

War reporter killed in brutal Syrian siege

Legendary war correspondent Marie Colvin was killed yesterday in the city of Homs by a Syrian Army shell. Her determination to expose a massacre ended up costing her life.



CITIZENSHIP
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Marie Colvin, left, and a street scene from Homs, where she was killed on Tuesday morning © Getty Images

‘I watched a little baby die today,’ wrote Marie Colvin. She was in the city of Homs, in Syria, which has, for days, been under sustained bombardment from soldiers loyal to the regime of the dictator Bashar al Assad. Rockets and mortars have been pulverising civilian areas, while snipers gun down anyone who dares to move around in the open. The situation, said Colvin, is ‘absolutely sickening.’

That harrowing report was to be her last. Yesterday morning, Colvin was killed when two shells hit the makeshift media centre in which she was staying. The attack also claimed the life of another journalist, young photographer Remi Ochlik – along with nine further victims.

Colvin was one of only a handful of Western journalists left in the city. While others fled, she took a smuggler’s route into Homs, braving gunfire and rockets as she snuck through the enemy lines.

It was not that she did not know the risks. She had covered conflicts across the globe, including in Sri Lanka, where she lost an eye in a grenade attack. But she had a passionate belief in the importance of bearing witness to the world’s horrors. At least, she said, her reports would mean that ‘nobody could say we did not know.’

Colvin and Ochlik join a long list of journalists who have become victims of the conflicts they aimed to expose. Ernie Pyle, one of the most popular American writers of the mid-20th Century, was shot while covering the final days of World War II; great photographer Robert Capa died after stepping on a landmine in Indochina, where, not long later, the Vietnam War was to kill no fewer than 63 foreign journalists.

And war reporting is riskier now than ever: journalists reporting recent conflicts in the Middle East have been actively

targeted by terrorists who see them as representatives of a foreign culture.

With this new threat, many reporters choose to remain in protected compounds, if they go to war zones at all. Colvin and Ochlik belonged to a hardy group who believe that the truth of a conflict can be fully conveyed only from its front line.

LINES OF FIRE

Every death in war ought to be mourned – but, say critics, journalists like Marie Colvin are as foolish as they are brave. No news story is worth risking your life for. For editors to encourage this sort of bravado, they say, is deeply irresponsible.

For Colvin, however, eyewitness accounts of war zones were important enough to risk everything. Only by writing from the gritty edge of a conflict can its horrific realities be understood; her reports, she believed, were ‘rough first drafts of history.’

Q & A

Q Will this affect how much we know about Homs?

A Marie Colvin was the only UK newspaper journalist in Homs, and one of the most ever-present reporters in conflict situations worldwide. Her death deprives us all of knowledge and understanding about events in Syria – as well as future wars. In

the short term, yesterday’s events probably increased public understanding: The Times have made Colvin’s final report freely available, and between her death and the report’s contents, the spotlight on Syrian violence has intensified.

Q Will it change the west’s policy towards Syria?

A Colvin reported that the inhabitants of Homs are pleading for foreign help, and the

UK and France both responded by confirming their support for Syria’s rebels. But with China and Russia strongly opposed, the way forward is unclear.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

‘Play with fire and you’re going to get burned.’

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► War reporters killed in brutal Syrian siege

WORD WATCH

Homs – Known as the ‘Capital of the Revolution’, Homs is a large and diverse industrial city in western Syria. The Syrian uprising’s most intense protests have occurred here, and since May it has been under siege by the government. Shelling by the army has claimed hundreds of lives, and this month the violence has intensified.

Sri Lanka – Sri Lanka is an island off the south coast of

India. For 26 years from 1983, separatists in the North-East known as ‘Tamil Tigers’ waged an on-off civil war against the government. The rebels used suicide and time bombs, and both sides drew criticism for human rights abuses. In 2009 the war finally ended, although occasional violence continues.

Indochina – Three Southeast Asian countries – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia – were previously grouped together under French rule as ‘Indochina.’ In

the 1950s the region witnessed struggles against colonial rule, which were followed by even bloodier wars after independence had been gained.

Vietnam War – After Vietnam gained independence, a vicious civil war was fought between the US-backed South and the communist North, supported by China. America’s use of indiscriminate tactics like ‘carpet-bombing’ and napalm sparked an enormous anti-war movement at home; ultimately they also failed to bring victory.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is war reporting worth the cost in lives?
2. Does the media have a *duty* to report on wars and disasters?

ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you are the editor of *The Times*. Write a paragraph defending your decision to allow Marie Colvin to report from Homs.
2. Research the life of a great war reporter from history and create a short psychological profile of your subject. Why did they choose such a dangerous career?

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 **NOTES**

