

Press Reporting from Revolutionary Asia Despite 'No Facilities for Women:' Charlotte Ebener in China, Indochina, and Indonesia, 1946-1947 (Laura Calkins)

Abstract

Charlotte Ebener (1918-1990) was an American newspaper correspondent reporting from across Asia and the Middle East. She worked in the early Cold War years for several press agencies, but both she and her reporting have receded so far from public awareness that there is not even a 'Wikipedia' page about her. She represented the International News Service (INS), the third-largest US press agency run by the Hearst newspaper group, and she briefly reported for the short-lived Women's National News Agency, a pioneering female-run news syndicate. After ten years of overseas reporting, she published a book of memoirs. Reviewing the book in 1955, The Los Angeles Times commented on Ebener's body type, her facial features, and her pursuit of two things over the course of her journalistic career – "the news and a man." In 1948 she indeed married "noted foreign correspondent" George Weller, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the Chicago Daily News, but according to the reviewer of her book Ebener's reportage from overseas was uneven, "now reporting straight, now doing a 'woman's angle' piece." The current near-invisibility of her career is compounded by the meager primary resource base available on Charlotte Ebener herself: while her husband's archive was deposited at Harvard University, there exists only a small collection of Ebener's letters at the Milwaukee Public Library, the local municipal library in her hometown in the American Midwest.

There were moments in Ebener's career when she was so close to the centre of events that she became part of them. She was placed under 'house arrest' in northeastern China in 1946 by Soviet-backed Chinese Communists. During an Arab general strike organized in 1947 to protest the coming partition of Palestine, Ebener was placed in 'protective custody' by British troops near Amman. She reportedly assisted progressive Egyptian feminists who went on a public hunger-strike in reform-minded Cairo in 1954. Yet even when she was interviewing male leaders at the centre of explosive international stories, she faced derisive gender-based comments from the men around her, both political figures and her colleagues in the press corps. For example at her meeting in 1948 with senior Dutch diplomat Hubertus Van Mook, who as the Acting Lieutenant-Governor of the Netherlands East Indies oversaw a series of 'police actions' designed to militarily subdue the Indonesian revolution, Van Mook made an awkward remark about Ebener's physical size; the disrespectful 'joke' was then included in a press story filed by a male reporter, who named Ebener in print as its target. It was her private correspondence with her mother back in Milwaukee that provided the basis for her only book, a work of reminiscences titled No Facilities for Women. Like Ebener's book, the presentation I propose for the conference on "Forgotten Journalists" would outline the arc of her career as an international press agency correspondent from 1944 to 1954, but within that long span, I intend to more closely examine her work in early postwar East and Southeast Asia. In that region in 1946-47, incipient wars for independence were already underway. Colonial and neocolonial powers found that re-establishment of their authority following Japan's defeat was directly contested by organized nationalist movements. Charlotte Ebener was a trail-blazing journalist who reported on the resulting social, political, and military developments in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia, well before the revolutionary conflicts there came to dominate both Great Power politics and world press headlines. In this presentation I plan to reconstruct Ebener's professional pathway through China, Indochina, and Indonesia in 1946-47, with the objective of identifying her news filings – as an agency correspondent, her stories carried no personal bylines or credits -- and setting them within the complex and violent context that she dared to explore and report.

Bio

Laura Calkins is an Associate Professor of History and Fellow of the Institute for Peace and Conflict at Texas Tech University, Texas, US. Her peer-reviewed research articles have been published in a range of academic journals, and her book China and the First Vietnam War, 1947-54 was published by Routledge in 2013. She also co-authored the book Voices from Vietnam: Eyewitness Accounts of the War, 1954-1975, published in 2005. She has specialized in the study of lived experience in modern Southeast Asia, having worked as an oral historian at the Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive in Texas. She served for four years as the Director of Women's Studies at Texas Tech University.