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Fascicolo 16. Novembre 2023
Storia Militare Contemporanea

a cura di
VIRGLIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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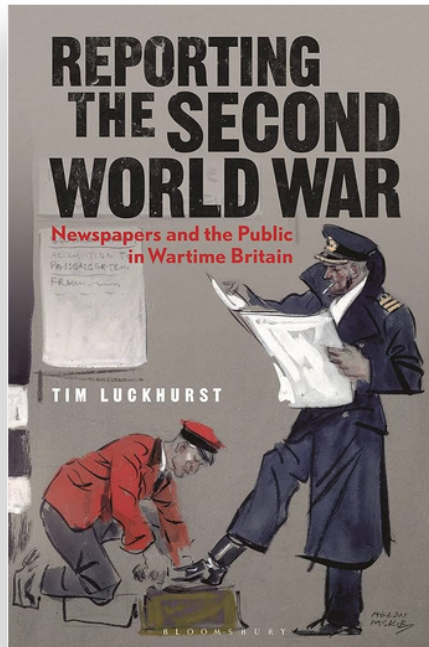
Distintivo speciale del Dipartimento della Guerra concesso agli addetti al Progetto Manhattan per la Bomba A(Atomica) che hanno lavorato almeno sei mesi tra il 19 giugno 1942 e il 6 agosto 1945

Foto 1198 DOE Ed Westcott 1945 Oak Ridge Tennessee (Wikimedia Commons)

TIM LUCKHURST,

*Reporting the Second World War:
The Press and the People 1939-1945*

Bloomsbury Academic



Should journalists always tell the truth regardless of the consequences? Or should they sometimes self-censor and conceal the truth in the public interest? Where does the boundary lie? And who gets to decide these things? What about when the stakes are high — for example during wartime? A timely new book reveals these vexed questions are eternal and reminds us that each generation must find its own set of answers and its own way through the epistemic and moral maze.

Tim Luckhurst's magisterial *Reporting the Second World War: The Press and the People 1939-1945* does two things: It provides a scholarly, deeply-researched

account of how British journalists reported the Second World War, and, in doing so, it shines a light on the practices of journalism. That a history book should succeed in doing both things is a mighty achievement. In Luckhurst's telling, journalism's driving motives oscillate between the desire to search for truth — and communicate it fearlessly to audiences, and the desire to do what is socially responsible — if need be by self-censoring in the public interest.

At the outset, L. notes that his approach does not easily fit the dominant constructivist, Foucauldian paradigm of late 20th Century history. He wants to talk about journalistic 'truth', however for decades, this concept has been undermined or ridiculed. A mischievous consequence of this fashionable truthphobia is we no longer have the intellectual tools to make sense of the tradition of Victorian Liberal Journalism. Luckhurst's approach is to sidestep the ideological roadblock by reminding us of the "importance of perceiving historic events as contemporaries did". As he explains,

"Our Victorian ancestors really did believe that newspapers were more than commercial products. The delusions that truth does not exist, that reality is socially constructed, and that journalism creates news rather than describing it did not exist."

Having deftly disposed of the truthphobic debris of post-modernism and Foucauldian relativism, the road is clear for L. to move forward.

To set the scene, the book describes media coverage of the two big stories of the late 1930s — the Abdication of King Edward VIII and the British government's policy of appeasing Nazi Germany. What emerges is a poignant illustration of what happens when journalism strays from its task of reporting the news honestly, fully and truthfully. In both cases, the media self-censored — inspired by the well-intentioned desire to do what was ethically-politically good according to the moral fashion of the time. In the case of the abdication, this meant keeping the British public ignorant of events that were being widely reported in the US and around the world. The greater good of maintaining the prestige of the Royal Family trumped the need to tell the truth.

A singular joy of the book is its original research from never-before-seen primary sources. For example, in his account of the abdication, L. draws on a cache of private documents written by Edwin Pratt Boorman editor-owner of the *Kent Messenger* newspaper. Boorman collected press reports from around the world and knew exactly what was going on but fell into line with the media groupthink

of his time and self-censored. When news of the crisis finally broke, Boorman sheepishly explained to his readers, “along with other newspapers, the *Kent Messenger* has been bound by that reticence with which the affairs of the Royal family are treated by the British press.” In other words, journalists suppressed the truth because they persuaded themselves it was ethical to do so.

The book similarly describes how, according to the official narrative of the time, appeasing Hitler was widely viewed as an “inherently virtuous policy” and the majority of the British media fell into line, “meekly obedient to the demands of ministers.” As a result of editors’ willingness to parrot the narratives of the “power establishment”, the late 1930s were therefore a low point in British journalism. Consequently, at the start of the war, Britain’s newspapers, despite their popularity, were “not greatly trusted”.

Early in the war, official censorship was crude and heavy-handed. L. tells the glorious story of the overworked British censor clutching four telephones and shouting at frustrated reporters, “I don’t know anything, and if I did, I couldn’t tell you.” The way L. seamlessly blends this sort of detail with clever intellectual analysis is impressive. For example, he distinguishes between “security censorship” — which silenced reporting of military details useful to the enemy, and “policy censorship” — which silenced opinions critical of government policy.

Luckhurst’s canvas is wide. There is an account of the *Sunday Pictorial*’s brilliant investigative reporting of Britain’s social snobbery and its potentially lethal results during air raids. To get the story, the *Pictorial* dressed two journalists as working-class Londoners and sent them to try to gain admittance to the air raid shelters of the capital’s top hotels. In every case they were turned away — even with bombs falling nearby. The paper noted with disgust, class snobbery meant their reporters were nearly “killed on the doorstep of safety”.

L. chronicles the decision-making process which led to the suppression of the communist *Daily Worker* newspaper in 1941 for its defeatist and subversive views. Although the move was accepted by most newspapers, it was criticised by the *Daily Mirror* which warned, “all suppression of opinion, as distinct from falsified fact, is dangerous... this is a dangerous precedent.” All of this feels highly relevant to the 2020s when calls for censorship and de-platforming are all too common.

One of the most fascinating chapters deals with the social tensions that arose

when large numbers of US soldiers arrived in Britain. The book highlights the little-known “Battle of Launceston” in which black and white US soldiers shot at each other in a racially-aggravated dispute in a sleepy Cornish town. In the resulting trial, fourteen black American soldiers were found guilty of mutiny by a jury of nine white officers — even though the evidence identifying them was weak. British newspapers reported the proceedings in detail, to the annoyance of the US authorities who wanted as little publicity as possible and who deemed it an, “inconvenient and embarrassing story.”

American race relations was a delicate subject for British journalists to report. It was feared that drawing attention to the “racial segregation and injustice that polluted the American armed forces” might infuriate the Americans and weaken the trans-Atlantic co-operation necessary to win the war. Despite this, British newspapers continued to take brave and principled positions. For example, they intervened to help save the life of Leroy Henry a black US soldier found guilty of raping a British woman at Combe Down near Bath. Evidence at his trial suggested he was probably the victim of a false and malicious allegation, leading to the suspicion he was convicted because of the colour of his skin. Media coverage caused outrage in Britain and led to the death sentence being overturned. L. concludes, “in pursuing stories of racial injustice in American courts martial, the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Herald* took particular risks to investigate and publicize complex controversies in the public interest.”

The book is illustrated with images and newspaper cartoons that capture the mood of the time. There are chapters covering, amongst other things, The Battle of Britain, the UK’s flexible friendship with Russia and Beveridge Report’s plans for a post-war welfare state. Although many people today regard the carpet-bombing of German cities as unethical, the book does not shy away from moral complexity and recognises the British public’s demand for vengeance for Germany’s bombing of Britain. As one newspaper editorial put it, “everywhere the same cry is heard — reprisals, reprisals, reprisals. The demand cannot be simply ignored.” Also covered are the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan in 1945 and the one of the BBC’s more shameful moments — its reluctance to broadcast Richard Dimbleby’s harrowing account of conditions inside Belsen concentration camp.

L. meticulously examines journalism during a time of extreme national peril.

But in doing so, he touches upon burning issues for journalism in the 2020s — a decade when journalists are aware of their ethical-political responsibilities and often feel they have to tread carefully to promote social justice. What emerges is that, even during wartime, journalists at their best were not tame agents of government propaganda. They often questioned the official narrative, preserved their critical faculties and made possible intelligent and provocative debate. L. reveals how our ancestors balanced on the journalistic tightrope and tried to perform the often-incompatible roles of reporting truthfully and helping to win the war. The conclusion is they did the impossible surprisingly well.

By GRAHAM MAJIN PhD

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11 dicembre 1941: Hitler annuncia al Reichstag la dichiarazione di guerra agli Stati Uniti. Bundesarchiv Bild 183-1987-0703-507. (Wikimedia Commons).



Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj in uniforme di capitano d'artiglieria

Storia Militare Contemporanea

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