

Chomsky's Bosnian Shame

By David Campbell

16 November 2009

Following on from the controversy surrounding Noam Chomsky's October 2009 Amnesty International lecture in Belfast (see my 9 November 2009 post, "Karadzic, photography and revisionism"), I have been receiving new information on interviews Professor Noam Chomsky has given in recent years where he discusses, amongst other issues, the 1992 ITN television reports of the Bosnian Serb camps at Omarska and Trnopolje.

My correspondence with Noam Chomsky:

I'll say some more about these interviews below, but one thing I have always wondered was whether Chomsky was open to evidence that these TV reports were in fact an accurate portrayal of the Prijedor region camps. So, having written the most detailed study available on this issue – *Atrocity, Memory, Photography, a two-part academic article* – last week I decided to write to Professor Chomsky and ask if he had, or was willing to read, my two articles, and if so, what he thought about them. He did reply, and the reply is revealing. Here is the verbatim exchange:

To: Noam Chomsky <<mailto:chomsky2@mit.edu>>
Sent: Thursday, November 12, 2009 1:30 PM
Subject: Bosnian camp photos - the true story of ITN vs LMD

Dear Professor Chomsky

In 2002 I published two lengthy, refereed academic articles in the Journal of Human Rights on the controversy surrounding the ITN news reports from the Bosnian Serb camps in 1992. These articles (attached as PDFs) were the result of two years research using many primary sources, and they have been freely available on the web for the last few years.

I am aware that you have made a number of statements repeating and endorsing the substance of the Thomas Deichmann/Living Marxism critique of the ITN reports. I am referring to two items available on your web site, namely the 2005 interview with The Guardian (<http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/20051031.htm>) and the 2006 interview with RTS (<http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20060425.htm>).

In light of my research, I find those statements very disturbing. I believe if you examined the empirical details of the case you would recognise that the

Deichmann/LM position is without foundation when it comes to the accuracy of the original TV reports and the meaning of the camp at Trnopolje.

I hope you will read my work, and I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

David Campbell

Within hours, Chomsky responded:

On 12/11/2009 19:13, "Noam Chomsky" <chomsky@MIT.EDU> wrote:

Thanks for the reference. I'll look it up. I doubt that I'll have any comments, unless you raised the matter of freedom of speech. On the camp and the photo, I've barely discussed it, a single phrase in an interview, in fact, which didn't say much. I realize that the Balkans are a Holy Issue in England, far more sensitive than Israel in the US, so perhaps it is not surprising that a single phrase in an obscure interview, which said virtually nothing, would arouse utter hysteria, as it has.

As for the sources you cite, one of them (the Guardian interview) was known at once to be a complete fabrication, so ridiculous that the Guardian ombudsman quickly issued an apology and it was withdrawn from their website (over my objection -- I think the antics of the media should be exposed). As for the other, I said almost nothing about the photo and the camp, apart from repeating Knightley's conclusions about what was probably the case. I presume you agree that he is a credible source, whether right or wrong. I'll be happy to send it to you if you haven't seen it, along with his bitter condemnation of British intellectuals for their shameful contempt for freedom of speech. In the interview to which you referred, that is what I discussed. If you disagree with him, you should write to him, not me.

I am well aware that the concept of freedom of speech is not regarded highly in England, so even this shameful escapade passed with virtually no criticism, in fact with euphoria. I'll be interested in seeing how you handled it in your articles. I don't see anything at all disturbing in my comments, except that they were perhaps too mild in condemnation of British intellectual practices. I do, however, think you might consider your own reaction, and ask whether the words "very disturbing" might be appropriate.

Noam Chomsky

This wasn't exactly an invitation to intellectual engagement ("I doubt that I'll have any comments..."). And he doesn't hesitate to conclude with an attack (that my concern about his statements is itself "very disturbing"). Given this, I didn't bother with a direct reply. But a public reply is warranted given the seriousness of the issue, so I intend to examine in detail Chomsky's response.

Let's skip over the question of whether the Balkans are a "holy issue" in England; whether calling attention to his statements is evidence of "utter hysteria"; and his claim that freedom of speech is "not regarded highly in England" and that "British intellectual practices" are to be condemned *tout court*. I am neither English nor British, but the more important point is that Chomsky has said all these things many times before, and the repetition of these charges suggests he keeps a stock answer for enquiries such as mine. Engaging with the challenging views doesn't seem to interest him. Of course, if Professor Chomsky decides to debate the substance of the two articles I sent him in a future reply, I will post his response and correct anything below should he demonstrate anything I've written is incorrect.

What Chomsky has said on the photographs of the Bosnian camps

Lets instead look at what Chomsky, in his own words, has actually said about the issue of ITN news reports, the photograph of Fikret Alic, and the Bosnian camps.

- From the outset Chomsky has viewed the issue as one of free speech above all else, and thus lent his support to *LM's* case against ITN and its reporters. However, after the jury verdict found against *LM*, Chomsky was quoted in *The Guardian (Media supplement, 21 February 2000, p. 9)* as saying that it was "evil" if *LM's* reporting "dishonoured the suffering of those in the Bosnian war." That was the high point of Chomsky's concern for the human rights of those in the Bosnian camps.
- In the 2003 Swedish controversy surrounding Diana Johnstone's revisionist book, as discussed in the previous post, Chomsky endorsed the statement that said this book was "an outstanding work, dissenting from the mainstream view but doing so by an appeal to fact and reason, in a great tradition." Johnstone's book quotes and endorses the *LM* critique of the Bosnian camp stories (see pages 72-73). Given that it was published after the High Court trial found the *LM* case to be totally without merit, Chomsky is indirectly claiming the reiteration of falsehoods counts as "an appeal to fact and reason." He goes further in his letter to Swedish friends when he states the case of Living Marxism "is important" and that Johnstone "argues – and, in fact, clearly demonstrates – that a good deal of what has been charged has no basis in fact, and much of it is pure fabrication."

- In 2005, in his contested interview with *The Guardian*, Chomsky stated that "LM was probably correct" in its claims about the pictures and the camp, and that although "Ed Vulliamy is a very good journalist...he happened to be caught up in a story which is probably not true." This is the first interview I cited in the email above, and the text comes from Chomsky's own web site. Chomsky objected strenuously to this interview and *The Guardian* (wrongly in many people's eyes) issued him an apology. However, his main objection related to his views on Srebrenica, and his list of objections is available [here](#). Chomsky never cited the statement about LM or Vulliamy as being wrongly reported, so he has not previously viewed it as "the complete fabrication" he now calls it. Presumably he doesn't want to retract his statement in the interview about freedom of speech, that "...in the case of Living Marxism, for a big corporation to put a small newspaper out of business because they think something they reported was false, is outrageous." (I'll return to the significance of that claim below).
- The second interview I cited in the email to Chomsky was one he gave Danilo Mandic of Serbia's RTS on 25 April 2006. It covered a range of issues, but does include a significant exchange on the Trnopolje pictures. Despite saying in his email to me that "I said almost nothing about the photo and the camp...", here is the relevant section (starting at 01:40 in the video):

NC: ...However, but if you look at the coverage, for example there was one famous incident which has completely reshaped the Western opinion and that was the photograph of the thin man [in the concentr...'] behind the barb-wire.

DM: A fraudulent photograph, as it turned out.

NC: You remember. The thin men behind the barb-wire so that was Auschwitz and 'we can't have Auschwitz again.' The intellectuals went crazy and the French were posturing on television and the usual antics. Well, you know, it was investigated and carefully investigated. In fact it was investigated by the leading Western specialist on the topic, Philip Knightly [sic], who is a highly respected media analyst and his specialty is photo journalism, probably the most famous Western and most respected Western analyst in this. He did a detailed analysis of it. And he determined that it was probably the reporters who were behind the barb-wire, and the place was ugly, but it was a refugee camp, I mean, people could leave if they wanted and, near the thin man was a fat man and so on, well and there was one tiny newspaper in England, probably three people, called LM which ran a critique of this, and the British (who haven't a slightest concept of freedom of speech, that is a total fraud)...a major corporation, ITN, a big media corporation had

publicized this, so the corporation sued the tiny newspaper for libel [sic]. . . .”

Perhaps that is ‘saying almost nothing’ to Chomsky, but it contains a number of untrue claims and is consistent with his earlier views. Indeed, in describing the pictures of Fikret Alic at Trnopolje as the ‘thin man behind barbed wire’ photographs, Chomsky is using Diana Johnstone’s phrasing to repeat Thomas Deichmann’s erroneous allegations. Most importantly, the RTS interview shows that he accepts the interviewer’s declaration that “the photograph of the thin man” – which Chomsky starts to say is in a “concentration camp”, but corrects himself to say just “behind the barb-wire” – is “fraudulent.” That is a major claim, and one that is demonstrably wrong.

Examining Chomsky’s source: the flaws in Philip Knightley’s argument

In his email reply to me, Chomsky maintained that his RTS interview simply repeated Phillip Knightley’s conclusions about the case. I accept that Knightley has written some credible things on war reporting generally, but in the case of the Bosnian camp photos his analysis, such as it is, is filled with errors and wrong in its conclusions. I have a copy of the Knightley analysis, so let’s examine the document that Chomsky continues to draw on for his understanding of this issue. The main elements of Philip Knightley’s statement on the case can be found [here](#) [Note August 2020 - that page is no longer available, but one of Knightley’s statements is reproduced [here](#)]. I have a longer document written by Knightley (and circulated recently by Chomsky) that incorporates this but has some other details. Those details make clear Knightley’s document dates from 1998-99, and consists of a statement Knightley gave to Helene Guldberg, who was then the publisher of *LM* and one of the three named defendants in the libel action brought by ITN. Although it is claimed that Knightley presented this statement to the High Court in London during the trial, the transcripts of the libel trial show Knightley did not testify, and there is no record of the role, if any, his statement played in proceedings. It seems, therefore, to have been a background briefing for the *LM* defendants as they prepared their defence.

The chronology of Knightley’s interest in this case is worth noting. He says he first came across the still image taken from the ITN reports when he was researching an article on female war correspondents for the Australian magazine *The Independent Monthly*. Knightley says this was in October 1994, but in fact the article appeared in the October 1993 issue (I have a paper copy). This reveals that, although he casts himself as the authority on war photography and reporting, he does not trace his memory of the Trnopolje pictures to their original broadcast and publication more than a year earlier.

Knightley then makes the interesting claim that on his first, albeit delayed, encounter with the photograph of Fikret Alic that “I was immediately struck by the fact that the image was

too good to be true.” This judgment – or, more accurately, pre-judgment – then colours the remainder of his analysis.

Knightley says he examined the ITN report frame by frame, but given his summary conclusions and the lack of any detailed analysis in his statement we have to wonder how much attention he paid to the specifics of the report. Knightley writes:

I have no way of knowing what the ITN team members said or decided when they were compiling their report after their visit to Trnopolje. But I know enough about television war reporting to be able to say that once they saw the image their cameraman had captured of an emaciated Fikret Alic with the stand of barbed wire across his chest, that image then drove and dominated their report. Their words were chosen to fit the image whether the facts justified them or not.

This conclusion is unsupported on two counts. The first is that the ITN reports (both Penny Marshall’s ITV story and Ian Williams’ Channel 4 story) concentrate at the outset by what the reporters found at Omarska rather than Trnopolje. Indeed, it is revealing that throughout this controversy *LM* and its defenders studiously ignored this fact and carefully avoided discussion of the larger camp at Omarska. Yet Omarska was the subject of the first half of both these television stories. The second half of each deals with Trnopolje, but the sequence of Fikret Alic at the barbed wire fence runs for 20 seconds in Marshall’s story and a mere five seconds in Williams’.

The claim that the image of Alic behind the fence “drove and dominated” these reports is, therefore, simply wrong. The best way to see that is to do something that Knightley did badly and I doubt Chomsky has done at all – actually view the reports in their entirety. Anyone can see them ~~here~~. [*Note August 2020 - although I still have the videos, they can, for copyright reasons, no longer be viewed on YouTube*].

Of course, if Knightley wanted an insight into what the ITN team members said or decided when compiling their report he could have interviewed them, as he interviewed Thomas Deichmann to get the details of his charges against ITN. After the High Court trial he could also have revisited the issue, because in testimony that very discussion was probed (see my article, part 2, p. 148), revealing that the ITN team decided *against* using the term ‘concentration camp’ to frame their report, thereby ensuring that the Alic images played a minor role in their coverage.

There are two other elements in Knightley’s flawed analysis that are worth highlighting. The first is his claim that, although ITN was right to report that Alic and others were detained at Trnopolje, the camp “was not a concentration camp in the Second World War sense.” This is also part of Chomsky’s statement to RTS (that the Alic pictures lead everyone to assume the camp was like Auschwitz), is what drives much of Diana

Johnstone's views, and was absolutely central to the whole *LM* campaign against the ITN coverage. The issues here are complex (and are discussed in detail in my article, part 2, pp. 145-52). Trnopolje is not like Auschwitz. But the important point is that the line of argument which says 'Trnopolje cannot be a concentration camp because it is not the same as Auschwitz' betrays an impoverished historical knowledge about the phenomenon both of concentration camps generally and the vast Nazi system of labour, concentration and death camps that made up the Final Solution.

The second and final feature of Knightley's flawed analysis I want to draw attention to is his claim that the image of Alic behind the barbed wire "changed the course of the war" in Bosnia. It is a view Chomsky repeats in his RTS interview where he states that the Alic photo was "one famous incident which has completely reshaped the Western opinion." Both these statements are unfounded. Knightley alleges that the Bush administration of 1992 changed its policy to Serbia within 20 minutes of the ITN story being shown on American television, and that an emergency British cabinet meeting immediately agreed to send 1,800 ground troops to Bosnia. Neither thing happened as claimed, as I make clear in my article, part 2, pp. 158-59.

It seems that Knightley has taken the view about US policy changing quickly from a *Sunday Times* report in 1992 which made just this statement, something that demonstrates the shallowness of Knightley's analysis. In fact, what then President Bush said was, having seen the report, he was personally outraged and would press for a UN Security Council resolution to ensure humanitarian relief convoys reached needy civilians. At no stage was there ever a suggestion of US ground troops being dispatched to Bosnia to intervene in the war. Indeed, the only US ground forces that made it to the region did not arrive until 1996 when they were part of the international mission overseeing the Dayton peace agreement, which partitioned Bosnia and rewarded the Bosnian Serbs for their ethnic cleansing. Equally, no British forces were dispatched in the wake of the report, and the only ones that made it to Bosnia were UN 'peacekeepers' sent to supervise relief convoys. They weren't given a war fighting mandate and had to stand on the sidelines watching ethnic cleansing operations being carried out. The idea that the picture of Fikret Alic paved the way for the rapid deployment of western military forces to fight is a fiction of the revisionists' imagination – and a forlorn desire of those Bosniaks who at the time were desperate for such action.

What about free speech in this case?

What unites Chomsky and Knightley in their outrage at ITN is the view that this whole issue is about freedom of speech above all else. When ITN decided to take legal action against *LM* for its claims about their reporters and the August 1992 story, many British commentators (in a challenge to Chomsky's anglophobia) were opposed to the idea that

a major media corporation would sue a smaller (albeit well produced and generously funded) publication. I discussed these issues in my original study (part 2, pp. 160-66).

There are important issues relevant to freedom of speech in Britain's peculiar laws of libel, and many people want to see these laws overhauled. Indeed, only this week Index on Censorship and English PEN have released a major report as part of the [Libel Reform Campaign](#) that details the needed changes. This demonstrates, contra Chomsky, that there are many significant British voices concerned about freedom of expression. I support this campaign for libel law reform and support the recommendations of IoC and English PEN.

However, in the case of the Bosnian camp photos we need to separate a number of different strands. Questions about the veracity of the ITN coverage and details of the conditions at Omarska and Trnopolje need to be considered *apart from* the issue of whether it was right that ITN was able to sue *LM*. This is where Chomsky, Knightley and others fail so spectacularly. It would have been quite possible for Chomsky to say *LM* should be able to publish what it wanted without any repercussions even though what they published in this case was both wrong and offensive. In his first comment on the case, Chomsky adopted a position something like this. However, since then he has folded his freedom of speech concern into a series of claims that support the substantive details of *LM*'s untrue allegations, while at the same time disingenuously claiming he is not taking a position on the merits of the case. As a result, Chomsky, Knightley and their supporters refuse to see the different dimensions here, prioritise an absolutist view of freedom of speech, and then make revisionist arguments designed to belittle the victims of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia in order to buttress their outrage at what one media company did to another. In so doing, they choose to regard ITN as simply a corporation, and overlook the way the individual reporters pursued the story despite military censorship by the Bosnian Serb authorities. Indeed, at no point in this controversy have Chomsky and others been concerned about the freedom of speech of those reporters.

I also think that, as strange as existing British libel law is, it had an important and surprisingly beneficial effect in the case of ITN vs *LM*. The *LM* defendants and Thomas Deichmann were properly represented at the trial and were able to lay out all the details of their claim that the ITN reporters had "deliberately misrepresented" the situation at Trnopolje. Having charged 'deliberate misrepresentation', they needed to prove 'deliberate misrepresentation'. To this end, the *LM* defendants were able to cross-examine Penny Marshall and Ian Williams, as well as every member of the ITN crews who were at the camps, along with other witnesses. (That they didn't take up the opportunity to cross-examine the Bosnian doctor imprisoned at Trnopolje, who featured in the ITN stories and was called to testify on the conditions he and others suffered, was perhaps the moment any remaining shred of credibility for *LM*'s allegations evaporated). They were able to show the ITN reports to the court, including the rushes from which the final TV stories were edited, and conduct a forensic examination of the visuals they

alleged were deceitful. And all of this took place in front of a jury of twelve citizens who they needed to convince about the truthfulness of their allegations.

They failed. The jury found unanimously against *LM* and awarded the maximum possible damages. So it was not ITN that bankrupted *LM*. It was *LM*'s lies about the ITN reports that bankrupted themselves, morally and financially. Despite their failure, those who lied about the ITN reports have had no trouble obtaining regular access to the mainstream media in Britain, where they continue to make their case as though the 2000 court verdict simply didn't exist. Their freedom of speech has thus not been permanently infringed.

Concluding thoughts on Chomsky and the Bosnian camp photos

According to Alexander Cockburn, "Chomsky's enemies have often opted for these artful onslaughts in which he's set up as somehow an apologist for monstrosity, instead of being properly identified as one of the most methodical and tireless dissectors and denouncers of monstrosity in our era."

I am not an enemy of Noam Chomsky. But I am a strong critic of his position on the Bosnian camp photos because his repeated statements of purported fact indicate that – in this instance – he is an "apologist for monstrosity" rather than one of its "tireless dissectors and denouncers." Although he says he only speaks about the freedom of speech issues implied by this case, he has to this day consistently made and repeated substantive claims about the status of both the visuals of Fikret Alic and the camp in which he was interned, while trying to elide the fact of those statements. Chomsky's insistence on seeing Alic and the reporters who witnessed Omarska and Trnopolje as pawns in a story that puts an absolutist notion of freedom of speech above the issues of human rights and historical accuracy is, to repeat, very disturbing. In fact, it is worse than that - it is shameful.

In writing that the words "very disturbing" might be an appropriate description for my concern about his statements on the Bosnian camp pictures, Chomsky demonstrated he sees no need to engage with the substance of arguments that contradict his views. For one regularly praised as an important intellectual of his time, that stance is a problem. In the words of Amnesty International's Northern Ireland representative, "we all have a responsibility to stand up for justice and to stand against those who would take away the human rights of the most vulnerable." In this particular case, that means we have to stand against Noam Chomsky's revisionist and unfounded claims about what happened and was reported at Trnopolje in August 1992.

[This post appeared on a previous version of my personal website on 16 November 2009. I began drafting it on 14 November 2009 and the original URL contained that date even though it was not published until two days later. On 10 August 2020 I took the text from my archive to produce this PDF so it could be re-posted on 'Balkan Witness'. Other than some reformatting, the correction of a few hyperlinks and spelling errors and the addition of page numbers, no other changes have been made to the original text - David Campbell].