



© LOUIE PALU



© RUSSIAN PHOTO ASSOCIATION, BALUNBERS ENL. MANSOVICH

Left: 'Attack – Eastern Front WWII', 1941, by Dmitri Baltermants

The order of war

Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts in the USA, discusses the crucial and malleable role photography plays in the theatre of war. She talks to **Oliver Atwell**

IMAGES of conflict are the currency of a vast proportion of our contemporary media landscape. Our newspapers and TV screens are awash with ever-shifting montages of war and famine, but without the demand there would be no supply. So, why do we desire such images at all? What is it that we hope to learn from the vivid images of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, or Mathew B Brady's carefully crafted portrait of Major-General Joseph Hooker?

In the introduction to her groundbreaking book *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath*, Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photographs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), in Texas, proposes that the images captured by photographers had, and still have, value for countless reasons. These include instruction, keepsake, historical

Left: US Machine Gunnery Sergeant Carlos 'OJ' Orjuela, age 31, Garmsir District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2008, by Louie Palu

marker, publicity, reconnaissance, criminal evidence and, crucially, acting as a catalyst to further inquiry and understanding of armed conflicts and their aftermaths. In the history of war photography, none of these rationalisations takes precedence over the other. All are equally viable reasons for the existence of war photography. With this in mind, can a certain structure and order begin to be identified within the maddening torrent of images that periods of conflict can produce? Navigating your way through *War/Photography* (the result of more than a decade's worth of research between Tucker and Will Michels, the MFAH's collections photographer), a clear answer is identified.

'When Michels and I entered into the initial period of research, we decided not to start with a premise,' says Tucker. 'All we could do was dig into the archives of the

Imperial War Museum and start looking. We looked at anything and everything. Then we'd get together over dinner and discuss the images we remembered. Out of the several thousand that we looked at, a handful stayed with us well beyond our initial investigations. The next stage was to make a list, get some photographic reproductions and put them on the walls at home.'

What the images revealed was a surprise to both Tucker and Michels. So many things have changed about both war and photography (equipment, distance, geographical location), but what their research – and ultimately their book – unveiled is that many themes are consistent throughout all wars, both big and small.

'If you look through the photography that was produced during the Second World War, and then later Iraq, you'll begin to spot certain visual tropes reoccurring,' says Tucker. 'Some of them are obvious, such as the mother or wife grieving at a graveside, the battlefield dead or medical procedures. Others are not so obvious. When you look through Roger Fenton's images of the Crimean War, half of



THE BEAUTY OF DESTRUCTION

A CRITICISM that is often levelled against war photography has much to do with how we perceive the ethics of the medium. How acceptable is it to photograph a person's suffering and aestheticise it? Some would say that a beautiful image detracts from the subject and becomes more about the form. In fact, the cultural critic Mieke Bal condemned the practice with her assertion that beauty distracts and, in worse cases, gives pleasure – 'a pleasure that is parasitical on the pain of others'. However, Tucker feels differently. 'If you want your images to have an impact, you better understand how to make an engaging image,' says Tucker. 'No one is going to remember a dull picture. A well-composed and beautiful image will stay in the mind long after you've looked at it. If you want your

image reproduced long after people stop worrying about a particular war, you have to create a push-pull effect. The subject matter pushes you away, but the aesthetics pull you in.' Tucker is also keen to address the criticism of photographing the victims of war. She shares similar feelings with the art critic David Levi Strauss, who said, 'There are inherent problems with representing the pain of others, but does that mean we should no longer attempt such representations?' Tucker adds: 'People who complain about so-called war pornography are being a little naïve. Let's say we don't have images of the victims of war. That means we have no images of the Holocaust to learn from and no images of Charles Taylor's war crimes to use in his trial. If we lose all that, we lose a whole lot more.'

them seem to feature guys standing next to their horses. Move forward some years to the Second World War and we have soldiers standing next to their Jeeps. These days we see young guys standing with one leg up on the Humvee.' It's with this in mind that *War/Photography's* chapters are arranged under headings such as Recruitment and Embarkation, Training, The Wait, Aftermath, Leisure Time and Portraits. *War/Photography* helps us to understand that, in many ways, war never changes. Despite the suffering and carnage such events inflict upon a society, war, at the very least, possesses some degree of identifiable structure. The challenge for photographers is to take those worn themes and create a fresh perspective.

WAR AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The relationship between war and photography had its genesis in the dusty, heat-inflected battlefields of the Mexican-American War, a conflict that ran from 1846-1848 and saw, among other things, the US seizing control of the previously Mexican-occupied state of Texas. The earliest war photographers – the first of whom was an anonymous American photographer – had no real platform for their images. Newspapers were still relying

on wood engravings. Instead, photographers produced images in order to put together photo albums that they would then sell to the public back home.

However, war photographers were limited by their equipment's inability to document the facts, causes and experience of conflict. It was some years before photography became a portable medium and, as a result, photographers were forced to take some inventive measures. The daguerreotype and calotype required lengthy preparations of materials prior to exposure followed by a cumbersome development process. The consequence was that photographers were unable to capture the rapid action and urgency of conflict.

'What is so interesting about the earliest war photographers, such as Timothy H O'Sullivan and John McCosh, is that they were attempting to take photographs of things that hadn't been photographed before,' says Tucker. 'They had nothing solid to draw from because there was no collective memory of photographic imagery yet. All they had were historic paintings of generals dying heroic deaths or representations of conflict. But interestingly, photographers such as Felice Beato and O'Sullivan both took photographs of the battlefield dead, and it's highly unlikely



Far left: W Eugene Smith's photograph of a dying infant found by American soldiers in Saipan, 1944

Below: Henri Huet took this image of an American paratrooper killed in action being lifted into an evacuation helicopter, Vietnam, 1966

Right: This image by Philip Jones Griffiths shows a boy called a 'little tiger' for killing two 'Vietcong women cadre' – his mother and teacher, it was rumoured, 1968



that either saw the other's work.'

The reason for this synchronicity lies in the photographic equipment's limitations. As a result of the cumbersome nature of cameras, photographers of the time were forced to fit their imagery into one of three categories: portraiture (the most common); set-up shots; and the aftermath of war (including the dead, the wounded, destruction of property and prisoners of war).

'Every photographer had to ask themselves, "What can I shoot and how can I get it?"' explains Tucker. 'There are those photographers who go towards the bullet and those who stay away. Going towards the bullet was not an option for 19th century photographers.'

It was in 1888 that photography became a more accessible and portable medium. It was then that Kodak released its first commercially successful 'box' camera for roll film. In brightly lit scenes the camera was able to produce snapshots – a function that was further improved in later models

by the introduction of flash, and shutter and aperture adjustment.

'We can look at the advances of camera technology and the advances in publishing at the same time,' says Tucker. 'You have the public's insatiable appetite of stereographic imagery and Mathew B Brady's fascinating Civil War images, which were finally able to bring the heat of battle to the public.'

'You also get the invention of halftone printing at the same time as the snapshot and movie camera. The first halftone-printed photograph appeared in 1873. Just after that period we find the English photojournalist Jimmy Hare wowing the public with his numerous photographic publications about the First World War. There's the first appearance of the portable Leica and Graflex cameras, both of which were hugely significant moments in photography. The cameras were lighter and it meant that photographers could focus on more than just the aftermath of war. Plus they didn't have to stage scenes, as they could actually be there

Far left: 'The Shirt of the Emperor, Worn during His Execution, Mexico', 1867, by Francois Aubert

to witness it in the moment.'

The relationship between publishing and photography took a significant turn in the 1920s and '30s with the invention of fast-drying ink. Picture magazines began to appear, which was a medium that became the primary means for the distribution of images of the Second World War.

As time moved on, the public were finding themselves consuming imagery in different ways. Wars fought in Vietnam and later Iraq seemed to carry their own set of rules about how imagery was being consumed. War photography has continued to grow and branch off into new ways.

THEN AND NOW

During the Vietnam War, sales of TVs rocketed. Photography was forced either to fight its corner or adapt to this new method of reportage. However, as Tucker points out, photography still produced the kind of imagery that in just one frame could communicate a global message.



Above: Thomas Hoepker's image of a US Marine drill sergeant delivering a severe reprimand to a recruit, Parris Island, South Carolina, 1970

‘You have to remember that the 1960s and ’70s gave us images such as Malcolm Browne’s photograph of Thich Quang Duc, the burning monk,’ says Tucker. ‘Eddie Adams shot his image of General Loan executing a Vietcong suspect (see below right), while Huynh Cong Ut (or Nick Ut) took his Pulitzer Prize-winning image of children fleeing a napalm strike. These are all images that have entered into the annals of history and into the collective unconscious. Everybody talks about the television coming into the living room, but you don’t remember television scenes like you remember the still photograph. Still images log in your brain in a different way – they linger.’

Now images of conflict would be near impossible to control. The rise of smartphones and social media has completely altered the way we consume imagery. In her essay *Media Coverage and Dissemination*, MFAH curatorial assistant Natalie Zelt points out that ‘through the widespread technological advancements of the 21st century, the distribution and consumption of images has collapsed into a single step.’ Photographers must now adapt to this new media landscape.

‘Photographers didn’t have to write captions before,’ says Tucker. ‘Now they’re expected to take the picture, upload it, link it and caption it. This all happens in real time and they have to meet stringent deadlines. It’s making a huge difference to media output.’

Add to this the fact that photojournalists have to compete with so-called citizen journalists who can circulate images in an instant with their smartphones and it makes the future of war photography very uncertain.

LOOKING AND SEEING

War photography cannot, and should not, be a medium of incontrovertibility. War photography provides as many questions as it does answers. According to Tucker, when we view an image we must ask ourselves, Who made the picture? From what point of view? When and where? What is the purported subject? What thoughts and feelings does it evoke? The fact is our interpretation of an image is affected by our own political, religious, cultural and personal expectations. We find what we search for, or, as the psychologist Wendell Johnson suggests, ‘What we look at is not what we see.’

One of the most interesting experiences

that Tucker had when putting together the *War/Photography* project was to listen to people in the military talk about Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams’ 1968 image of General Loan executing a Vietcong suspect. Adams’ image roused national anger in the US and became an iconic image for the crowds who lamented the US’s occupation of Vietnam.

‘Talking to the guys in the military actually helped to completely turn my opinion around on the subject of Eddie Adam’s image,’ says Tucker. ‘It’s rare that we hear the real story behind an image. They told me that General Loan did exactly what he had to do. The fact is there was no front line,



Right: Eddie Adams’ image of Police Commander Nguyen Ngoc Loan killing Vietcong operative Nguyen Van Lem, 1968

Right: British Marines surrender to Argentinian troops in Malvinas/Falklands, 1982, by Rafael Wollmann



there were no safe places to send prisoners and there were executions going on like that all over Saigon at that time. Add to that the fact that the prisoner was responsible for the death of the family of one of Loan’s friends and you begin to get some perspective. But despite the truth, people still saw what they wanted to see.’

Photography has for a long time been employed as a political tool. Visual imagery, handled in the right way, can become a powerful and undying symbol. Often, images can become slaves to the text that annotates them. As Susan Sontag said in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, ‘All photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions.’

‘The importance of the interaction between images and their captions is total,’ says Tucker. ‘There are numerous examples throughout history that show how our interpretation of an image is influenced by the words that accompany it. Take, for example, the image of the attack on Pearl Harbor taken by an unknown photographer in 1941. I’ve read three different versions of the captions that went with that image. One was from the Japanese saying they’ve taken down the mighty US navy. Another from the Germans says that their allies have vanquished the US forces. The third is from the US. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what that one says.’

Of course, the rise of digital imagery has begun to affect our interpretation of what is true and what is not. The truth of photography has raged since the medium’s birth, but we are now facing a form of anxiety that throws into question the veracity of photography. People mistrust photography and they mistrust digital photography even more. The malleability of digital imagery – in fact, photography in general – means that the medium is always questioned and never entirely trusted.

‘There will always be suspicion about photography,’ says Tucker. ‘The fact is, Ansel Adams had a bottle of bleach in his

darkroom. Photographers have always adjusted with their images. If photographers aren’t being accused of adjusting their images, they’re being accused of setting them up. It’s like the myth that Joe Rosenthal constructed with his image ‘Old Glory Goes Up on Mount Suribachi’ (1945). You can’t kill that story.’

PRODUCING THE BOOK

There’s an apt quote from the author Thomas Mann where he suggests that it is possible for a book to become more ambitious than its author. It’s a quote Tucker has clearly lodged in her mind when discussing *War/Photography*.



War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath, by Anne Wilkes Tucker et al, is published by Yale University Press, price £60, as a 604-page hardback edition, ISBN 978-0-300177-38-1

Below: Women aircraft workers finishing transparent bomber noses for fighter and reconnaissance planes at Douglas Aircraft Company’s plant in Long Beach, California, 1942. Picture by Alfred Palmer



‘When myself and the team started out, we had no intention of producing a 600-page book,’ she says. ‘We thought it would be 400 pages or just under. As the book took shape, more and more divisions came up and it kept growing.’

Tucker quickly realised that if that book were reduced in size, then it would read like a series of war photography’s greatest hits.

‘If we began taking things out, we would have lost so much,’ she says. ‘We would have no snapshots or anonymous photographers, for example. We wanted to open the discussion. In fact, despite its size, we firmly believe this book is the beginning of something. Once people get their heads around it, then they are free to take it somewhere else.’

By Tucker’s own admission, working on the book has had one rather unexpected and unintended consequence.

‘I really can’t stomach violence any more,’ says Tucker. ‘I was watching a violent movie the other day and I had to get up and run out of the room. It’s like some mild case of post-traumatic stress disorder. It’s affected many of us who worked on the book. There were a lot of sleepless nights. But there is humour in the book, too. One of my favourite images shows a soldier using his gassing mask to protect his eyes while he’s chopping onions.’

War/Photography succeeds because of its commitment to showing the total experience of war. Despite the carnage that surrounds them, these soldiers are still human. They continue to lead their lives. Not only does it help us understand the people who wage a perpetuate war, but it also helps us understand ourselves a little more. **AP**