Frontline: The Rainbow Warrior, secrecy and state terrorism: A Pacific journalism case study

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Abstract

France detonated 193 of a total of 210 nuclear tests in the South Pacific, at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, before halting them in 1996 in the face of Pacific-wide protests. On 10 July 1985, French secret agents bombed the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland Harbour, killing photographer Fernando Pereira, in a futile bid to stop a protest flotilla going to Moruroa. The author was on board the Rainbow Warrior for more than 10 weeks of her last voyage. He was awarded the 1985 New Zealand Media Peace Prize for reportage and investigations into the ‘Rainbow Warrior and Rongelap Evacuation’. The following year, the author’s book Eyes of Fire told the inside story of state terrorism in the Pacific. He has subsequently reflected on a 20-year legal struggle by Television New Zealand and other media campaigners to prevent the French spies gagging reportage of their guilty plea from a public video record and the lingering secrecy about the health legacy of nuclear tests in the Pacific. In the context of the Frontline project for journalism as research, his work inspired a microsite—a community-driven collaborative project in 2015 coordinated by the publishers, Little Island Press, interrogating participants over a three-decade period and ‘challenging the nature of mainstream media in New Zealand’ with an alternative reader’s media model.
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The Rainbow Warrior Case was a dispute between New Zealand and France that arose in the aftermath of the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior. It was arbitrated by UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar in 1986, and became significant in the subject of Public International Law for its implications on State responsibility. On 10 July 1985 an undercover operation conducted by the French military security service (DGSE) sank the Dutch-registered Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior berthed in Auckland Harbour. The “Rainbow Warrior” sinking did not have serious consequences for peace. It was an officially inspired military operation with strictly limited intentions. Nevertheless, since the UN Charter was signed international lawyers have increasingly addressed the problem of low-level uses of force. French action clearly fell within the broad concept of “international delinquency” encompassing acts short of belligerency such as “violation of the dignity of a foreign State, violation of foreign territorial supremacy, or any other internationally illegal act”.

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