Photography and War

Pippa Oldfield
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To my parents

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In 1855 the British magazine *Punch* satirized the public appetite for photographs depicting the unfolding conflict in the Crimea. In a postscript to a letter to a soldier, a fictional female correspondent writes,

p.s. I send you, dear Alfred, a complete Photographic apparatus, which will amuse you doubtlessly in your moments of leisure, and if you could send me home, dear, a good view of a nice battle, I should feel extremely obliged.

p.s. No. 2. If you could take the view, dear, just in the moment of victory, I should like it all the better. ¹

While only a spoof, the passage foresees some of the themes and assumptions that would shape the nascent genre of war photography: eyewitness images made from the soldier’s viewpoint in the heart of combat action; the use of photography to report from front line (characterized as military and masculine) to home front (civilian and feminine); and the promise of pleasurable aesthetic contemplation of scenes of war, viewed from a comfortable distance. These assumptions are examined – and challenged – in the pages that follow.

The genre of war photography tends to be dominated by an emphasis on the figure of the intrepid war photographer – typified by the great Robert Capa – who is motivated by adventure, the quest for ‘truth’, historical consciousness and humanitarian concerns. But this persona did not emerge unbidden, nor do war photographers, past or present, work in a vacuum. They are part of an economy that is supported by consumers and their desire

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¹ Roger Fenton, *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1855, salt print.
to view—like Alfred’s sweetheart—events of the combat zone, a desire upon which various suppliers may capitalize.

The Crimean War (1853–6), an armed struggle between Russia and a Franco-British-Turkish alliance, was the first conflict to be extensively photographed and consumed through images. Numerous photographers made records, including Carol Popp de Szathmari, Col. Jean-Charles Langlois, James Robertson and Felice Beato. It was Roger Fenton, however, whose work set a precedent for conveying the sights of the far-off battlefield to audiences curious to see the events of war via a ‘photographic apparatus’. Fenton, a well-to-do Englishman and vocal advocate for photography, was prompted in part by commercial motivations. He was commissioned and financed by British publisher Thomas Agnew & Sons, who had identified an opportunity to sell photographic prints to the public. Fenton also had the blessing of photography enthusiasts Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, as well as the cooperation of the British Army, which hoped Fenton’s expedition might counter adverse press on the war. Given Fenton’s patrons, and his position as a prototypical ‘embed’ integrated with British troops, it is unsurprising that he produced dignified and sanitized images of conflict. Although Fenton encountered corpses in the aftermath of battle, he was under instructions not to jeopardize public support by suggesting that British troops were suffering.

The logistical challenges of producing photographs in the field were considerable. The constraints of photographic technology—slow shutter speeds and limited light sensitivity of emulsions—meant that spontaneous images of action were impossible to capture. Instead, Fenton produced impressive staged portraits of soldiers in full regalia, who might have been posing in a smart London studio. Fenton’s field views are, of necessity, stationary and detached rather than made in the heat of battle. His best-known image, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855), evokes Tennyson’s emotive poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, written a year earlier to commemorate a daring but disastrous cavalry assault (illus. 4). For viewers accustomed to vivid paintings and illustrations of war, Fenton’s unpopulated image must have seemed uncharacteristically bare and sombre. In contrast to the lithographs of William Simpson, an artist who was in the Crimea at the same time as Fenton, there are no dashing cavalry charges to be seen. The only indications of combat are the spent cannon balls littering the valley,
and even they were artfully redistributed by Fenton for greater dramatic effect. The viewer must make a considerable imaginative leap to reconstruct the scenes of fighting from this barren and static image.

Nonetheless, the apparently unmediated realism of photography gave Fenton’s images a distinctive power. Owing to the impossibility of photo-mechanical reproduction in newspapers, the images were translated into wood engravings and were published in the popular periodical *Illustrated London News*. Prints were displayed in at least 26 venues in the UK, and although the exhibition tour was a commercial failure in terms of sales, it received a reported two million visitors. Fenton’s *Valley of the Shadow of Death* remains an icon of war photography even today, foreshadowing the ‘aftermath’ approach of contemporary artists discussed in Chapter Five, ‘Legacies’.

The American Civil War (1861–5) vastly expanded the market for viewing images of war. Photo-historians have invariably highlighted the remarkable contribution of Mathew Brady, a visionary entrepreneur who maintained portrait-studios and galleries in New York City and Washington, DC. Following his foray to the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) in 1861, Brady enlisted over twenty talented photographers, including George N. Barnard, Timothy O’Sullivan and Alexander Gardner, commissioning them to photograph in the field, and disseminated their images through his pioneering photo-agency. Thanks to his talent for promotion – typified by the ubiquitous credit ‘Photograph by Brady’, regardless of who actually made the image – Brady became the best-known photographer of the war.

The economy of Civil War images, however, was far greater than a single name, or even a single agency. Countless other photographers adapted to new market conditions and transferred their operations to the combat zone, or at least close to it. Hardly had the dust settled on Fort Sumter before newspapers in the Confederate states were advertising ‘Truly Superb Photographic Views’, made ‘From the Seat of War’, which could be bought from book and periodical stores, studios and galleries. ‘War views’ of this type encompassed battlefields, ports, ruins, encampments, troops, bridges and weaponry, some made by photographers whose names are now barely remembered.

As well as ‘war views’, there was a huge appetite for mass-produced portraits of famous military leaders, not to mention ambrotypes, tintypes
and *cartes de visite* of individual soldiers. Photographers capitalized on this demand, sometimes shutting up shop to follow military clientele as they went to war. The high-street ambrotypist Elizabeth Beachbard was one of the first to relocate, establishing a wooden cabin at Camp Moore, Louisiana, where she photographed Confederate soldiers prior to their deployment (illus. 5). By August 1862 the *New York Tribune* declared that no camp was free from the ‘omnipresent artists in collodion and amber-bead varnish’. Perhaps the most successful of these entrepreneurs were the Bergstresser Brothers of Pennsylvania, who were reputed to have made 160 one-dollar portraits.
of Union soldiers in one day alone, while based with the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg.\footnote{23}

As had been the case during the Crimean War, photo-mechanical reproduction in print media was still impossible. Attempts were made to produce photographically illustrated books by binding large original prints into a single album, such as Brady’s \emph{Incidents of the War} (1862) and Gardner’s \emph{Photographic Sketch Book of the War} (1866) (see illus. 13). Although these grand and handsome volumes subsequently received much acclaim, at the time they were commercial failures, produced in small numbers for an elite market that could afford to spend up to $150 on a luxury item.

During the conflict, people encountered images in other ways. Photographs were translated into wood engravings and published in popular illustrated periodicals such as \emph{Harper’s Weekly}, often appended with the caption ‘from a photograph’ as an indication of authenticity.\footnote{15} Original photographs were displayed everywhere from upmarket galleries such as Brady’s on New York’s Broadway (as discussed in the Introduction) to humble tents hastily erected near military encampments (see illus. 2). Photographs were sold in a range of sizes – as \emph{cartes de visite}, small mounted album cards and various larger mounted prints – priced as low as 25 cents for the smallest.\footnote{16} An album card depicting the impressive battery at Yorktown, Virginia, is appended with a label verso declaring the view to be number 375.
in ‘Brady’s Album Gallery’ (illus. 6). Purchasers were encouraged to collect and arrange the series in pre-slotted albums, for domestic and social display. The copyright notices on both the front and reverse of the card highlight how the financial value of such enterprises was zealously guarded.

One of the most popular modes of dissemination, now virtually forgotten, was the stereograph. Developed as a means of rendering photographic scenes three-dimensional, stereographs comprised two almost-identical images taken with a twin-lens camera to mimic human binocular vision. The two prints were mounted on card and viewed through a special hand-held device, a stereoscope. The physical closeness demanded by the stereoscope, and the optical illusion of entering a three-dimensional world, offered an immersive, intimate experience that was distinct from viewing prints in an album or exhibition, and elicited something of a parlour craze. Manufacturers such as the New York-based E. & H. T. Anthony & Co. supplemented their existing stereographic inventory with war images supplied by Brady; Alexander Gardner produced and sold his own. Stereographs and other prints were available from shops, galleries and photo-studios as well as by mail order. Gardner’s Catalogue of Photographic Incidents of the War (1863), for example, provided listings of images in a bewildering array of sizes and options. By the time of the Confederate surrender in May 1865, images of war had become far more commonplace than could ever have been imagined at the outset, and continued to circulate in the decades that followed.

**Photojournalism and the Cult of the War Photographer**

There was clearly great potential for images to be reproduced in the printed press, if only the technology could be invented. In 1882 the German copper engraver George Meisenbach patented a revolutionary solution: the autotype or halftone process. By using a screen to translate photographs into dots of varying density, images could then be etched as plates for use in printing presses. In 1880 the first photographic reproduction appeared in a newspaper, and by the end of the century, halftone technology was adopted by existing illustrated periodicals such as the Illustrierte Zeitung in Germany,
the *Illustrated London News* in the UK and *L'Illustration* in France. Although photojournalism would not fully develop until the mid-1920s, photographic news in the press had begun.22

One of the first conflicts to be disseminated via halftone technology was the Spanish–American War of 1898, fought in Cuba and the Philippines. Eager periodicals despatched correspondents to Cuba in anticipation of hostilities, and the media tycoon William Randolph Hearst was even reputed to have told his staff, ‘You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.’23 Although apocryphal, the story exemplifies the growing influence attributed to illustrated print journalism, and the perception that war represented a commercial opportunity that could be exploited by the media. The U.S. periodical *Collier’s* began cultivating a roster of photographic correspondents that included British émigré James (Jimmy) Hare, whose images boosted the periodical’s circulation.24 The Bain News Service, a photo agency established by George Grantham Bain in 1898, instructed Frances Benjamin Johnston to cover the story of the return of the U.S. fleet after its naval victory in the Philippines. A professional photographer with high-profile Washington connections, Johnston gained access to the *USS Olympia* anchored in Naples, where she photographed Admiral George Dewey, the ‘Hero of Manila Bay’. She also made surprisingly intimate photographs of sailors showing the crew eating in their mess below-decks, reclining in their quarters and even dancing a male-only waltz (illus. 7). Female press photographers were still a minority, but Johnston was a vocal advocate for women’s professionalization.25

By the turn of the century, a new cultural persona was emerging: the daredevil photographer who roved the world in search of conflicts, despatching images of violence and drama to be viewed in newspapers by a distant public. Some of these photographers began to achieve fame in their own right. Viktor Bulla, whose photographs of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 appeared in the *Illustrated London News* and *Collier’s*, was claimed to be the special correspondent of at least two Russian publications including *Iskry* and *Niva*. A portrait of the young photographer, reproduced in *Niva*, depicts him as a romantic figure attired in military uniform and bearskin Cossack hat, with camera cases slung across his chest.26 At *Collier’s*, meanwhile, Jimmy Hare was elevated from the status of unnamed ‘Special Artist’ to that
of famed ‘War Photographer’, whose personal qualities of courage and
determination were as much a part of the story as his pictures. In an early
example of celebrity photographic endorsement, a Kodak advertisement
published in Collier’s emphasized Hare’s credentials as a bona fide war
photographer working ‘under artillery fire’ in the Russo-Japanese War.27
A few years later, the El Paso Daily Herald set the seal on his star status, claiming
that ‘no war is official until it has been covered by Jimmy Hare’s camera.’28

By the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, seasoned war
photographers like Hare were joined by opportunist novices who converged
on accessible sites of battle. Ciudad Juárez was described by the New York
Herald in 1911 as ‘lousy with freelance photographers’, and the adjacent
Texan city of El Paso even offered hotels for war tourists to view the battles
between federal and rebel forces.29 The Mexican reporter and photographer
Agustín Casasola, whose pivotal role as an agent bears comparison with that
of Mathew Brady some fifty years earlier, formed the Agencia Fotográfica
Mexicana in 1912, which distributed images by Manuel Ramos, Hugo Brehme
and countless others to periodicals and newspapers such as Nueva Era and La

7 Francis Benjamin Johnston,
Olympia (sailors waltzing
onboard the uss Olympia),
1899, cyanotype.
The dissemination of images in illustrated journals was rivalled only by the photographic postcard industry, which counted large manufacturers such as U.S. manufacturer Walter H. Horne – at its peak in 1916 producing 5,000 cards a day – as well as numerous one-man-band operations. While postcards destined for U.S. markets stereotyped Mexicans as bandits and ‘greasers’, more nuanced portrayals came from Mexican photographers such as H. J. Gutiérrez and Jesús H. Abitia. Given the buoyancy of the market, it is no surprise that photographers and subjects sometimes colluded to fabricate profitable images. A striking image of the Mexican rebel leader ‘Pancho’ Villa on horseback in mid-gallop, purportedly made at the Battle of Ojinga, Chihuahua (1914), was distributed by the Bain News Service, and reproduced in the U.S. magazines Leslie’s and Collier’s (illus. 8). It is likely, however, that the image was actually made by a stills photographer working for the U.S. Mutual Film Corporation, to whom Villa had granted exclusive rights to film his battles in return for $25,000 to finance his military operations. Villa, who welcomed photographers and reputedly fitted freight cars as rolling stock darkrooms, was sharply aware of the value of positive press. The romantic horseback image attracted international sympathy for the charismatic general and his revolutionary cause, at least until relations with the U.S. military soured.
PHOTOGRAPHY'S "SECOND FRONT"

Film base is a plastic—one of the earliest. To make a better film, Kodak long ago began producing from cotton linters a "miracle material": cellulose acetate.

In the form of Tenite—made by Tennessee Eastman Corporation, a Kodak subsidiary—this plastic is tough as a steer's horn and lighter than wood. It can be molded under heat or pressure, or "machined" like lumber or metal. It can be clear transparent, or in an unlimited range of colors.

Tenite is molded into finished products at the fastest rate ever reached with plastics. It led to a minor "industrial revolution" before the war or wartime shortages were dreamed of...

Now it has more than a hundred war applications—not as a substitute, but as a superior material. As an extra advantage, it does supplant other "critical" materials.

A few war uses are illustrated... In a sense, they all started with photography—the ever-growing need for finer film... Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N.Y.

Remember Torpedo Squadron 8?... how, knowing exactly what the odds against them were, this heroic band of 30 Navy fliers drove unceasingly into the massed fire of the Japanese fleet off Midway. And only one man survived. A stern example to us all. BBUY MORE WAR BONDS.

Serving human progress through Photography.

For brass—Molded of Tenite, this bugle once more raises the question, "What will plastics do next?" Before acceptance by the Army, it won the most critical ears by its tone and range.
developed for a better Kodak film (illus. 39). Tenite, a plastic developed from cellulose acetate for film base, was apparently used to make steering wheels for jeeps and bayonet scabbards; it even replaced brass used for that most patriotic of symbols, the army bugle. Whether corporate innovation was really leading the way is a matter of conjecture, and the nature of photographic-military-industrial relationships is far from clear-cut.

Photographic and optical technologies have certainly enhanced military capabilities, sometimes surpassing the limitations of the human eye and the visible spectrum. The conquest of darkness has been an ongoing military preoccupation, and explosive ‘star shells’ and ‘light balls’ providing illumination rather than arson were employed as early as the seventeenth century. In the Second World War the U.S. Army Air Force sought a more efficient alternative to power bombs to provide high-intensity light to aid night-time observation and targeting. The private photographic company EG&G, co-founded by scientists Harold Edgerton, Kenneth Germeshausen and Herbert Grier under the auspices of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was commissioned to develop electronically generated strobe flash technology that could be carried by aircraft. The system required a 76-centimetre (30-in.) quartz flash tube and banks of capacitors, weighing up to 227 kilograms (500 lb) each, to power a split-second flash of light capable of illuminating a target from the height of 1.6 kilometres (1 mi.). Integrated with radar and a synchronously timed camera, the strobe flash system proved invaluable on the night of 5 June 1944, when photographs confirmed that the D-Day invasion of Normandy would take the Axis forces by complete surprise.

Infrared photography, sensitive to long-wave light, also enables penetrative sight beyond human vision. Following the publication of experiments by U.S. inventor Robert W. Wood in 1910, infrared’s potential for haze penetration in aerial reconnaissance was developed during the First World War. By the 1930s, dye-sensitized silver halide (black-and-white) film was made commercially available by international manufacturers including Agfa, Kodak and Ilford. ‘False colour’ infrared films, such as Kodak’s groundbreaking Aerographic and Aerochrome, were developed for the U.S. Air Force in the Second World War. The salient characteristic of infrared film is its capacity to distinguish between foliage and camouflage, making
it possible to discern troops in rural or heavily forested areas. Vegetation appears as glowing white areas on black-and-white prints; ‘false colour’ film translates the chlorophyll of green trees into vivid pinks and reds. The technology became particularly valuable in conflicts in Korea, Vietnam and Latin America, playing a decisive role in the defeat of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s guerrilla campaign in Bolivia in 1967. More recently, the ongoing ‘War on Drugs’ has seen the use of false colour aerial and satellite imagery to identify illegal coca plantations in Colombia.

Such imaging is not limited to the military. Present-day private satellite companies such as DigitalGlobe have made some data commercially available, and the humanitarian organizations Human Rights Watch and UNOSAT (United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme) have acquired satellite images to assess the impact of hostilities on civilian zones in Syria and Gaza respectively. Amnesty International has made productive use of false colour infrared images made during the War in Darfur (2003 and ongoing), which unequivocally show scarlet areas of healthy vegetation that may be compared to grey areas of burned villages (illus. 40). Such imagery has the potential to function as evidence of ongoing conflict and human
Mobilized in this way, claims photography scholar Wilco Versteeg, machine-made photography may fulfil ‘the role of witness and public defender’, a role once occupied by the archetypal war photographer in the mould of Robert Capa or Philip Jones Griffiths. Nonetheless, there are limitations to this potential: military agencies may restrict satellite data either by buying all commercially available images, or by imposing a resolution cap to degrade images accessed by outside parties.

Military Communications

An overlooked but vital aspect of wartime photography is its role in communications, serving as a medium to replicate and disseminate information. Photography’s usefulness in producing and reproducing military maps in the field has already been discussed, but a further application is the miniaturization and transportation of information. Microfilm, initially developed in 1839 by British inventor John Benjamin Dancer, was patented in France in 1859 by René Dagron, who correctly foresaw its huge potential for copying and miniaturizing documents. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 provided a striking instance of the usefulness of wartime microphotography, when carrier pigeons were used to carry microphotographs on collodion pellicle (a thin membrane of emulsion) across German lines between besieged Paris and the provinces. A single pigeon could carry the equivalent of five hundred pages of official orders, fitted into a quill holder and attached to its tail feather. Upon receipt, the pellicle would be projected and transcribed. After the French defeat, the entrepreneurial Dagron obtained permission to reproduce despatches on pellicles, which he sold as card-mounted souvenirs (illus. 41). The accompanying
Microfilm remained a crucial means of wartime communication in the twentieth century. In the Second World War Kodak created a service called ‘V-mail’, adopted by the U.S. government as a practical solution to maintaining correspondence between home and frontline. Letter writing was considered essential to maintaining soldiers’ morale, yet the continual shipment of millions of letters was a vast operation. The V-mail system entailed micro-photographing original letters, transporting the lightweight microfilm to the frontlines, and then printing out paper copies for recipients. Not all correspondents were content to have their letters mediated in such an impersonal way, however. As Army and Navy magazine reported on 14 February 1944,

> The patience of Army postal officers was at an end. They issued a stern edict: after St Valentine’s Day, imprints of lipstick will no longer be tolerated on V-mail. Explained Major Kenneth H. Donnelly, postal officer of the Sixth Service Command: lipstick smears when it passes through V-mail photographic equipment, ruins the letter that bears it, and others that follow. The automatic feeder must be stopped and cleaned after every passing of ‘the scourge’.

Servicemen complained that V-mails (and Airgraphs, the British version) were but poor imitations compared to physical letters bearing the unmistakeable imprint of their loved ones, but the system provided an invaluable chain of personal communication before the era of email.

**Stopping Cannonballs: Weapons Testing and Assessment**

Photography’s capacity for distanced viewing has long made it a valuable tool for analysing weapons in relative safety. During the American Civil War, the ever-eloquent commentator Oliver Wendell Holmes reported that
experiments upon the walls of forts with shot and shell, the damage done a vessel, the respective merits of military inventions, all these are recorded by the art [of photography] with more promptitude and fidelity than tongue or pen can achieve. It is even said that the passage of a cannonball through the air can be photographed – that the double-barreled lens of the sun battery shoots, as it were, the ferrigunous [sic] sphere as it flies.67

In reality, photographic technology was not sufficiently evolved to permit the capture of fast-moving objects; cannonballs, Holmes observed, ‘unlike model little boys’, were ‘heard and not seen’. Nonetheless, military departments, commercial businesses, scientists and entrepreneurs began developing