



## Comparing War Writing

In this activity we will look at war writing covering two relatively recent large-scale civil wars involving humanitarian atrocities or disasters, and we will compare this mostly contemporaneous journalism to Chimamanda Adichie's literary treatment of war.

It's worth reminding ourselves of the way that the Biafran War came to symbolize in the American and European consciousness the "humanitarian crisis." According to a short summary of Lasse Heerten's *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017),

In the summer of 1968, audiences around the globe were shocked when newspapers and television stations confronted them with photographs of starving children in the secessionist Republic of Biafra. This global concern fundamentally changed how the Nigerian Civil War was perceived: an African civil war that had been fought for one year without fostering any substantial interest from international publics became 'Biafra' - the epitome of humanitarian crisis. Based on archival research from North America, Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, this book is the first comprehensive study of the global history of the conflict. A major addition to the flourishing history of human rights and humanitarianism, it argues that the global moment 'Biafra' is closely linked to the ascendance of human rights, humanitarianism, and Holocaust memory in a postcolonial world. The conflict was a key episode for the re-structuring of the relations between the West and the Third World.

Photojournalist images of the Biafran War can be found on [Google Images](#) (warning: some are graphic).

## The Bosnian War (1992 – 1995)

### Contemporaneous reporting from *Newsweek*

But if the democratization of Serbia represents the best-case scenario for Yugoslavia as a whole, the worst-case is not hard to imagine. Seizing on new unrest as a pretext, Milosevic could still resort to strong-arm methods, prompting fears of a push for Serbian domination throughout the country. That could vindicate the glum assessment of a recent CIA study which predicted the probable breakup of Yugoslavia within 18 months and a possible civil war. Yugoslavia's fate may be decided not by battles between Serbs and other nationalities but by the contest pitting Serb against Serb.

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The history of the Balkans is written in blood. The Serbs and Croats have hated each other for centuries, the Hatfields and McCoys of a murderous backwater that has long threatened the peace of Europe. Now the region where World War I began could present Europe with its first big conflict of the post-cold-war period.

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Although their little country looks like a mouse trying to roar, Slovenes insist they are ready to fight on. "We have been buying antitank and antiaircraft weapons for more than a year," says Slovenian government spokesman Jelko Kacin. "We bought everything needed to fight off an occupation," he says, adding that most of the weapons, including mines and shoulder-fired missiles, come from Singapore and are suitable for the lightly trained militiamen defending Slovenia. "They are cheap, efficient and effective," he says.

The Slovenes may be hoping that, under cover of all the confusion that is likely in the months ahead, they will be able to slip away to full independence. A country of tidy farms and pristine industrial parks, Slovenia is an economic powerhouse, producing a quarter of Yugoslavia's gross national product with 8 percent of its population. "We can go it alone," says Josip Skoberne, head of the chamber of commerce in Ljubljana, the republic's capital. Croatia seems less bullish on full independence, if only because its large Serbian minority would fiercely resist a break with Yugoslavia. If both sides behave sensibly - a very big "if" in the Balkans - Zagreb and Belgrade may yet be able to compromise on a new form of confederation - a deal too good for even the Slovenes to turn down. That possibility is perhaps the best reason to hope that a civil war in Yugoslavia can still be averted.

From the fourth century on, the Balkans have been a violent fault line between East and West, the scene of epochal struggles: Rome versus Byzantium, Christianity versus Islam, the empires of Europe versus the empire of the Turks. In 1914, as the old order crumbled, the Balkans provided the spark that touched off World War I. Herded together in a new country, the Balkan nationalities spent World War II slaughtering one another in even greater numbers than they were slaughtered by the Nazis. For the next 35 years a Communist strongman papered over the rifts. Now the Balkans are boiling again.

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Last week the Serbs and Croats who inhabit the Croatian-held town of Vukovar demonstrated just how destructive such instincts can be. Clashes in that area claimed at least 40 lives, raising the Yugoslav death toll to more than 300

since June. Exactly what happened at Vukovar depends on whom you ask. According to Croat accounts, fighting was provoked when the Yugoslav Army launched a tank attack on the town's Croats. The Serbs maintain that the Croatian National Guard opened fire on the federal Army units first.

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The Yugoslav civil war is rapidly defining the rules of the new world order-and they are jolting, not just to the warring nationalities of the Balkans, but for many Westerners as well. Foreign-policy pundits, appalled by the continued killing in Sarajevo and the resumption of fighting in the Croatian port city of Dubrovnik, call for intervention on moral grounds. But such arguments don't carry much weight.

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At NATO's meeting in Oslo last week, the organization offered to consider peacekeeping for Eastern Europe, but only if requested by the 34 member-nations of the Council on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The West did not rule out a demonstration of sea or air power if U.N. economic sanctions fail to force Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to reconsider his crusade for a greater Serbia. But President Bush has made it clear he has little enthusiasm for that course. "I think prudence and caution prevents military actions," he told a press conference. Even the United Nations could reconsider maintaining its peacekeepers if there is no peace to keep.

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The atrocities apparently started last spring, when Serbian forces began the "ethnic cleansing" of newly independent Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Serbs drove more than 1 million Muslims and Croats from their homes, torturing and killing some of them, abusing and terrorizing the rest. Some Muslims and Croats struck back with atrocities of their own. Now the grim results are finally showing up on television screens and the front pages of newspapers. Pictures sear the conscience of the world: a wailing baby beside a bullet-punctured window, the emaciated bodies of prisoners in the camps, an old woman shot down at her grandchild's funeral. The struggle in what used to be Yugoslavia turns out to be not just a civil war but a ruthless campaign by members of one ethnic group to "purify" the land by driving out others. Suddenly the response of the outside world so far--a lot of hand-wringing and a few relief supplies for one besieged city, Sarajevo--looks pathetically inadequate.

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Faced with a political and moral dilemma, he groped for the safe middle ground. "The world cannot shed its horror at the prospect of concentration camps," Bush said. But he was reluctant to send "somebody else's son or somebody else's daughter into harm's way." Instead, he asked the United Nations Security Council for a resolution authorizing the use of force, if necessary, to maintain the flow of relief supplies into Bosnia. Neither Washington nor its closest allies had any clear idea of how force could best be exerted. The administration was in deep disarray; it wasn't known when vacationing Secretary of State James Baker would stop running foreign policy and start running Bush's presidential campaign. And despite the outcry over Bosnia, Washington still lacked a sense of urgency. "Until the pressure of this week, we have not had this on the front burner," admitted a senior State Department official. "And even now, there is no consensus on what the hell we should do, what we can do, to stop this nightmare."

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U.S. forces are available for intervention from air bases in Italy and Germany and from warships, including the aircraft carrier Saratoga, in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. But it's by no means certain that airstrikes alone can even protect the relief shipments, much less stop the fighting, and they might inspire Serbian attacks on the 1,600 lightly armed U.N. peacekeeping troops already deployed in Sarajevo.

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In a meeting at the White House last week, American Jewish leaders suggested to Brent Scowcroft, the president's national-security adviser, that airstrikes or other carefully targeted military action could be used to punish Serbia itself if Milosevic doesn't quickly open the detention camps, which remind many Jews of the Nazi Holocaust. "He agreed that that is a reasonable proposition that the administration should consider," said one participant in the meeting, Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress. In her op-ed piece, Margaret Thatcher argued that "even installations on the Serbian side of the border may be attacked if they play an important role in the war." But the Serbs are tough fighters, and the Yugoslav arsenal, including surface-to-air missiles, could make U.S. warplanes pay a steep price for any punitive campaign. . . . With the East/West conflict over, Yugoslavia held little strategic importance. Few anticipated that wars in Croatia and Bosnia would create 2 million refugees in Europe-its greatest social and economic headache in nearly 50 years.

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Serb atrocities-"ethnic cleansing," detention camps, mass executions of civilians-provoked only rhetoric. The Security Council voted to set up a war-crimes commission, but neglected to provide for actual trials. Its resolution for a no-fly zone gave no authority to shoot down violators; Serbs responded by bombing northern Bosnian towns.

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The war is far from over. At the weekend the Bosnian Serbs hadn't pulled back their artillery--and the allies stood ready to resume bombing. Despite U.S. warnings, the Muslims refused to rule out military offensives under NATO cover. And Milosevic has proved untrustworthy before. "It's so hard to believe that anything you do in Bosnia can come out well," says a senior U.S. official. It's always easy to be pessimistic about the Balkan war--but last week, for once, it was possible to be hopeful. Last week's shelling of Sarajevo's marketplace left 37 dead and more than 80 wounded, precipitating the largest NATO airstrikes ever. U.S., French, British, Spanish and Dutch planes all took part in the attack.

## The Rwandan Civil War (1990 – 1993) & Rwandan Genocide (1994)

### Contemporaneous reporting from *The New York Times*

Rwanda is probably best known among Westerners for its gorillas and the work of Dian Fossey, the American naturalist who was murdered there in 1985. Her life and work was the subject of the popular motion picture, "Gorillas in the Mist."

But the bloodletting in Rwanda and Burundi runs through the history of both countries as fluidly as the meandering Akanyaru River that marks their common border.

Tribal problems exist in virtually every African country. But modern weapons, the centuries-old feud between the Hutu and the Tutsi and a competition for land unlike anywhere else in Africa have led to genocidal orgies in Rwanda and Burundi.

Burundi, with 5.8 million people, and Rwanda, which has nearly 8 million people, are each slightly larger than Vermont. The majority of the people in both countries are farmers, and competition for land is at the root of much of the ethnic animosity.

On the eve of independence, the Belgians began turning political, economic and military power over to the Tutsi.

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But when independence came to Rwanda, the Hutu assumed political power through the sheer weight of numbers. Their coming to power was aided by a 1959 uprising in which, by official estimate, 20,000 to 100,000 of the Tutsi were slaughtered and 200,000 more fled to Burundi.

In Burundi, the Tutsi held onto power. In 1972, Hutu in Burundi tried to overthrow the Government, massacring hundreds of Tutsi in the rural hillsides.

The army, which was nearly exclusively Tutsi, crushed the rebellion, killing between 100,000 and 300,000 Hutu, a figure agreed on by the government and human rights groups. In a further reprisal, the Tutsi set about killing most of the Hutu intelligentsia, targeting scores of people for execution simply because they had some education beyond high school.

In 1988, Hutu and Tutsi turned on each other again in Burundi when Hutu villagers, fearful that unannounced military maneuvers were the onset of another massacre, struck first. About 25,000 people were killed in the first day of the 1988 clashes. Thousands more died when the army moved in to restore order by opening fire on Hutu and Tutsi villagers still locked in combat. Afterward, Tutsi soldiers avenged Tutsi deaths by executing Hutu villagers.

STARTING in the 1970's, Rwanda was a favorite laboratory for international aid. Largely because it was so small, it was considered a fine place to test how effective various development strategies could be in a land with a cooperative Government and good transportation.

Now it is a laboratory of a different sort -- a microcosm from which to learn what can happen when politicians seek to ride sectarian forces of hate.

This is, after all, not a question just for a tiny country in East Africa. Politicians from Belgrade to Armenia to Kashmir and beyond have been playing upon long-simmering ethnic divisions to a remarkable degree in recent years -- often, as in Bosnia, with brutal results for their rivals and little but international ostracism for their own people.

That ethnic or tribal rivalries can backfire on those who promote them is a truism long since accepted by scholars of international affairs. "The detour towards ethnicity is totally ruinous," said Professor Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University, an expert on the politics of, among other places, Lebanon. "The tribal consolation is a false consolation. It is a false sense of union, an ethnic binge you indulge and then you realize it doesn't do anything for you. But you cannot reason with these furies. The call of blood is powerful for a moment, then people will wake up in the wreckage of it all."

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So this is the result: In a land that was home to 8 million people, between 200,000 and 500,000 Tutsis have been killed and between 2 million and 3 million people, most of them Hutus, have fled their homes.

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Land is often cited as the root cause of the killings -- that Hutu and Tutsi killed each other to keep the land they had or to take over the land of others. While this is one of the world's most densely populated countries, and rural peasants make up the bulk of the population, that explanation is not complete.

Others point to long-simmering resentment between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority. But ethnic differences between the two are slight -- they speak the same language and have intermarried for so many generations that many Rwandans do not know if another person is a Hutu or a Tutsi.

Another explanation is that the violence arose out of a struggle for political power. "It is a problem of Hutu and Tutsi and power sharing," said Mr. Nduziye.

During centuries of feudalism the Tutsi ruled, even though they made up only about 15 percent of the population. The Belgians, who came in the early part of this century, perpetuated Tutsi dominance. In 1959 the Hutu started to rise and by the time of independence in 1962 they were on top. They killed thousands of Tutsi and forcing tens of thousands into exile.

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With support from elements of the army, the militia launched what was tantamount to the final solution in April after President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, died in a mysterious plane crash. Within hours the killings started, first in Kigali, where moderate Hutu and intellectuals were slain along with Tutsi.

Quickly the violence spread throughout Rwanda's hills and valleys. "The authorities here received orders from Kigali to eliminate the Tutsi," said Celestin Semanza, who was Deputy Mayor of the district of Mabanza, which is within the province of Kibuye. He said that soldiers arrived by jeep from Kigali and that the Interahamwe came in buses from other provinces. "We couldn't stop them," he said.



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The United Nations refugee agency said it had identified three new sites for refugee camps near Bukavu that could accommodate up to 100,000 people. But the agency declined to guess how many refugees there might be.

About 2.4 million Rwandans live in the French-controlled safe zone, including about 800,000 who were displaced by the civil war that ended last month.

Until today, United Nations officials assumed that the refugee flight would be manageable. But the sun rose today on a road teeming with people. A United Nations official said she expected 15,000 to 20,000 Rwandans, most of them members of the majority Hutu ethnic group, to cross the border from Cyangugu today.

Although the United Nations and private relief agencies are better prepared to handle the new wave of refugees than they were in Goma, they still face a daunting task. The 320,000 refugees who settled around Bukavu in recent weeks have already been taxing the resources of the area, a heavily cultivated farming region.

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“I’ve lost nearly everyone,” he said, his voice a soothing baritone, his handsome, bearded face an oddly impassive mask. Gérard, 37, was a Tutsi customs inspector and government opponent whose family had been wiped out—about 40 people in all. He’d heard that his 4-year-old daughter had survived, and he had made arrangements with my escort the previous night for a lift to Nyanza, where she was last seen. Our journey over the next 48 hours brought home Rwanda’s genocidal madness as no body count could ever do.

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### **When did life start to change?**

Things started to change way before 1994, even before I was born. Tutsis had always been discriminated against and most of them went into exile while those who remained in the country were sometimes denied certain services. I started to experience this discrimination when I joined school as a young girl. However, the situation got worse when we started hearing local radio stations calling Tutsis “cockroaches” and “snakes,” explaining how they were going to kill us. And then the genocide happened.

### **How did you get through this difficult time at home?**

My parents tried to protect us from all the rumours that were going around, yet I could see the fear in their faces. At that time, I was not paying much attention to their reactions. After the genocide that’s when I thought: “Wow, they were really scared, they were fearful of what was going to happen.” As a child, I never thought there would be genocide. I kept saying to myself, “I will go back to school despite all that is being said.” I never expected what happened, especially because my neighbours and friends were Hutus; we were going to school together and visited each other’s homes.

## Comparing War Writing

Answer each question as completely as you can, and by citing at least one piece of evidence from both the war journalism above and *Half of Yellow Sun*. Wherever possible, give the formal properties and style of the writing emphasis in your responses over the content of the wars (e.g., the different political contexts, etc.).

1. Compare the way that journalists write about the origins of the Bosnian and Rwandan conflicts and the way Adichie writes about the origins of the Biafran War.

2. Contrast the emotional effect of the writing on the humanitarian atrocities that occurred in the Bosnian and Rwandan conflicts with the emotional effect of Adichie's writing on the Biafran War. Identify at least two stylistic elements that are responsible for the differences in emotional impact.



3. Compare the way that the actual fighting, the military conflict, gets treated by the journalistic writing versus the way that it is treated in the novel. What are the specific differences and what are their implications for the way the reader is affected by each text?

4. Compare the tone of the writing about why Western countries (the U.S. and Western European powers) largely stayed out of the Bosnian/Rwandan conflicts with the tone on this matter in *HYS*.