2018

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Kimberly Holifield

University of Southern Mississippi

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Recommended Citation

Holifield, Kimberly (2018) "Through the Lens: World War I Photography as Historical Record," *SLIS Connecting*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.18785/slis.0701.09

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting/vol7/iss1/9>

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Through the Lens: World War I Photography as Historical Record

By Kimberly Holifield

British Studies Research Paper

July 2016

Readers: Dr. Matthew Griffis

Dr. Teresa Welsh

Figure 1. Unidentified German Official Photographer in a Shallow Trench, June 1917 (Imperial War Museum Collection, www.iwm.org.uk)

Figure 2. First World War Exhibit, Imperial War Museum (Holifield, 2016)

“Photography takes an instant out of time, altering life by holding it still.”—Dorothea Lange

Introduction

Quotations fill vacant spaces along the walls of the First World War exhibit at the Imperial War Museum of London. As one walks past displays of weaponry that ushered in the era of modern warfare, letters in bold black print appear to reach out and halt passersby: "I've tried for eighty years to forget it. But I can't." These words were spoken by Harry Patch in remembrance of the harrowing conflict that he witnessed, known for all posterity as the Great War. As evidenced by the veteran's words, the struggle for survival leaves a lasting impression when compounded by the sound of gunfire and the smell of death on the battlefield. War excites each of the senses simultaneously, but it is the sense of sight that best serves the memory of those who fought for king and country.

Soldiers of the First World War viewed their experience not only through the lens that surrounds a colored iris but also through the lens of a camera. World War I marked the first time that the camera traveled with amateurs to war. Unencumbered by the assortment of nineteenth-century equipment necessary to develop a single photograph, soldiers of the new century used the camera to capture their personal view of war (Carmichael, 1989). Their pictures tell a story of comradeship, the daily drudgeries of duty, and sacrifice. Words convey thoughts and emotions. A photograph captures them for display.

Today the preservation of photography as historical record remains clouded with the same reticence that scholars and preservationists exhibited decades ago. Writing in 1990, Leary expands on the archival appraisal of photographs, stating that "potential research use is the major determinant of archival value in photographs. All photo archives should carefully characterise [sic] the types of researchers they serve and the extent and purpose of the uses made of photographs in the archives." Those who browse special collections are often in search of textual evidence relevant to their thesis. Photographic images that grace the pages of works pertaining to the history of World War I have heretofore served as added interest to the text, supplementing words comprehended by the reader.

However, a shift toward photography as historical record has slowly begun to make its way through the world of scholarship. In their 2009 article, Tucker and Campt contend that the time is near when visual history is granted the same authority as the written record.

Many of the same questions must be asked of photographs as of any other type of historical source. By exposing the questions one ought to raise about all historical evidence, photographs reveal not simply the potential and limits of *photography* as a historical source, but the potential and limits of *all* historical sources and historical inquiry as an intellectual project. Yet this is precisely the promise and ultimate potential of the historical study of photographs—that it pushes their interpreters to the limits of historical analysis (Tucker & Campt, 2009).

The language of the image is universal and few barriers exist. However, official photographs documenting World War I are not free of bias. In the words of military historian Stephen Badsey (2014), "The camera could not lie, in the sense that it would record what was in front of it; but all photographs were the product of a selection process, starting with what the cameraman thought was appropriate and technically possible." Future archivists must not only be trained to appraise what is written, but also what is seen. There are several instances of official photographers on both sides of the conflict misrepresenting their subjects for the sake of publicity. Yet, as Carmichael's research (1989) indicates, "the first year and a half of the war on the Western Front and at Gallipoli was recorded chiefly by amateur photographers" (p. 44). After military leadership forbade the use of personal cameras in the field, uninhibited expression of the amateur was replaced by the skillful eye of official photographers.

Purpose and Importance of the Study

During the centenary of the First World War, one must not only remember the sacrifice of those who fought, but also preserve the memory of their sacrifice. It is the purpose of this study to examine World War I photography held in select archives of Great Britain and the historical significance of such items. Photographs have much to offer the scholar.

Thousands of photos taken from 1914 - 1918 permit the viewer a glimpse into the Great War, whether it is the scarred landscape of the Western Front or an image of a nurse tending wounded soldiers. One who observes these black and white images from a century ago may note that pictures are certainly worth a thousand words.

Research Questions

R1. What are some of the major repositories in Great Britain that include collections of archival photographs pertaining to World War I and how many images are in each collection?

R2. Who or what is depicted in the photographs of the collections in this study? What are the themes/content of the photographs?

R3. Who were the photographers of the images in these collections?

R4. Does the content of the images in this study by official photographers differ from those of amateur soldiers? If so, what are the differences?

Review of Literature

The text continues to be hailed as the most common and easily accessible source of information for the researcher. For the purpose of this study, secondary sources pertaining to the subject of photography as historical record, along with those that chronicle images of the Great War and its photographers, readily available among library shelves and online academic journals such as JSTOR, were used to provide context. In the 1970s, scholars began to debate the merits of photography as historical record, as well as the collection of said material in archives to serve future research endeavors pertaining to the subject(s) portrayed within photographic images.

Walter Rundell, Jr. (1978) addressed his colleagues at the forty-second annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, where he spoke of the acceptance of photographs as “an integral part of the evidence, not just illustrations” (p. 375). The former president of the Society elaborated on issues that continue to plague the profession unto the present day. Lack of organization and questions of inclusion

are perhaps the greatest hindrance to the successful collection and maintenance of photographs within an archive. Leary (1990) lists methods necessary for the effective appraisal of photographs, including questions that must be asked by archivists when viewing said material, and whether or not certain images are worthy of preservation. Within the preface to these proposed guidelines, Leary states the need for full-time staff whose sole focus must be directed toward the management of photographic archives.

Matthew Brady, who captured the American Civil War through the camera lens, is an example of those conscious of the photograph as a work of art. Brady, like many of his contemporaries, is remembered for staging scenes. As Carmichael explains, this method of early photography continued to be recognized and accepted as standard practice through the early twentieth century. From 1978 to 1990, one may observe a shift in attitude toward the acceptance of photography as historical evidence. As recent research attests, such as that presented by Tucker and Campt (2009) and Badsey (2014), historians are beginning to see what their twentieth-century predecessors were loath to accept - the photograph is the source.

Books that chronicle iconic images of the Great War and those who captured them on film serve as excellent supplemental material to the collections observed within archives. The British Library is home to several works that provide valuable background information pertaining to First World War photography. Jane Carmichael, who served as Director of Collections at the Imperial War Museum and Keeper of the Photographic Archive, writes poignantly of the World War I photographers and their images (Figures 1 and 2). In *First World War Photographers*, Carmichael (1989) explored the history of the war photographer beginning in the nineteenth-century Crimea. The author describes the laborious process of hauling cumbersome equipment in horse-drawn wagons over fields of battle and the “consciously artistic” images that resulted (p. v). By the time of the First World War, advancements in technology resulted in smaller cameras that were easily operated by all who could afford the cost.

The most commonly used model by the amateur in World War I—most of whom were officers—was the Kodak Vest Pocket Camera. However, official photographers usually opted for medium-format cameras that produced glass plate negatives, panoramic or large fields cameras (Patrick, 2008). Carmichael (1989) contrasts the way in which these devices were employed by official and amateur photographers during the war. In April 1915, British officials placed severe restrictions on photography in an effort to curb the soldier's knack for capturing subject matter deemed "unfit for publication" (p. 44). Prior to the aforementioned date, British press relied on amateurs to supply them with images from the Front. By 1916, Carmichael paints a picture of a hierarchical system in which official photographers were enlisted—complete with honorary promotions—to best serve the Allied war effort with images that appealed to the spirit of patriotism and demonstrated the efficiency of the military as a whole.

Regulations did not prevent British soldiers from snapping a few photographs for themselves every now and then, nor did it prevent official photographers from straying off the beaten path. Several documented the plight of civilians and their suffering and without these images, only half of the story would be known. War not only affects the soldier but the women, children, and the elderly who were left behind in villages destroyed by heavy artillery and advancing armies. Those able to flee walked miles of country roads in search of safe haven and sustenance. It is unlikely that each civilian within these images penned their experience for the world to read, but the photographs still exist so their story has not been lost.

While Carmichael's work provides one with an excellent vantage point from the British lines, Remus (2008) focused on the opposition in *German Amateur Photographers in the First World War*. Unlike their Allied counterparts, German soldiers were among the few to freely experiment with the camera throughout the duration of fighting (Thomas, 2014). Their images speak of a once beautiful French countryside forever scarred by exploding shells, machine gunfire, barbed wire, and troops desperate to advance a few feet beyond their trenches. Infantrymen pose for the

camera shoulder to shoulder, smiling as the photographer takes their picture. Remus features an image of men shaving, for "short beards were not only a question of hygiene but necessary for fixing gas masks appropriately" (2008, p.79). Captions such as these harken to the ominous nature of warfare. To the untrained eye, a photo of German soldiers going through the motions of a morning routine may not be pause for consideration. However, the archivist must view these images with the knowledge of a historian since monotonous routines are performed with purpose in war.

Photographs taken at night display the brilliant, curving light of shells streaming across the darkened sky and the penetrating, fearsome glow that emanates from an explosion moments later. The German soldier's camera, like those belonging to all amateurs, conveys a personal story of war. Poignant images are featured throughout Remus' 2008 work. The pictures speak for themselves: the toe of a boot sticking out of the mud; its wearer unearthed while digging a trench. One may write or speak of death, but there is a finality in viewing an article of clothing that once belonged to a living individual. "[. . .] this is the authentic face of the Western Front as it was witnessed and preserved by the simple view of the photographing infantrymen in the trenches" (p.7).

Like Remus' photographic history of the German soldier who served in the First World War, Thomas and Petiteau (2014) focused on a particular collection of World War I photography - personal albums. *The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography* (Thomas & Petiteau, 2014) coincided with the centennial anniversary of the conflict and focused on specific individuals who fought the battles of the Great War, some of whom survived, some of whom did not. Thomas, the Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Canada, explained that "albums and diaries were a testimony to [the soldier's] time of service, to what they had witnessed during their years of absence from home" (p.16).

Aircraft flew over the fields of battle for the first time during World War I. Pilots glimpsed enemy lines from above, and they took cameras along for the ride. In the words of historian Tim Cook (2007), "Without maps or aerial photographs, the infantry did not

know where they were, did not know where they were supposed to be, and worst of all, did not know where they were in relation to the enemy” (Figure 3). Like a soldier’s personal album shared with generations of family members, the strategic information that pictures convey to a military commander was priceless.

Figure 3. WWI Aerial Photography
(Imperial War Museum Collection, www.iwm.org.uk)

The First World War: Unseen Glass Plate Photographs of the Western Front (de Keyzer & van Reybrouck, 2015) illustrated the small glass plate negatives used by official photographers throughout the war to create some memorable images. For instance, Australian photographer Frank Hurley created the famous “Angel of Death” image that was developed using the negative of a dead soldier lying beneath French soil and the negative of an exploding shell positioned above that of the deceased man (Thomas, 2014). Images like Hurley’s “Angel of Death” were not uncommon in the creation of propaganda during the war.

In *The First World War* (de Keyzer & van Reybrouck, 2015), glass plates were enlarged so that each image spanned the width of two pages. The text was limited to an introduction in which van Reybrouck prefaced his interview with de Keyzer about the historical and artistic significance of World War I photography. The work is divided into sections devoted to photographers of the Great War, from Isidore Aubert’s images of industry to Albert Moreau’s photographs of the French army and its valiant pursuits. The pages of photos developed from glass plates speak to the words of Carmichael (1989), who

wrote that “the power of the still image lies not only in its description of the immediate but also in its capacity to suggest and symbolize” (p.151).

Methodology

In terms of methodology, once the research was compiled from the aforementioned secondary source materials, it became a matter of selection. After visiting a number of repositories across Great Britain, the study focused on the collections of World War I photographs held by the Imperial War Museum of London, Durham University, and Central Library of Edinburgh. Each provided access; photographs have been digitized and are available online for future reference. Many contained within the Imperial War Museum collection are free to download, provided that the user maintains strict adherence to copyright and distribution laws. Staff members on site in London, Durham, and Edinburgh generously provided contact information. Their courtesy and willingness to aid in detailing information related to their collections have proven beneficial throughout the research process. Moreover, by extending the focus to include different regions of Britain—particularly northern England and Scotland—the focus of the subject matter escapes confinement and is not limited to a collection housed within a specific location.

Results

R1. What are some of the major repositories in Great Britain that include collections of archival photographs pertaining to World War I and how many images are in each collection?

Archivists in Great Britain have not only risen to the challenge posed by Rundell in the late 1970s but also adhered to the 1990 guidelines proposed by Leary in order to make collections of photographs accessible to the researcher and general public. The Imperial War Museum of London serves as an excellent starting point for those who wish to learn about World War I. Its physical location features an exhibit that includes every aspect of war, from uniforms and weapons to letters and photographs. Displays have been replicated in universities, libraries, and the halls of Parliament during this time of remembrance. The online presence of the Imperial War Museum holds a wealth of material for the benefit of researchers around the globe, who currently have access to

103,187 photographs chronicling the Great War. These digitized treasures are cataloged, captioned, and available at the click of a mouse.

Although the collections owned by Durham University and the Central Library of Edinburgh are much smaller than the Imperial War Museum, theirs are no less telling of the conflict that waged a century ago. In truth, collections relative to a local population offer scholars necessary links to piece together the puzzle of history. Durham University has cataloged thirty-two aerial photographs from the papers of William Douglas Lowe, Adjutant and Commanding Officer of 18 Durham Light Infantry (collections relating specifically to the Durham Light Infantry, with whom Lowe served, are housed in the archives of the Durham County Record Office). Photos of the Darfur Campaign (106 images, 1916-1917) are found in the University's Sudan Archive among the papers of H.A. MacMichael.

Durham University also maintains personal albums belonging to Douglas Newbold, who served in Palestine from 1916 to 1918, as well as the album of Alec Macfarlane-Grieve, a Durham lecturer who served with the Highland Light Infantry and Seaforth Highlanders during the Great War. The aforementioned collections documented in 106 images that fighting extended well beyond miles of trenches along the Western Front. The Great War was truly a *world* war.

Lastly, members of staff at Central Library in Edinburgh, Scotland, were consulted. In honor of the centenary, the library recently digitized photographs from World War I that are found in donated items—mainly personal diaries and family scrapbooks. Thirty images of Field Marshal Earl Douglas Haig are among the Capital Collections of Edinburgh (which house the digitized material of the city's libraries and museums), as well as the diaries of Ethel Moir, who served as a nursing orderly during the war. Moir's diaries offer a female perspective that is often underrepresented. These items, along with the Thomson scrapbooks that chronicle the experience of family members who served, are a unique addition to the study of First World War photography.

R2. Who or what is depicted in the photographs of the collections in this study? What are the themes/content of the photographs?

Photographs housed within the Imperial War Museum collection span the entirety of the war. The collection encompasses a wide range of themes shot by soldiers and official photographers representing both the Allies and Central Powers. Portraits of soldiers and women who were involved in either manufacturing or nursing are among the collection, as well as aerial photographs used by the military for reconnaissance. Landscapes before and after crucial battles were fought are well represented, providing the viewer with an understanding of how drastically the topography of rural areas was altered where heavy fighting occurred. And one must not forget the trench life of the soldier; whether he served in the British, French, or German army makes no difference. All are represented, including soldiers and sailors from every corner of the battling empires who fought in campaigns far beyond the Western Front. Photographs within the collection display the smiling infantryman with his comrades, artillerymen surrounding the weapons responsible for creating deep craters dotting No Man's Land, and airmen in their flying machines. Lest we forget troops from the United States; the Imperial War Museum documents the delayed arrival of American doughboys in Europe.

The content of First World War photographs held by the aforementioned repositories in Durham and Edinburgh center around the story of individuals before, during, and after the four-year conflict. Lives of officers and general infantrymen are forever stilled in black and white, marking the time and place while standing before a camera. Abigail Adams need not worry that her twentieth-century sisters have been forgotten, for the contributions of the ladies are also credited in these photographs. Whether laboring in a munitions factory or nursing the wounded soldier, women of the First World War have a story to tell in order for the history of this tragic event to be fully comprehended.

R3. Who were the photographers of the images in these collections?

Photographers of the Great War were divided into three groups: official, press, and amateur (Carmichael, 1989). Of the three, press

photographers were the most limited in terms of access. Prior to severe sanctions levied on those with a camera, members of the press relied on the soldier to document each phase of the war. Once restrictions were in place, official photographers were hired to fill the void. Ernest Brooks is perhaps the most famous of the official photographers who served the British cause with a camera. Images developed from the glass plates of Isidore Aubert and Albert Moreau captured the French struggle to secure victory in their homeland. And one must not forget the contribution of unknown German amateurs, whose photographs of the Western Front convey the same struggles as those endured by soldiers on the other side of No Man's Land. The contribution of the amateur, no matter which nation he pledged allegiance, has proven invaluable to the record of what happened (in the words of George M. Cohan) "over there."

R4. Does the content of the images in this study by official photographers differ from those of amateur soldiers? If so, what are the differences?

Official photographers of the First World War were more selective in terms of the content of their photos, compared with those taken by the amateur. Tight restrictions were placed on the former within the purview of the western theatre. Those photographing eastern campaigns were allotted a bit more freedom. Official photographers had a set job description that the amateur did not. However, each managed to capture the realities of war, whether in photographing preparations for battle or its aftermath.

By 1916, the fear of court-martial stymied the Allied soldier who refused to relinquish his camera (Badsey, 2014). Still, there were those who dared to defy the rules. The amateur's photos focus on *his* time at the Front, whereas the official photographer captured a broad view of the war and its participants. The official photographer used the war as his canvas. He was both scribe and artist. Each photographer's aesthetic is distinct from the other. Brooks' silhouetted figures against spacious skies are in direct contrast to the conflict between movement and stillness that one finds in the work of Tom Aitken. Together, both the amateur and official photographer have gifted posterity with the liberation of the First World War soldier from the pages of history.

Conclusion

July 2016 marked the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest in history. At the end of four months, over one million men had lost their lives (Figure 4). Official photographers were there to capture each wave of battle on film. The images tell a story no less frightening than those written on a page. Oral accounts and texts written by both the fallen and those who lived to tell the tale can teach us many things, but scholars should not forget that images hold intrinsic value. Photographs help produce a panoramic view of the war from every angle.

Each of the repositories selected for this study offers researchers a treasure trove of material to better explore a world at war and those involved. Those who work to preserve the images of the First World War realize that careful interpretation is necessary when dealing with these primary sources. As with any other source of information, a number of steps must be taken before a particular library, museum, or archives decides to place a collection within their care. Once the decision has been made and proper procedures are followed pertaining to the identification and explanation of what the photographs convey, the matter of access is addressed. Digitization is the ultimate goal. An online presence not only benefits researchers who cannot visit the physical site due to distance, but it also guarantees that photos will not be forgotten within the confines of a building. Through digitization, a safety net is in place for the images of World War I, ensuring that they will remain for future generations to examine and appreciate. After all, history is witnessed through a lens before it is written.

Acknowledgments

The researcher would like to extend sincere appreciation for the aid of staff at the British Library and Imperial War Museum of London. Many thanks to Alison Stoddart of the Central Library of Edinburgh, as well as Alastair Fraser of Durham University Library. Their time and assistance in locating private collections for the researcher to view proved invaluable. Lastly, the researcher would like to acknowledge Dr. Teresa Welsh, whose listening ear and encouraging voice led to the successful completion of this project.

Figure 4. British Troops, Battle of the Somme (Getty Image, British Library www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107535.html)

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