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Features

Syria, the country that slipped into hell

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Two writers offer horrific close-ups of a nation falling apart, says Roger Boyes

The Morning They Came for Us

Dispatches from Syria by Janine di Giovanni

Bloomsbury, 224pp £16.99 * £14.99

Syria Burning A Short History of a Catastrophe by Charles Glass

Verso, 192pp; £8.99 * £8.49

The serial horrors of the Syrian war have barged their way into our living rooms. From gas attacks to public beheadings, from infants washed up on familiar European beaches to the enslavement of teenagers, this is the war whose images we cannot escape.

Janine di Giovanni has been an unnonfiction flinching reporter in many battle zones, most notably in Bosnia. She understands the cues, the moments when a multicultural society, imagining itself to be tolerant, starts to crack and when neighbour turns on neighbour. "One day you are busy with dentist appointments or arranging ballet lessons for your daughter and then the curtain drops," she writes in her precisely observed dispatches from Syria, *The Morning They Came for Us*. The barricades go up, fathers disappear, banks close; peace becomes war in 24 hours.

War begins with a jolt. It is this Syrian jolt that di Giovanni seeks to communicate when she describes an 11-year-old noseless boy, his blasted face nothing but flaps, now living in a displaced peoples' camp, who had made the mistake of running out of his home when he heard aircraft engines. It had been a clear day, notes di Giovanni, "a good day for bombing". Her notebooks are full of scarred and lost Syrians. None of them could have imagined that a modest, peaceful rising almost exactly five years ago would turn not just into a long, bloody war but an inscrutable war within a war within a war.

She discovers horrors that trump those we have seen on our television screens. There's the law student Hussein from the shattered Baba Amr district of Homs, where the Sunday Times correspondent Marie Colvin died in 2012. Hussein was caught first by Shia militiamen speaking Farsi, beaten on suspicion of being a Free Syrian Army fighter, made to sleep with a mound of bodies in the mortuary (including his dying brother) and then handed over to Syrian torturers who described themselves as doctors.

First they slashed his penis with a blade and leant on his bladder to force him to urinate in agony. Then they administered electric shocks. Sometimes he was hung upside down for five-hour stints. And, incredibly, his gut was slit open, his intestines tugged out and laid on the outside of his body while the "doctors" joked about over-fed fighters. After a while the intestines were stuffed back into his stomach and he was crudely sewn up again.

No, di Giovanni's book is not breakfast reading. Yet the strength of the writing comes out in the more subtle moments such as the case of Nada, a Sunni protest organiser in the Alawite-dominated Assad heartland of Latakia. Tipped off that a friend had been arrested, Nada knew that the Syrian secret police would come for her; only the timing was in doubt. She plays through her head what will happen when the police come, the likely

reaction of her parents; she destroys her Sim card, makes a bonfire of her notebooks. "I knew I could never outrun them," she tells di Giovanni in a Turkish safe house after eight months of jail and beatings.

We learn the gritty detail of a dirty war. Being interrogated blindfold, for example, is particularly disturbing; the brain has to race to work out who is in the room, who will attack verbally or physically from what angle. The mental exhaustion drives you to the edge. There is rape, the constant threat of mass rape and, as one female former prisoner tells the author, there is the spectacle of a male prisoner being raped by guards in front of you. A camp doctor tells di Giovanni that raping women during war is as much about punishing male fighters as it is about wrecking the lives of the female victims: "It is the worst thing to do to the men — because they are our women."

It is not only a bestial war but a surreal one. Charles Glass, the graceful and knowledgeable chronicler of the Middle East for more than 30 years, hears wise words about the Syrian uprising from a friend, a Damascus hotel owner. "In Damascus," she says, "only the poor class is taking part. In Homs, all classes, all sects."

The velocity of the war soon changed that 2011 judgment, yet for a long time the war was, for the posh Alawites of the capital and of Latakia, not much more than pre-dinner small talk. "People in the city refuse to see and hear the violence in their suburbs much as Beverly Hills ignored riots in Watts in 1965 and 1992," he says and marvels that even in mid-2014 women in bikinis were gambolling on the beach below his Latakia hotel.

Di Giovanni makes a similar observation, watching the pool parties at her Damascus hotel, the dancing to Adele as smoke rose from the shelling in the southern suburbs. Thursday afternoon, the start of the weekend, was marked not by a rush to flee the battlefield but to get to the hairdresser in time for the Muslim weekend. The swish restaurants were full, the opera functioning.

The mood has curdled, of course. Both Glass and di Giovanni have the merits of listening carefully to the fears of Alawites, as well as the Sunnis. Glass points out that while Assad's Alawites do indeed make up the ruling class and the military command, most families still live on small landholdings. Alawite soldiers serving in Assad's army are returning without limbs. Memorial notes are pinned everywhere. The battle for Syria launched by Assad and now heavily sponsored in blood and treasure by Russia and Iran was about securing Alawite control. And yet when this war eventually stumbles to a close it is difficult to see how they will emerge as victors. Glass, in his careful reading of history, knows that governing Syria has never been easy "as the commanders of punitive expeditions from Titus to the Ottomans' last general could attest".

Di Giovanni's book is full of passion and self-questioning, posing the age-old question of war correspondents: why do I keep doing this, why does it consume me so? Glass, though he too covered war (and was held hostage by Shia militants in Lebanon for 62 days in 1987), has other questions: could Syria's revolution have turned out differently? His core anxiety is that fanaticism stoked by conniving outside powers is wrecking the Levant that he loves. He quotes Nietzsche: "Be careful when you fight the monsters, lest you become one." Good advice.

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