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Regarding the Pain of Others

SUSAN SONTAG



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for David

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called 'news', features conflict and violence – 'If it bleeds, it leads' runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view.

How to respond to the steadily increasing flow of information about the agonies of war was already an issue in the late nineteenth century. In 1899, Gustave Moynier, the first president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, wrote:

We now know what happens every day throughout the whole world . . . the descriptions given by daily journalists put, as it were, those in agony on fields of battle under the eyes of [newspaper] readers and their cries resonate in their ears . . .

Moynier was thinking of the soaring casualties of combatants on all sides, whose sufferings the Red Cross was founded to succor impartially. The killing power of armies in battle had been raised to a new magnitude by weapons introduced shortly after the Crimean War (1854–56), such as the breech-loading rifle and the machine gun. But though the agonies of the battlefield had become present as never before to those who would only read about them in the press, it was obviously an exaggeration, in 1899, to say that one knew what happened 'every day throughout the whole world'. And, though the sufferings endured in faraway wars now do assault our eyes and ears even as they happen, it is still an exaggeration. What is called in news parlance 'the world' – 'You give us twenty-two minutes, we'll give you the world', one radio network intones several times an hour – is (unlike the world) a very small place, both geographically and thematically, and what is thought worth knowing about it is expected to be transmitted tersely and emphatically.

Awareness of the suffering that accumulates in a select number of wars happening elsewhere is something constructed. Principally in the form that is registered by cameras, it flares up, is shared by many people, and fades from view. In contrast to a written account – which, depending on its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a larger or smaller readership – a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all.

In the first important wars of which there are accounts by photographers, the Crimean War and the American Civil War, and in every other war until the First World War, combat itself was beyond the camera's ken. As for the war photographs published between 1914 and 1918, nearly all anonymous, they were – insofar as they did convey something of the terrors and the devastation – generally in the epic mode, and were usually depictions of an aftermath: the corpse-strewn or lunar landscapes left by trench warfare; the gutted French villages the war had passed through. The photographic monitoring of war as we know it had to wait a few more years for a radical upgrade of professional equipment: lightweight cameras, such as the Leica, using 35-mm film that could be exposed thirty-six times before the camera needed to be reloaded. Pictures could now be taken in the thick of battle, military censorship permitting, and civilian victims and exhausted, begrimed soldiers studied up close. The Spanish Civil War (1936–39) was the first war to be witnessed ('covered') in the modern sense: by a corps of professional photographers at the lines of military engagement and in the towns under bombardment, whose work was immediately seen in newspapers and magazines in Spain and abroad. The war America waged in Vietnam, the first to be witnessed day after day by television cameras, introduced the home front to new tele-intimacy with death and destruction. Ever since, battles and massacres filmed as they unfold have been a routine ingredient of the ceaseless flow of domestic,

small-screen entertainment. Creating a perch for a particular conflict in the consciousness of viewers exposed to dramas from everywhere requires the daily diffusion and rediffusion of snippets of footage about the conflict. The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images.

Something becomes real – to those who are elsewhere, following it as 'news' – by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation. The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, was described as 'unreal', 'surreal', 'like a movie', in many of the first accounts of those who escaped from the towers or watched from nearby. (After four decades of big-budget Hollywood disaster films, 'It felt like a movie' seems to have displaced the way survivors of a catastrophe used to express the short-term unassimilability of what they had gone through: 'It felt like a dream.')

Nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall. Cite the most famous photograph taken during the Spanish Civil War, the Republican soldier 'shot'

by Robert Capa's camera at the same moment he is hit by an enemy bullet, and virtually everyone who has heard of that war can summon to mind the grainy black-and-white image of a man in a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves collapsing backward on a hillock, his right arm flung behind him as his rifle leaves his grip; about to fall, dead, onto his own shadow.

It is a shocking image, and that is the point. Conscripted as part of journalism, images were expected to arrest attention, startle, surprise. As the old advertising slogan of *Paris Match*, founded in 1949, had it: 'The weight of words, the shock of photos.' The hunt for more dramatic (as they're often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value. 'Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be,' proclaimed André Breton. He called this aesthetic ideal 'surrealist', but in a culture radically revamped by the ascendancy of mercantile values, to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening seems like elementary realism as well as good business sense. How else to get attention for one's product or one's art? How else to make a dent when there is incessant exposure to images, and overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again? The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence. Sixty-five years ago, all photographs were novelties to some degree. (It would have been inconceivable to Woolf – who did appear on the cover

of *Time* in 1937 – that one day her face would become a much-reproduced image on T-shirts, coffee mugs, book bags, refrigerator magnets, mouse pads.) Atrocity photographs were scarce in the winter of 1936–37: the depiction of war's horrors in the photographs Woolf evokes in *Three Guineas* seemed almost like clandestine knowledge. Our situation is altogether different. The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image – of an agony, of ruin – is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war.

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EVER SINCE CAMERAS WERE invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens, photographs were superior to any painting as a memento of the vanished past and the dear departed. To seize death in the making was another matter: the camera's reach remained limited as long as it had to be lugged about, set down, steadied. But once the camera was emancipated from the tripod, truly portable, and equipped with a range finder and a variety of lenses that permitted unprecedented feats of close observation from a distant vantage point, picture-taking acquired an immediacy and authority greater than any verbal account in conveying the horror of mass-produced death. If there was one year when the power of photographs to define, not merely record, the most abominable realities trumped all the complex narratives, surely it

was 1945, with the pictures taken in April and early May at Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau in the first days after the camps were liberated, and those taken by Japanese witnesses such as Yosuke Yamahata in the days following the incineration of the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August.

The era of shock – for Europe – began three decades earlier, in 1914. Within a year of the start of the Great War, as it was known for a while, much that had been taken for granted came to seem fragile, even undefendable. The nightmare of suicidally lethal military engagement from which the warring countries were unable to extricate themselves – above all, the daily slaughter in the trenches on the Western Front – seemed to many to have exceeded the capacity of words to describe.* In 1915, none other than the august master of the intricate cocooning of reality in words, the magician of the verbose, Henry James, declared to *The New York Times*: ‘One finds it in the midst of all this as hard to apply one’s words as to endure one’s thoughts. The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated . . .’ And Walter Lippmann wrote in 1922: ‘Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which

*On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916, sixty thousand British soldiers were killed or gravely wounded – thirty thousand of these in the first half-hour. At the end of four and a half months of battle, 1,300,000 casualties had been sustained by both sides, and the British and French front line had advanced by five miles.

the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real.’

Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real – incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be – since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real – since a person had been there to take them.

Photographs, Woolf claims, ‘are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye’. The truth is they are not ‘simply’ anything, and certainly not regarded just as facts, by Woolf or anyone else. For, as she immediately adds, ‘the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling.’ This sleight of hand allows photographs to be both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality – a feat literature has long aspired to, but could never attain in this literal sense.

Those who stress the evidentiary punch of image-making by cameras have to finesse the question of the subjectivity of the image-maker. For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance. Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they

don't have the look that comes from being 'properly' lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or – just as serviceable – has adopted one of several familiar anti-art styles. By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative – all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion – and less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification.

The less polished pictures are not only welcomed as possessing a special kind of authenticity. Some may compete with the best, so permissive are the standards for a memorable, eloquent picture. This was illustrated by an exemplary show of photographs documenting the destruction of the World Trade Center that opened in storefront space in Manhattan's SoHo in late September 2001. The organizers of *Here Is New York*, as the show was resonantly titled, had sent out a call inviting everyone – amateur and professional – who had images of the attack and its aftermath to bring them in. There were more than a thousand responses in the first weeks, and from everyone who submitted photographs, at least one picture was accepted for exhibit. Unattributed and uncaptioned, they were all on display, hanging in two narrow rooms or included in a slide show on one of the computer monitors (and on the exhibit's website), and for sale, in the form of a high-quality ink-jet print, for the same small sum, twenty-five dollars (proceeds to a fund benefiting the children of those killed on September 11). After the purchase was

completed, the buyer could learn whether she had perhaps bought a Gilles Peress (who was one of the organizers of the show) or a James Nachtwey or a picture by a retired schoolteacher who, leaning out the bedroom window of her rent-controlled Village apartment with her point-and-shoot, had caught the north tower as it fell. 'A Democracy of Photographs', the subtitle of the exhibit, suggested that there was work by amateurs as good as the work of the seasoned professionals who participated. And indeed there was – which proves something about photography, if not necessarily something about cultural democracy. Photography is the only major art in which professional training and years of experience do not confer an insuperable advantage over the untrained and inexperienced – this for many reasons, among them the large role that chance (or luck) plays in the taking of pictures, and the bias toward the spontaneous, the rough, the imperfect. (There is no comparable level playing field in literature, where virtually nothing owes to chance or luck and where refinement of language usually incurs no penalty; or in the performing arts, where genuine achievement is unattainable without exhaustive training and daily practice; or in film-making, which is not guided to any significant degree by the anti-art prejudices of much of contemporary art photography.)

Whether the photograph is understood as a naïve object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning – and the viewer's response – depends on how the picture is

identified or misidentified; that is, on words. The organizing idea, the moment, the place, and the devoted public made this exhibit something of an exception. The crowds of solemn New Yorkers who stood in line for hours on Prince Street every day throughout the fall of 2001 to see *Here Is New York* had no need of captions. They had, if anything, a surfeit of understanding of what they were looking at, building by building, street by street – the fires, the detritus, the fear, the exhaustion, the grief. But one day captions will be needed, of course. And the misreadings and the misrememberings, and new ideological uses for the pictures, will make their difference.

Normally, if there is any distance from the subject, what a photograph 'says' can be read in several ways. Eventually, one reads into the photograph what it *should* be saying. Splice into a long take of a perfectly deadpan face the shots of such disparate material as a bowl of steaming soup, a woman in a coffin, a child playing with a toy bear, and the viewers – as the first theorist of film, Lev Kuleshov, famously demonstrated in his workshop in Moscow in the 1920s – will marvel at the subtlety and range of the actor's expressions. In the case of still photographs, we use what we know of the drama of which the picture's subject is a part. 'Land Distribution Meeting, Extremadura, Spain, 1936', the much-reproduced photograph by David Seymour ('Chim') of a gaunt woman standing with a baby at her breast looking upward (intently? apprehensively?), is often

recalled as showing someone fearfully scanning the sky for attacking planes. The expressions on her face and the faces around her seem charged with apprehensiveness. Memory has altered the image, according to memory's needs, conferring emblematic status on Chim's picture not for what it is described as showing (an outdoor political meeting, which took place four months before the war started) but for what was soon to happen in Spain that would have such enormous resonance: air attacks on cities and villages, for the sole purpose of destroying them completely, being used as a weapon of war for the first time in Europe.* Before long the sky did harbor planes that were dropping bombs on landless peasants like those in the photograph. (Look again at the nursing mother, at her furrowed brow, her squint, her half-open mouth. Does she still seem as apprehensive? Doesn't it now seem as if she is squinting because the sun is in her eyes?)

The photographs Woolf received are treated as a window

*Nothing in Franco's barbarous conduct of the war is as well remembered as these raids, mostly executed by the unit of the German air force sent by Hitler to aid Franco, the Condor Legion and memorialized in Picasso's *Guernica*. But they were not without precedent. During the First World War, there had been some sporadic, relatively ineffective bombing; for example, the Germans conducted raids from Zeppelins, then from planes, on a number of cities, including London, Paris and Antwerp. Far more lethally – starting with the attack by Italian fighter planes near Tripoli in October 1911 – European nations had been bombing their colonies. So-called 'air control operations' were favored as an

on the war: transparent views of their subject. It was of no interest to her that each had an 'author' – that photographs represent the view of *someone* – although it was precisely in the late 1930s that the profession of bearing individual witness to war and war's atrocities with a camera was forged. Once, war photography mostly appeared in daily and weekly newspapers. (Newspapers had been printing photographs since 1880.) Then, in addition to the older popular magazines from the late nineteenth century such as *National Geographic* and

economical alternative to the costly practice of maintaining large garrisons to police Britain's more restive possessions. One of these was Iraq, which (along with Palestine) had gone to Britain as part of the spoils of victory when the Ottoman Empire was dismembered after the First World War. Between 1920 and 1924, the recently formed Royal Air Force regularly targeted Iraqi villages, often remote settlements, where the rebellious natives might try to find shelter, with the raids 'carried on continuously by day and night, on houses, inhabitants, crops and cattle', according to the tactics outlined by one RAF wing commander.

What horrified public opinion in the 1930s was that the slaughter of civilians from the air was happening in Spain; these sorts of things were not supposed to happen *here*. As David Rieff has pointed out, a similar feeling drew attention to the atrocities committed by the Serbs in Bosnia in the 1990s, from the death camps such as Omarska early in the war to the massacre in Srebrenica, where most of the male inhabitants who had not been able to flee – more than eight thousand men and boys – were rounded up, gunned down and pushed into mass graves once the town was abandoned by the Dutch battalion of the United Nations Protection Force and surrendered to General Ratko Mladić: these sorts of things are not supposed to happen here, in Europe, *any more*.

Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung that used photographs as illustrations, large-circulation weekly magazines arrived, notably the French *Vu* (in 1929), the American *Life* (in 1936), and the British *Picture Post* (in 1938), that were entirely devoted to pictures (accompanied by brief texts keyed to the photos) and 'picture stories' – at least four or five pictures by the same photographer trailed by a story that further dramatized the images. In a newspaper, it was the picture – and there was only one – that accompanied the story.

Further, when published in a newspaper, the war photograph was surrounded by words (the article it illustrated and other articles), while in a magazine, it was more likely to be adjacent to a competing image that was peddling something. When Capa's at-the-moment-of-death picture of the Republican soldier appeared in *Life* on July 12, 1937, it occupied the whole of the right page; facing it on the left was a full-page advertisement for Vitalis, a men's hair cream, with a small picture of someone exerting himself at tennis and a large portrait of the same man in a white dinner jacket sporting a head of neatly parted, slicked-down, lustrous hair.* The

*Capa's already much admired picture, taken (according to the photographer) on September 5, 1936, was originally published in *Vu* on September 23, 1936, above a second photograph, taken from the same angle and in the same light, of another Republican soldier collapsing, his rifle leaving his right hand, on the same spot on the hillside; that photograph was never reprinted. The first picture also appeared soon after in a newspaper, *Paris-Soir*.

double spread – with each use of the camera implying the invisibility of the other – seems not just bizarre but curiously dated now.

In a system based on the maximal reproduction and diffusion of images, witnessing requires the creation of star witnesses, renowned for their bravery and zeal in procuring important, disturbing photographs. One of the first issues of *Picture Post* (December 3, 1938), which ran a portfolio of Capa's Spanish Civil War pictures, used as its cover a head shot of the handsome photographer in profile holding a camera to his face: 'The Greatest War Photographer in the World: Robert Capa'. War photographers inherited what glamour going to war still had among the anti-bellicose, especially when the war was felt to be one of those rare conflicts in which someone of conscience would be impelled to take sides. (The war in Bosnia, nearly sixty years later, inspired similar partisan feelings among the journalists who lived for a time in besieged Sarajevo.) And, in contrast to the 1914–18 war, which, it was clear to many of the victors, had been a colossal mistake, the second 'world war' was unanimously felt by the winning side to have been a necessary war, a war that had to be fought.

Photojournalism came into its own in the early 1940s – wartime. This least controversial of modern wars, whose justness was sealed by the full revelation of Nazi evil as the war ended in 1945, offered photojournalists a new legitimacy, one that had little place for the left-wing dissidence

that had informed much of the serious use of photographs in the interwar period, including Friedrich's *War Against War!* and the early pictures by Capa, the most celebrated figure in a generation of politically engaged photographers whose work centered on war and victimhood. In the wake of the new mainstream liberal consensus about the tractability of acute social problems, issues of the photographer's own livelihood and independence moved to the foreground. One result was the formation by Capa with a few friends (who included Chim and Henri Cartier-Bresson) of a cooperative, the Magnum Photo Agency, in Paris in 1947. The immediate purpose of Magnum – which quickly became the most influential and prestigious consortium of photojournalists – was a practical one: to represent venturesome freelance photographers to the picture magazines sending them on assignments. At the same time, Magnum's charter, moralistic in the way of other founding charters of the new international organizations and guilds created in the immediate postwar period, spelled out an enlarged, ethically weighted mission for photojournalists: to chronicle their own time, be it a time of war or a time of peace, as fair-minded witnesses free of chauvinistic prejudices.

In Magnum's voice, photography declared itself a global enterprise. The photographer's nationality and national journalistic affiliation were, in principle, irrelevant. The photographer could be from anywhere. And his or her beat was 'the world'. The photographer was a rover, with wars

of unusual interest (for there were many wars) a favorite destination.

The memory of war, however, like all memory, is mostly local. Armenians, the majority in diaspora, keep alive the memory of the Armenian genocide of 1915; Greeks don't forget the sanguinary civil war in Greece that raged through the late 1940s. But for a war to break out of its immediate constituency and become a subject of international attention, it must be regarded as something of an exception, as wars go, and represent more than the clashing interests of the belligerents themselves. Most wars do not acquire the requisite fuller meaning. An example: the Chaco War (1932-35), a butchery engaged in by Bolivia (population one million) and Paraguay (three and a half million) that took the lives of one hundred thousand soldiers, and which was covered by a German photojournalist, Willi Ruge, whose superb close-up battle pictures are as forgotten as that war. But the Spanish Civil War in the second half of the 1930s, the Serb and Croat wars against Bosnia in the mid-1990s, the drastic worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began in 2000 - these contests were guaranteed the attention of many cameras because they were invested with the meaning of larger struggles: the Spanish Civil War because it was a stand against the fascist menace, and (in retrospect) a dress rehearsal for the coming European, or 'world', war; the Bosnian war because it was the stand of a small, fledgling southern European country wishing to remain multicultural

as well as independent against the dominant power in the region and its neo-fascist program of ethnic cleansing; and the ongoing conflict over the character and governance of territories claimed by both Israeli Jews and Palestinians because of a variety of flashpoints, starting with the inveterate fame or notoriety of the Jewish people, the unique resonance of the Nazi extermination of European Jewry, the crucial support that the United States gives to the state of Israel, and the identification of Israel as an apartheid state maintaining a brutal dominion over the lands captured in 1967. In the meantime, far crueller wars in which civilians are relentlessly slaughtered from the air and massacred on the ground (the decades-long civil war in Sudan, the Iraqi campaigns against the Kurds, the Russian invasions and occupation of Chechnya) have gone relatively under-photographed.

The memorable sites of suffering documented by admired photographers in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s were mostly in Asia and Africa - Werner Bischof's photographs of famine victims in India, Don McCullin's pictures of victims of war and famine in Biafra, W. Eugene Smith's photographs of the victims of the lethal pollution of a Japanese fishing village. The Indian and African famines were not just 'natural' disasters; they were preventable; they were crimes of great magnitude. And what happened in Minamata was obviously a crime: the Chisso Corporation knew it was dumping mercury-laden waste into the bay.

(After a year of taking pictures, Smith was severely and permanently injured by Chisso goons who were ordered to put an end to his camera inquiry.) But war is the largest crime, and since the mid-1960s, most of the best-known photographers covering wars have thought their role was to show war's 'real' face. The color photographs of tormented Vietnamese villagers and wounded American conscripts that Larry Burrows took and *Life* published, starting in 1962, certainly fortified the outcry against the American presence in Vietnam. (In 1971 Burrows was shot down with three other photographers aboard a US military helicopter flying over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. *Life*, to the dismay of many who, like me, had grown up with and been educated by its revelatory pictures of war and of art, closed in 1972.) Burrows was the first important photographer to do a whole war in color – another gain in verisimilitude, that is, shock. In the current political mood, the friendliest to the military in decades, the pictures of wretched hollow-eyed GIs that once seemed subversive of militarism and imperialism may seem inspirational. Their revised subject: ordinary American young men doing their unpleasant, ennobling duty.

Exception made for Europe today, which has claimed the right to opt out of war-making, it remains as true as ever that most people will not question the rationalizations offered by their government for starting or continuing a war. It takes some very peculiar circumstances for a war to become genuinely unpopular. (The prospect of being killed

is not necessarily one of them.) When it does, the material gathered by photographers, which they may think of as unmasking the conflict, is of great use. Absent such a protest, the same antiwar photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism, in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or by defeat. The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.