months after the end of Desert Storm. "Nayirah's testimony was critical for establishing the conditions where the American public would accept the deaths—any death—of their own," says MacArthur. "It is ironic and immoral that such changes should have brought about misinformation, perhaps even a downright fake."

According to Tom O'Sullivan, a journalist at *PR Week*, both Steve Watt's and Nayirah's testimony provide what is called in PR-speak, "a classic third-party endorsement", although Nayirah's was not revealed as such at the time. A story is told, someone else

# Body counts

Reporting on the claims and counter-claims of the numerous atrocities in Bosnia and Serbia has become a journalistic minefield. Both sides have long since embraced propaganda, accusing the other of orgies of violence that hark back to the atrocities committed in Yugoslavia during the second world war.

I saw similarly exaggerated claims during the Romanian revolution of 1989, when disembowelled bodies of pregnant women were paraded in front of the press in Timisoara. In fact, these women had died of natural causes and had been cut open for autopsies—not butchered by Ceausescu's Securitate.

For the first time last week, one side in the Yugoslav conflict retracted an atrocity claim. A thousand Bosnian Serbs were alleged to have been massacred in Odzak in northern Bosnia, which had been captured by the Croats for three months. The Belgrade news agency, Tanjug, withdrew the claims when commanders from the Bosnian Serb army said there was no evidence of any graves. It then emerged that the reporter had picked up the claim from *Glas*, a paper published in a Serb stronghold. This rare retraction could signal a new trend, sparked off by the realisation that false reports only escalate the scale of the sectarian-style atrocities on either side.

The Croations have produced a 500-page book with pictures and eye-witness statements of Serbian atrocities. I saw pictures of burnt bodies with their hands tied and their genitals cut off and forced down their throats. When I was in Split last month, re-

ports came through of a massacre of 15 Croatian soldiers in western Bosnia. Their faces had been shot to pieces, they had been castrated, and two fingers from each hand had been cut off, leaving the three-fingered Serbian salute.

Serbian tell similar stories of mass torture. The strongly partisan paper, *Politika*, has accused the Croats' crack Ustashe force of "ethnic cleansing" in eastern Bosnia, and of razing Serb villages with modern German weaponry.

Speaking to some Chetniks (crack Bosnian Serb troops) in a Serb stronghold near Sarajevo, prejudice and propaganda was very apparent. The Chetniks, many of them teenagers, told me that during their ethnic cleansing operations, they had been attacked by drug-crazed Muslim Bosnians, and had rescued Serb children who had been raped by Muslims. They said that they had proof that Libyans, African and Iranian mercenaries were fighting for the Bosnians. In the same breath, they said that all Muslims were "dirty Arabs who wipe their bottoms with their hands".

The atrocities inflicted on Bosnian Muslims have been documented in a report called *Save the Humanity*, which was published last month by Bosnian peace and non-governmental organisations based in Sarajevo. It draws on 20 statements made by eye-witnesses, who said they would be willing to stand up in an international court and repeat their statements.

These factual accounts seem credible, but some of the stories I heard in Sarajevo could easily have been exaggerations or pure myth. As the war in Bosnia continues, new atrocity stories come to light every day, increasing the stakes, and the bitterness on all sides. Such horror stories, whether true or false—and some certainly are true—will divide communities in Bosnia and the other Yugoslav republics for years to come.

Kevin Weaver

retells it and in the retelling it often gets embolstered. Watt says he was told the child-killings story on the road to Sarajevo and has no first-hand knowledge. That means the real, true story is that someone, preferably English or an English speaker and a non-combatant, believes in its authenticity. "But the listener doesn't take it in as hearsay—instead they hear it as recorded fact," says Sullivan. "You could argue, that is what the PR industry is all about."

According to an executive at Hill and Knowlton who, although not acting for any Balkan interests, refused to be named, the fact that Croatia is not subjected to any embargo, even for weaponry, while Serbia faces sanctions, may itself be due to better PR. A recent investigation of reported atrocities showed that the number of substantiated incidents was similar: four perpetrated by Serbs, two by Croats, one by Muslims, and two by Muslims and Croats together.

John Kennedy, a Conservative parliamentary candidate at the last election, now a PR

consultant with Ian Greer Associates who has worked on the Serbian account, says that the Serbian government in its support for Serbian irregulars is "faced with losing battles on the second (propaganda) front precisely because they have been winning the war. The public relations defeats do not bother the fighters, of course, but they have an indirect effect on their ability to prosecute their war."

Mr Kennedy, usually labelled by BBC radio—and without further qualification—as "an expert on Serbian affairs", feels Greer's way is more subtle than that favoured by the American companies. "We use the press," he said "but it is behind-the-scenes lobbying, and the use of governmental opinion to sway international governmental opinion where we are the most effective. The Serbs will now have more opportunity for pressing their cause. Milan Panic, prime minister of the rump Yugoslavia, numbers Lawrence Eagleburger, US assistant-secretary of state among his closest friends.