

Photojournalism in Europe, 1920-1970

The construction of discourse on war through images

Author-s:

[Mathieu JESTIN](#) [1]

Abstract

War photography experienced its golden age from the interwar period to the 1970s, particularly in Western Europe. It was driven by the mythical figures of major reporters and magazines and drew on the many technical and technological transformations that marked photography since its invention in the nineteenth century. It was used by totalitarian regimes for a time but has now lost its monopoly over the image as a repository of reality and truth to other media, such as television and the Internet. The genre subsequently found other forms of expression to represent war, which are more artistic and less focused on the event itself than on the emotion it arouses in the audience as seen through the photographer's gaze.

Article

While photography took advantage of technical progress to gradually establish itself in newspapers and European public opinion during the late nineteenth century, photojournalism did not truly take form until the interwar period. The concept of a photographic report revolutionized information at the time. It took inspiration from the sequences of another burgeoning medium, film, and replaced the written word by narrating an event through the juxtaposition of photographs. These documentaries, which revolved around mythical figures and magazines, were built on images that illustrated and recounted current events almost in real time. Photojournalists looked for scoops and the sensational, while remaining as close as possible to the events. For instance, Marie-Claude Vogel, the daughter of the founder of *Vu* magazine Lucien Vogel, brought back the first images of Nazi concentration camps in 1933. This movement reached its height during the Spanish Civil War. Capa's images appeared in all major European magazines of the time and helped forge a shared universe of representations of the war.

The rise of photojournalism after the Great War can firstly be explained by changes in the means of production and reproduction that had begun during the preceding century: more compact cameras made by Leica, Kodak, and Rolleiflex, high-performance film rolls, the appearance of colour and better printing quality, among others. In Western Europe, the medium also relied on the emergence and instant success of current affairs magazines that distinguished themselves from the traditional press. These appeared first in Germany with the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (1891), which had a circulation of two million in 1930, and the *Münchener Illustrierte Zeitung* (1923), and later in France with *Vu* (1928) and *Match* (1936). Photojournalism also took advantage of the creation of powerful photography agencies such as Keystone (1927), which was founded by the Hungarian Garai, or Dephot (1928). However, the genre was especially based on the popularity of renowned photojournalists endowed with a heroic and quasi-mythical aura, such as Felix Mann, Otto Umbehrr (known as Umbo), Robert Capa, Germaine Krull, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Eli Lotar. This new journalistic model circulated and spread throughout Europe, especially after the rise of dictatorial regimes sparked the emigration of artists and intellectuals. The Hungarian Stefan Lorant,

for instance, was imprisoned by the Nazis after collaborating on *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* (1928-1933). After being freed he founded *Pesti Napl* magazine in Hungary (1933), and ultimately went into exile in England, where he successively created the magazines *Weekly Illustrated* (1934), *Lilliput* (1937), and *Picture Post* (1938).

The medium, which was a discourse in images, was quickly seized upon and manipulated by the propaganda of totalitarian regimes as a tool for persuasion and control. In its founding editorial, the magazine *SSSR na stoïke* [The USSR under construction] (1930) asserted that “photography should serve the country not according to circumstances, but in a constant manner according to a plan.” In Fascist Italy, the medium was placed under the management of the highly powerful Luce (Educational Film Union). But it was in Nazi Germany that the system reached its extreme. There had been experiments with controlling photography before 1939, notably during the Spanish Civil War; during the Second World War, this task was entrusted to the Wehrmacht, in the form of its “Unity of war correspondents and propaganda.” Photography was deprived of any value in and of itself (artistic or documentary) and became a medium of discourse for legitimizing the regime’s action. 3.5 million images—1.4 million of which have survived—were produced during the conflict by the German army’s twenty-eight propaganda departments. This includes the pictures taken by Albert Cusian, the member of *Propagandakompanie* 689, who photographed the Warsaw ghetto during the spring of 1941 with his colleague Ludwig Knobloch.

During the Second World War, the German occupier suppressed or took over most European magazines, although many photographers continued their work in the Allied camp and were able to disseminate their work. On the Western front, Margaret Bourke-White, Germaine Krull, Lee Miller, Philipp Rodger, and Eric Schwab followed the advance of Allied armies and witnessed the liberation of camps. Their reports appeared notably in the American magazine *Life*, founded in 1936 by Henry Luce. As for Dimitri Baltermans and Yevgeny Khaldei, they bore witness to all of the phases and actors of the war on the Eastern front up to the Nuremberg trials. In post-war Europe, these images circulated through the press as well as the army, in an effort to make European public opinion more aware of the horror of war and denounce it. After 1945, the success of photojournalism was undeniable, with photojournalists exhibiting even more than previously. While they were sometimes embedded within a military unit, they also gained in independence, as they were free when it came to their work. They were often staunch pacifist militants, and many were convinced that they could not be the victims of war due to the neutrality of their aims. Deaths, wounds, and kidnappings increased nonetheless. Between 1954 and 1956, the new agency Magnum (1947) lost two of its founders, Robert Capa (1954) and David Seymour (1956), in Indochina and during the Suez crisis. It was also during this period that the very meaning of photojournalism changed. While it took advantage of the international context of decolonization and Cold War conflicts (Cuba, Vietnam, the Berlin Wall), it also suffered from it. As a result of editorial choices, the image being sought became less shocking and more humanist. It was no longer a matter of touching people, but of making public opinion more aware of major international issues. In particular, the expectations of readers, who were confronted by war less directly, evolved. The event being reported (the Algerian War, the Prague Spring) was no longer at the heart of the magazine’s approach, but instead reflected the public’s interests, while calming or on the contrary arousing its fears, for instance with the nuclear threat.

The late 1970s thus sounded the death knell for photojournalism as it had appeared fifty years earlier. It gradually lost its monopoly—to television and later the Internet—over images, the recording of reality, and capturing the moment. It was also the victim of the evolution of war, which became more technological, distant, and disembodied, with the battlefield becoming more diffuse. Photojournalists no longer immortalized combat, but instead observed its consequences. The glory days of magazines have also passed, as numerous publications are disappearing, and those that remain now give prominence to celebrities. The genre must therefore reinvent itself by appropriating other mediums

(books, exhibitions), and by taking a different approach to time and events, one that is less marked by urgency.

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