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Syria: War Reporter Marie Colvin and Photographer Rémi Ochlik Are Killed

By Vivienne Walt

A celebrated American-born war reporter and a young French photographer were killed on Wednesday morning when Syrian forces bombed a makeshift media center in the besieged city of Homs. The tragedy shook the disparate community of conflict journalists gathered there, not least in highlighting the degree to which risks are intensifying for those covering Syria's march to civil war.

Marie Colvin, an American who was one of Britain's most honored combat journalists, and Rémi Ochlik, an award-winning photojournalist who was just 29, died when the regime's military hit the building where a growing number of foreign journalists were covering the Homs battle. British photographer Paul Conroy, whose work illustrated Colvin's chilling dispatch from Homs in the London *Sunday Times* last weekend, was reported severely injured, along with an unnamed American woman journalist. Those details have not yet been confirmed. ([PHOTOS: The Syrian Civil War: Photographs by Alessio Romenzi](#))

Within seconds of the news breaking on the BBC and Syrian Twitter feeds, the closed Facebook group for conflict journalists lit up with frenzied messages, many of them unable to believe that their colleagues were gone. And Colvin's own Facebook site was jammed with messages from friends, one saying, "Please God not Marie! Marie are you OK?"

She was not. Just one day before, Colvin had posted a message to the war-reporters' Facebook group, urging colleagues to break her newspaper's firewall and post her extraordinary report from inside Homs. With her characteristic passion and wry self-deprecating humor, she offered to "face the firing squad" for whoever illicitly reposted her work, while not forgetting to praise Conroy's "amazing photos" which accompanied it. "I don't often do this but it is sickening what is happening here," she wrote. ([MORE: With Syria's Rebels: A Visit to a Bombmaker's Factory](#))

At 55, Colvin was no novice in witnessing sickening events. She was a victim of violence herself, having lost her left eye after coming under government fire in Sri Lanka in 2001. While many might long since have sought a prosthetic eye, Colvin chose instead to wear a black eye patch, something of a badge of honor for conflict journalism, instantly making her the most distinctive journalist in any combat zone.

She was also surely one of the more dedicated, rarely missing a conflict — and believing to the end that the

perils were simply a journalist's duty. "Our mission is to speak the truth to power. We send home that first rough draft of history," she said in 2010, in an address at a packed ceremony for fallen war reporters at St. Bride's Church in London. "In an age of 24/7 rolling news, blogs and twitters, we are on constant call wherever we are. But war reporting is still essentially the same — someone has to go there and see what is happening," she told the audience. "You can't get that information without going to places where people are being shot at, and others are shooting at you."

For Ochlik that horror came as he was just beginning his career. He was with his friend Lucas Dolego, the French photographer, on the streets of Tunis during the revolution there last January when Dolego was hit and killed by a police teargas canister. "We had come to work, so I kept on working," he said in a recent interview, after being honored for his Arab Spring photos. "As a little boy I always wanted to become an archeologist, for the travels, the adventures," he continued. That changed when his grandfather gave him his first camera. He began photographing his friends, and later traveled to Haiti, to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya last year — and last week, to Syria.

Colvin's last dispatch from Homs was a video, which aired on the BBC on Tuesday, describing the appalling conditions and deep terror felt by residents who have been encircled by Syrian forces for weeks. Later, she called Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch's Emergency Director, to discuss what she'd seen. "She contacted me not because she wanted to boast about reaching Homs, but because she wanted to reach out to people she thought could make a difference to the people of Homs," Bouckaert said in a Facebook post on Wednesday. "I could just imagine her happily chatting away with me as the shells fell around her building, and being totally in her element. She was one of the most fearless and dedicated reporters I have ever met."

After months of being shut out of the conflict, journalists have increasingly sneaked into Syria through smuggling routes from Lebanon and Turkey, coordinating their life-threatening journeys with local activists. As the coverage of the Homs siege filtered out of Syria, the small corps of journalists in the city has appeared ever more a target of attacks, from a government that has been intent on keeping journalists away from rebel territory. The shock among journalists on Wednesday came while many were still absorbing the loss of Anthony Shadid, the celebrated New York Times correspondent, who died in Syria last Thursday of an apparent asthma attack after sneaking into the country illegally; many colleagues and friends were still gathered in Beirut for Shadid's memorial service, which took place there on Tuesday, when news hit of Colvin and Ochlik's deaths.

Born in Oyster Bay, New York, Colvin graduated from Yale University, and became renowned in Britain largely through her gripping coverage of the 1990s Balkans War, and the war in Chechnya. But Colvin was not all about work. With her crackling wit, and her knack for great story-telling, she was an excellent companion for lengthy dinners after a day's reporting, not least during the past year's revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Over dinner in each of those places, Colvin — despite being in the thick of a compelling revolution — spoke about where she might go next, and how to get there ahead of the press pack, which was increasingly more young and nimble than herself. ([PHOTOS: The Syrian Civil War:](#)

[Photographs by Alessio Romenzi](#)

In her address at St. Bride's Church in 2010, Colvin touched on the issue of whether war reporters perhaps risked their lives for professional ambitions, rather than a humanitarian drive to expose injustices. The answer, apparently, was not entirely clear to her. "We always have to ask ourselves whether the level of risk is worth the story," she said. "What is bravery, and what is bravado?" Shaken by the losses, many journalists will be wrestling with that question in the days and weeks ahead.

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