

# Media Disinformation on Purported Aleppo Atrocities Fits Historical Pattern

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*It has been several months since the barrage of nightmarish reports about the horrors in East Aleppo as the government army prepared to drive out the remaining rebels from the city in mid December. Purported “activists” posted their “[goodbye](#)” messages, claiming they feared they would be slaughtered by government forces.*

Women were said to have chosen [suicide over rape](#). And most widely disseminated of all were reports that regime soldiers had executed 82 civilians, including women and children. (See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) None of these shocking reports were verified by journalists on the ground. Though none of the news media admitted it, there were no foreign journalists in East Aleppo because they feared being kidnapped and killed by the al Qaeda-aligned rebels, as American reporter James Foley had been in 2014. But after hostilities concluded in East Aleppo with the rebels being driven out of the city, the same organizations who propagated the doomsday narrative have shown no interest in examining it and setting the record straight.

There have been no indications that anyone inside East Aleppo who posted a goodbye message was actually harmed. [Lina Shamy](#), who miraculously enjoyed a reliable Wi-Fi connection and a steady supply of power to tweet constantly and grant Skype interviews from East Aleppo, warned on Dec. 12, 2016 that “this may be my last video. More than 50,000 civilians who rebelled against the dictator al-Assad are threatened with field executions or are dying under bombing.” CNN published this terrifying message from Shamy along with [another](#) in which she claimed “genocide is still ongoing!”

But Shamy was not executed upon the government taking control of the city. Instead, she was evacuated by the government out of the city. She is now living freely and recounting her experience in the pages of the [New York Times](#), where she falsely blamed attacks on evacuation buses on the government’s Syrian Arab Army (SAA). In reality, it was the rebels who [set fire](#) to the [buses](#) full of civilians and imperiled the peaceful evacuations.

As for reports of executions of 82 civilians by government troops, it does not appear that anyone has followed up by presenting any evidence that this actually happened. There have been no names of the 82 people allegedly killed, no photos, no bodies, and no grave sites indicating that mass murder had occurred.

Perhaps this should not come as a surprise. The original reports were completely unsubstantiated, based on nothing more than one United Nations official repeating hearsay. News media relied on the authority of the United Nations to bolster the credibility of their headlines (“UN says civilians shot on the spot.”) [Amnesty International](#) took the UN reports

at face value and said they “point to apparent war crimes,” phrasing meant to prejudice legal claims against the Syrian government while deflecting responsibility for making them.

The reports came from a single official: Rupert Colville, a spokesman for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Colville told a news conference that in addition to 82 civilians (including dozens of women and children) reportedly killed by government troops, the death toll could actually be much higher. Buried deep below the headlines in the news coverage, we come across an important caveat. Colville admitted “it was hard to verify the reports.”

Rather than present evidence of these horrible atrocities, Colville admits that they are merely rumors from an undisclosed source. To present this as an factual finding of the United Nations is like taking a prosecutor’s opening argument and saying it was the decision of the jury at the end of the trial. If the media was really interested in reporting the truth, they would frame the allegations skeptically rather than treat them as settled and proven.

But the purpose of media in the United States and Western democracies is not to report the truth but to reinforce the government’s position by accepting the fundamental validity of its narrative. As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman write in *Manufacturing Consent*, “(a) propaganda model suggests that the ‘societal purpose’ of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state.” [1]

It is evident that the political and military establishment is fixated on regime change in Syria, and thus has chosen to align with Syria’s local al-Qaeda affiliate — if not directly then indirectly by supporting groups that make common cause in fighting under their command. The propaganda model would predict that the media would portray the Assad government as uniquely cruel and savage, and the opponents of the regime as worthy victims of the Syrian government’s evilness.

Thus it should not be surprising that after the re-capture of East Aleppo actual evidence of a massacre was discovered, but was ignored. Since the evidence pointed to atrocities by the rebels against the government, instead of vice versa, it went unreported in the Western press.

In late December, [100 government soldiers](#) were found dead inside East Aleppo. Video by Syrian “activists” showed that at least some of the dead soldiers had been captured days earlier, suggesting they were executed rather than killed in battle. Despite photographic and video evidence, these deaths were not worthy of being covered by CNN, the New York Times, the BBC or other outlets who did report on unverified accusations of executions by the other side.

### The Hue and Racak “Massacres”

Several historical examples are useful to see how stories that coincide with the government line are amplified by the media, no matter how little evidence exists. Later, when evidence emerges which calls into question the original narrative, the media simply ignore it and it is lost to history.

During the U.S. aggression against Vietnam, the brutality and viciousness of the “Communists” was exemplified in the American public imagination by the “Hue Massacre” in

January 1968. The official narrative was that North Vietnamese troops, while retreating from the city of Hue after the Tet offensive, carried out indiscriminate massacres of civilians and buried them in mass graves.

*London Times* correspondent [Stewart Harris](#) reported in March 1968 that Hue Police Chief Doan Cong Lap claimed there had been 200 killings and a mass grave discovered with 300 bodies. The next month, the Saigon government's propaganda agency put out a report claiming there were 1,000 victims of a Communist massacre, many of whom had been buried alive. After this was not picked up, the U.S. State Department put out the same report the following week. It was duly splashed across all the major American newspapers.

"The story was not questioned, despite the fact that no Western journalist had ever been taken to see the grave sites when the bodies were uncovered," write Chomsky and Herman in *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*. "On the contrary, French photographer Marc Riboud was repeatedly denied permission to see one of the sites where the Province Chief claimed 300 civilian government workers had been executed by the Communists. When he was finally taken by helicopter to the alleged site, the pilot refused to land, claiming the area was 'insecure.' " [2]

Subsequently, a purported "captured document" was found that allegedly showed Communists had admitted to killing 2,748 people. This was taken at face value and became the new official version of the incident.

In reality, a vicious U.S.-led assault to recapture Hue had resulted in massive casualties. Photographer Philip Jones Griffiths wrote that most of the victims were killed by the air assault. The dead were falsely designated as victims of a Communist massacre.

[Gareth Porter](#), who thoroughly investigated the events in Hue, described his findings as follows:

The available evidence – not from NLF sources but from official U.S. and Saigon documents and from independent observers, indicates that the official story of an indiscriminate slaughter of those who were considered to be unsympathetic to the NLF is a complete fabrication. Not only is the number of bodies uncovered in and around Hue open to question, but more important, the cause of death appears to have been shifted from the fighting itself to NLF execution. And the most detailed and 'authoritative' account of the alleged executions put together by either government does not stand up under examination.

But there was never any attempt by the mainstream Western press who were so quick to amplify the U.S. government's accounts to investigate what really happened and set the record straight if their findings did not match the initial story. Nor was there any interest in investigating casualties in Hue when there was substantial evidence that they were caused by the U.S. military and forces loyal to the military dictatorship they were supporting.

30 years later in Kosovo, the Western media reported the latest massacre by the evil forces of an official enemy. In this case, the Serbian military had allegedly murdered 45 unarmed Kosovo Albanians in the village of Racak. The first reports of a "massacre" and a "crime against humanity" in Racak were pronounced by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission head William Walker.

On January 18, 1999, Chief International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia prosecutor Louise Arbour showed up at the border of Kosovo and demanded entry to investigate the incident. In March, U.S. President Bill Clinton would use the pretext of Racak to justify an illegal air war against Serbia when he declared, “(w)e should remember what happened in the village of Racak, where innocent men, women and children were taken from their homes to a gully, forced to kneel in the dirt, sprayed with gunfire — not because of anything they had done, but because of who they were.” [3]

Clinton’s version was created out of whole cloth. There were no women and children, and there was no evidence the dead had been marched from their homes and forced to kneel in the dirt. The Serbian government determined that there was only 22 *men*, and that the deaths had resulted from a fire fight during a police action to catch Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters who had killed four policeman the week before.

While the Serb version, which was exculpatory to their own side, should not be accepted at face value either, it does raise possibilities worth examining. There was a context that could explain the dead bodies, i.e., heavy fighting between KLA and Serbian forces. As Michael Mandel writes in *How America Gets Away with Murder*: “to the extent that there was a massacre, it was provoked by the KLA as part of a deliberate and consistent pattern aimed at bringing on NATO’s military intervention.” Mandel notes that even NATO supporters such as Michael Ignatieff had written several months before that KLA tactics “were not a miscalculation, but a deliberate strategy” designed to force Serbian forces to overreact and force NATO to intervene on the KLA’s side. [4]

It is not hard to see the double standard by which the media operates when reporting alleged atrocities by enemies of the U.S. government. Actual massacres by the U.S. armed forces are portrayed as one-off cases attributable to low-level rogue offices, like My Lai in Vietnam, or as honest mistakes and collateral damage, like the Kunduz hospital bombing in Afghanistan. Even in the wholesale murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent noncombatants, like the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the systematic carpet bombing of vast swaths of Cambodia and Laos, U.S. actions are never conceived of as evidence of barbarity and indiscriminate violence. Whereas atrocities by the other side are unfailingly portrayed as unprovoked mass murder, unconscionable examples of the enemy’s lack of humanity and indicative of the difference between *us* and *them*.

The mainstream media is best understood as an appendage of the government and ruling class interests, one which functions as part of a propaganda system that has nothing to do with providing with facts, but rather creating an acceptable ideological framework for its audience. This explains why the media exhibits such a blatant confirmation bias. In this light, it should be anything but surprising that the story about the Syrian government executing 82 civilians can become an official historical fact without any serious attempt to verify the actual course of events either at the time they happened, or after the fog of war has cleared.

## References

[1] Chomsky, Noam and Edward S. Herman. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon, 2011. Kindle edition. (Loc. 7556)

[2] Chomsky, Noam and Edward S. Herman. *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume 1*. Boston: South End Press, 1979. (pp. 346)

[3] Quoted in Mandel, Michael. *How America Gets Away with Murder: Illegal Wars, Collateral Damage and Crimes Against Humanity*. Pluto Press, 2004. Kindle edition. (Loc. 1737)

[4] Mandel, Michael. *How America Gets Away with Murder: Illegal Wars, Collateral Damage and Crimes Against Humanity*. Pluto Press, 2004. Kindle edition. (Loc. 1820)

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