

Amateur Photography and War

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ABSTRACT

From the late nineteenth century, soldiers started to photograph the wars in which they fought thanks to the invention of portable cameras. Private use of images by combatants immediately created difficulties for European armies and states. Amateur images coexist with official and public representations of war, which they consolidate, supplement, and sometimes subvert. In Europe, the First World War saw an unprecedented and extensive use of portable cameras by soldiers. Far from the traditional codes of representation combat, or the homogenous accounts provided by official channels, thousands of images recorded the experience on a human level. In the following decades, war imagery was transformed as a result. In a permanently unstable relation with professional photography, soldiers' amateur photography contributed to the elaboration of contemporary war imagery in Europe. It eventually became a privileged mode for the visualization of armed conflicts in recent decades.



Reconnaissance operation of the 8th RIM [French Marine Infantry Regiment] in the sector of Old Saïda. Raid on a mechta (hamlet) and arrest of Algerian combatants. Date: 1959. Photograph: Arthur Smet. Copyright: ECPAD – collection Smet. Réf.: D163-29-55. Arthur Smet practiced amateur photography as part of the 8th RIM with the consent of its hierarchy, before becoming a reporter in his own right from the summer of 1959.

Popular war images are, in general, those produced by institutions. Belligerent powers, professional photographers and newspapers have framed the icons that dominate collective memory. *The Falling Soldier* by Robert Capa (1936), or *Raising a Flag over the Reichstag* by Yevgeny Khaldei (1945), for instance, are part of widely shared narratives. However, these visual monuments, and their potent esthetics, are just one of the facets in the relation between photography and combat. They obscure the accumulation of images produced by soldiers themselves. The development of portable cameras favored the emergence of a new relation to war images, which first emerged in the late nineteenth century, during the British campaign in Sudan (1898) and the Boxer Rebellion in China (1900-1901). This evolution had consequences both on the experience of combat and on how war violence was processed. They were subsequently felt throughout the twentieth century in the major conflicts that affected Europe.

The first portable cameras were released in the 1890s. The Richard Vérascope, first sold in 1893, quickly became one of the favorite cameras of the French setting out for colonial conquest. Pocket cameras soon multiplied, and more and more soldiers used celluloid film rolls. The Vest Pocket Kodak, which was released in 1912, became the “soldier’s camera” for the British. Throughout Europe, combatants documented their everyday life thanks to these new point-and-shoot devices. While the category of professional “war photographer” only appeared in the early twentieth century, many combatants were already familiar with the photographic medium. The wars in which they fought before 1914 were, for the most part, distant conflicts. Soldiers recorded their experiences through images, and compiled albums upon their return. Some sold their prints to newspapers which could print photographs at low costs from the 1890s: the boundary between war correspondents and soldiers-photographers proving to be a porous one. Regulating these practices quickly became an issue within major European armies. Some images taken by soldiers received public exposure in the newspapers and caused major communication problems for General Staffs, especially when they showed casualties on their side or when they documented atrocities. The British army was confronted with this difficulty in the First Boer War (1880-1881), during which control over images proved problematic. Censorship was implemented as a result, although that policing of the camera was still exceptional. In these early stages, most armies tolerated amateur uses of photography in wars that were fought outside Europe, at a distance. Alongside other recording medias, such as diaries, private correspondences, or objects brought back from the theater of war, amateur photography allowed soldiers to mediatize their own war experiences quite early on.

The expansion of private photography was not truly regulated until the end of the First World War. Authorities realized that soldiers-photographers acting outside the framework of a nascent official communication efforts had to be controlled. In the first months of the conflict, snapshots taken by soldiers circulated in British and French newspapers, but censorship developed throughout Europe as the war went on. In France, the Section photographique de l’armée [the Photographic Division of the French Army] was created in 1915. In Great Britain, a supervisory organization was established in 1914. Amateur photography on the front, though theoretically contained, continued to prosper. Officers were unable to forbid such practices effectively. German soldiers could use private cameras as long as combat-related subjects were not documented. In any event, many soldiers practiced self-censorship. Most albums tend to record the periphery of the battle itself and their circulation was limited to a first circle of friends and family. Yet this mass of images nonetheless revealed aspects of the war that were ignored by public mediatization. These millions of amateur photographs stand in contrast with the glossary of official imageries, one that institutionally understated the chaos of the battlefield. Angles that were ignored in public visualizations of the conflict, from military boredom to extreme violence, are exposed in these personal archives. The democratization of photography is not the only explanation for the popularity of this technology among soldiers. Optical warfare developed in the twentieth century creating new perspectives of the battlefield. Sights, binoculars and kodaks framed and normalized battles that had become impossible to visualize in their immensity.

The democratization of photography accelerated during the Second World War. Professional photographers

imposed their visual norms, but private uses could be encouraged by the belligerents. In Germany, amateur photography was supported in order to strengthen the bonds between the front and the rear, as long as the brutality of the fighting and exactions against civilians remained invisible. In 1941, General Wöhler confiscated and banned photographs of the zone entrusted to *Einsatzgruppe D*. Extreme images nevertheless survived. Pictures of civilians being executed were sometimes found on dead German soldiers. In the Pacific War, American soldiers occasionally kept photographic trophies showing the remains of their enemies. These snapshots rarely circulated beyond closed circles and were often destroyed or hidden by their authors or their descendants after the war. Photography, however, often escapes its creator. In the USSR, where private photography was authorized as long as it was in keeping with the official narrative, some images of atrocities found on German soldiers were circulated in illustrated books and newspapers to denounce Nazi violence. Such pictures could even transform into exhibits in postwar trials. Atrocity photographs could also be a means to resist. The pictures shot in 1944 from within one Auschwitz's the gas chambers by a member of the Sonderkommando were an attempt to contest the invisibility of the extermination.

After 1945, the hegemony of photojournalism eclipsed private practices, although soldiers kept flouting regulations. Many conscripts who served in Algeria brought "their" war back to France in the shape of private albums for instance. In the 1990s, amateur images assumed again a preeminent role in the visualizations of war. The Abu Ghraib scandal in 2003 and the outrage surrounding Stuart MacKenzie's fake photographs (a private in the British army, MacKenzie sent the *Daily Mirror* doctored images showing British soldiers humiliating a prisoner in 2004) stand as two vivid examples of that evolution. Controlling soldiers' private images still is a burning issue. They sometimes involuntarily expose the violence of wars that are publicly framed as orderly and effective. Their dissemination can contradict officials versions: Russia passed a law in 2017 to prevent the automatic geolocation of selfies from revealing the positions of its soldiers in Syria and in Ukraine. Digital technology profoundly transformed photographic uses in this regard. Amateur photographers now have the capacity to create and to disseminate pictures from the war front before photojournalists, adding to the renewed instability of the boundaries between personal and professional practices.

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