

INTERVIEW



War stories

James Hill began his career documenting the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and has continued to cover some of the bloodiest conflicts of our time, from the Allied invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to the tragedy of Beslan. He talks to [Katie Scott](#)

Above: Beslan, North Ossetia – in a school a few hundred yards from School No. 1, which was the victim of a terrorist attack, two stand in an empty corridor on the first day of the restarted school term on 15 September 2004. Most pupils stayed away rather than attend. All pictures © James Hill.

James Hill arrived in Kiev in October 1991 with 30 rolls of film from *The Times*, a couple of Nikon cameras, several lenses, and 'not much of a clue'.

Hill had recently finished a photojournalism course at the London College of Printing. This, he says, was a bid to avoid going to work in the City. 'After I left Oxford University, I had a couple of offers to go into corporate finance but I couldn't quite face it. So I agreed with my father that I would go travelling for a year, and then come back and do something proper and correct. I came back and I still couldn't face it. A friend of mine had found out about the LCP course. We both applied. When I started, I realised exactly how large the distance was between what I could do with the camera and what the people that I saw being pub-

lished in *Time* magazine could do. I remember thinking, 'Thank God I've got a year to practise at this and I don't need to make a living from this yet because no one is going to hire me.'

Hill decided to head to the Ukraine to stay with a family friend. Four years later, he had built strong contacts and had had work published with titles in both the UK and US. He explains: 'The first ever picture I had published was a double-page spread in *The Independent on Sunday* magazine on Crimean Tartars. I then started to do a bit of work for the American press and *Newsweek*. A lot of journalists came down from Moscow to do stories about this new republic, the Ukraine, and there was a very small press community there at the time. Someone



would ask, 'Do you know a photographer?'

Hill admits that he was very lucky. 'I was somewhere where there was a big story happening which was suitable for both news and features coverage – the break-up of the Soviet Union. It wasn't like a war that lasts for three months then it's over. There had been so little coverage of it that there was a great hunger for work. And there weren't enough people to provide it so you didn't have to be that good to build up a reputation.' And Kiev was a cheap place to live. 'You could just go

somewhere like Georgia for two weeks, stay in a hotel, and it would cost \$250. If I sold the story, that was great, but if I didn't sell it, it wasn't a disaster. I could afford to make some mistakes. I was making about \$1000-\$1500 a month but that was enough. I just lived on potatoes and vodka.'

Into the war zone

It was during this time that Hill inadvertently became a war photographer. He explains: 'There was plenty of work in the Soviet Union but the vast majority of it was working in



war zones. I ended up covering them because I needed to work, and that was the only work I could find.

'What I found strange was how surreal war is. It's so beyond normal existence that you end up feeling like you're in a movie. If someone is lying in front of you and there is blood everywhere, it is so overwhelming, that although you know it is the reality, part of you feels like it isn't really happening. There's this instinctive reaction when something is that horrible that part of you just refuses to believe that it's

Above: A soldier from the Northern Alliance holds his gun over the head of a Taliban soldier, killed in fighting in the city of Kunduz as the Northern Alliance troops secured the city, the last stronghold of the Taliban in the north of Afghanistan, 2001.

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true. The other thing that affects you is how people around you react. Most of the wars were being fought by irregular forces. I always found it odd that, for example, you could be photographing a dentist with a Kalashnikov.

'I found it just fascinating and I think that that is one of the reasons while a lot of people keep returning to document war. It's so beyond your normal life, that it becomes magnetic. You get drawn into it, and the strange emotions that you feel are also very powerful. You start to get withdrawal symp-

toms when you are sent to photograph the local head of a collective farm, for example. You just don't get motivated by that.'

In 1995, Hill was given a contract by the *New York Times* and moved to Moscow. This came at a crucial time. 'Getting the contract was a huge relief as I had almost given up photography at that point. I had had an interview with ITN to take up a producer's job with them. I was finding it really tough to make a living'. Hill recognises this is even more of a problem now for



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young photographers coming through. 'There's a huge mental pressure on photographers if you are not making money. It becomes really difficult to motivate yourself to go out and experiment if you've got this terrible financial sword hanging over your head.'

From Russia with love

Three years later, and Hill was ready for a change, although he continued to work for *The New York Times*. 'I moved to Italy because I was going a bit mad. The Russians are amazing people and I loved photographing there because they are so emotional. But they don't live in the middle, they live on the edge. There's great sadness and great joy but not a lot in the middle. Eventually it gets a bit tiring living with people like that. Also, I felt like I

Above: Two looters make their way through the car park of the abandoned Ministry of Industry in Baghdad looking for pickings after most government buildings had been picked clean in three days of unrest following the arrival of US forces in the city in 2003.

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was getting a bit blind. Seven years is a long time to be covering one story. I needed something fresh. Also Italy was a joy to work in not least because after living in Russia, it was amazing to be able to go someplace and eat a meal that was actually edible!

Hill continued to cover conflicts. In 2001, he travelled to Afghanistan. 'I was in Rome when September 11 happened and then I went to Israel because *The New York Times* thought something might happen there. When I got to Jerusalem, they asked me to go to Afghanistan. I flew back to Rome, packed my bags, flew to Moscow and then went via Tajikistan, where I picked up a Northern Alliance helicopter and went in that way. It turned out later that the *New York Times* had asked every other

staff photographer and everyone had said no. They know that the Brits won't complain about the food or the poor living conditions.'

This, he explains, was his first 'digital' war and so having a good fixer, who could ensure they had power was essential. 'A good fixer is a key to a lot of the success. You just need someone who can smell what is happening around you, especially in a war zone. I had this amazing fixer in Afghanistan for whom the word no didn't exist. He only said yes or maybe. He was hired by the reporter but didn't last a day because he didn't speak very good English, but I hired him instead because he knew his stuff and could fix generators. Afghanistan was the first digital war and if you didn't have power, you were toast! The



Top: Troops from the forces of General Dostum walk over the site of the battle with Taliban prisoners at Qala Jangi fortress near Mazar-i Sharif as the corpses of Taliban prisoners lay strewn inside of the fort, 2001.

Right: A man feeds the doves of the shrine of Azrat Ali in the city of Mazar-i Sharif where the spirit of Ali, the son of the prophet, is said to reside. 20 pairs of doves were originally brought to the shrine in the 16th Century by Sultan Hussein Byeqra from Nejev, in modern day Iraq, where Ali is buried. The doves, known locally as Azrat's army, and as symbols of peace are according to the current mullah of the mosque, the first to leave when fighting breaks out, a frequent occurrence, and the last to return, 2001.



generator was always breaking down, and the equipment we had took 25 minutes to send a 300KB picture. I never sent more than five pictures in one day.'

Hill also covered the Allied invasion of Iraq, but says that he would not return there now. 'I'm still interested in doing some war photography but I won't go to Iraq. I have two children and I think to do that would be unreasonable. Also, I'm not brave enough to do Iraq and if the Iraqis didn't get me, I think my wife would!' Instead, Hill has diversified with print sales and exhibitions, including a major retrospective at Visa pour L'Image in the summer, three exhibitions in Moscow and two further shows planned next year in Italy. He adds: 'I'm getting more interested in larger format

photography whether 6x6 or 6x9. I may even buy a 6x12 camera. Maybe it's because I am getting old that art photography is interesting me more. A friend of mine is Luc Delahaye. He does photojournalism but he calls it art. It just depends how you do things.'

Diversifying is a necessity, he adds, with the market for tough photojournalism constantly shrinking 'I think that news magazines in general are having a really tough time. When a magazine comes out three or four days after an event, it's hard to seem fresh. What is a really huge problem now is that people have got

used to the internet being free. It's makes it really hard for photographers to sell work to internet sites – even good quality ones. I also think that the huge volume of images that are out there have dropped the value of images hugely.

'I remember when I had just finished at LCP, I went to cover a rugby match for *The Times*. I went with one of their photographers, and they ended up running one of my pictures and one of his. They paid me £80 for a three-column picture, which was published deep in the sports pages. I was in Belarus last spring to cover the elections, and a leading

German newspaper decided to publish one of my pictures on their front page. They paid me all of €55.'

These sorts of fees reflect public taste. An image of a semi-clad celebrity emerging drunk from a salubrious nightclub would command a lot more. He concludes: 'The diet has become so heavy. Every day there is bad news and so now people don't want to see it. As a result, there is real self-censorship by the media. And at the end of the day, it is about making money. It is a business. You'd have to be a pretty brave organisation to say sod the money'

