

Highlighting Brutal Truths

After 38 years of reporting from some of the most dangerous places on earth, **Christina Lamb** talks to **Fergus Byrne** about the horrors of war and what we can learn about humans, conflict, and resilience.

According to a recent editorial on the British news website, *Tortoise*, the transfer of frozen Russian assets to Ukraine would be an appropriate response to the “invasion, occupation, expropriation, mass rape, mass murder and the kidnapping of hundreds of Ukrainian children” by Russia. Whilst these damning accusations are not new, the fact that “mass rape” is included may come as a shock to many.

But not to the chief foreign correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, Christina Lamb. ‘If you want to humiliate your enemy or drive people out from an area, raping the women and children is a very effective way of doing it’, she says. ‘It’s also cheap. As one of the people I interviewed told me, “It’s cheaper than a Kalashnikov bullet.”’

Her book, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield*, opens with a description of the rape by Russian soldiers of women in Ukraine and goes on to document a shocking catalogue of stories about rape as a weapon of war. From Bosnia, where tens of thousands of women were brutally and repeatedly raped, to Rwanda, where hundreds of thousands of women were raped, tortured and murdered, the book is a powerful exploration of the harrowing impact of sexual violence in war, whilst also shining a light on the enduring resilience of women across global conflicts.

She tells me the book’s latest update now includes stories from Israel and Palestine. ‘That was the one conflict people sometimes used to cite as not really having much sexual violence’, she says. ‘But that’s not the case now. Clearly, on October 7th, there was rape of Israelis by Hamas and others. And clearly, in detention centres, Israeli detention centres, it’s being used on Palestinians, particularly men.’

One of the disturbing aspects of these stories for Christina is that they are only now getting close to the coverage they deserve. ‘I know there was reporting of what happened in Bosnia’, she says, ‘but this is the first time that it’s so widely reported. And I was a little worried that it’s being reported because it’s people like

us, it’s Europeans, and they look like us, and therefore it somehow seems more important to people.’

Yet despite efforts to bring these horrific crimes to wider public attention, these truths are in danger of being ignored again while the current American administration looks to be seen as a peacemaker. If Ukraine is bullied into a truce by Donald Trump’s enforcers, Russia will appear to have been rewarded for an unprovoked invasion and the re-drawing of international borders by force, whilst at the same time, horrific war crimes may be ignored.

Talking of Ukraine, Christina says: ‘It’s very clear who is the aggressor in this war and the many terrible things that they have done. Just today, I was told about a Ukrainian who was taken captive by the Russians. They contacted his children, aged 10 and 13, and killed him in front of the children. The things that are being done are just so horrific.’

From Young Journalist of the Year at the British Press Awards in 1988 to Foreign Correspondent of the Year at last year’s Society of Editors Awards, Christina Lamb has built a reputation as one of the most highly regarded foreign correspondents of our time. Her dedication to uncovering the human impact of conflict has taken her to war zones from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Africa and the Middle East. But she feels she may have crossed a line in the last few years. ‘When I started out as a journalist, it was 1988, and the Berlin Wall was just coming down’, she says. ‘It was the end of apartheid in South Africa. Dictatorships in Eastern Europe and Latin America were being overthrown, and it felt like everything was going in the right direction. Well, it doesn’t feel like that now. It feels absolutely the opposite. I feel like I crossed a line, really, in recent years. I was always very idealistic and thought that my job was to go to places and expose injustice and that, somehow, things would change. But actually, very rarely does anything change. So now I’m a bit more of an activist. I speak about war rape a lot because I am so shocked at how prevalent it is, and how little it is done about it, and

how hard it is to get justice. And I interact with a lot of women around the world who are trying to do something about it.'

Highlighting the plight of women in war has had a profound effect on her, but Christina's experience of covering so many conflicts over more than 35 years has also taught her things that are becoming glaringly obvious in a world where aggressive macho strutting dominates the news. 'What I see is that we in the West tend to make the same mistakes over and over again.' She cites examples of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, where it was 'quite easy to remove a dictator or a repressive regime' because we have an overwhelming military force. 'But in each of those cases, we completely failed to actually have a lasting political plan, or indeed, in the case of Iraq, it was no plan.' She points out that 'the failure to listen to people on the ground' and instead just attempting to impose something from outside has been 'a disaster'.

Global politics is fluid and unpredictable at the moment, and her extensive experience in war zones has provided her with a unique perspective. She posits a provocative idea: 'I strongly believe that if women were running things, there would be fewer wars. There needs to be far more women in peace negotiations.' However, she acknowledges the complexities, noting, 'Margaret Thatcher did launch the Falklands War.'

Despite this, she believes the absence of women in decision-making roles during critical negotiations

is a significant error. 'I can't think of a single peace process anywhere in the world at the moment where there are women leading it', she says.

Despite the dark realities she reports on, she remains inspired by the incredible people she meets, often women who display remarkable resilience and courage. 'It's in the darkest places that we see the brightest lights.'

However, many of those she has met who have had the courage to tell their stories are horrified that, having told them, nothing seems to change. She gets WhatsApp messages from them asking why nothing has been done. The lack of change is becoming a constant shadow.

Speaking of Afghanistan, she says: 'I cannot believe that in 2025 people somehow think it's okay for there to be a country in the world where girls cannot go to school and not work or even go to a park or beauty salon or even appear at a window.' There is a feeling that the outrage that there was when the Taliban first took over three and a half years ago has disappeared, and people have moved on. 'And yet these poor women and girls in Afghanistan are trapped behind four walls, and I really feel strongly that we need to keep reminding people about that.'

Christina Lamb will be speaking about her life in journalism at the Marine Theatre in Lyme Regis on Wednesday, 23rd April, at 8 pm. To book tickets, visit: <https://www.marinetheatre.com/>

