# War Photography In Historical Perspective

War Photography has been one of the best mediums to receive information on what is happening on the front lines of war and has evolved with cultures and has even changed people’s vision of the conflict. The medium has grown in popularity so much that it can literally determine an outcome of a war with one simple snapshot. From the start of war photography in the civil war to the great disasters of the world wars, the polarizing Vietnam wars, and even today's wars, the medium has gone through some drastic changes like in every kind of photography style. Like every other kind of photography, war photography has evolved in its style, the techniques used, and how the world takes in the photos.

The Civil War is considered to be the very first documented war with the aid of a camera, this sparked many people to be interested in seeing and photographing the great war that pitted brothers against each other. The Civil War that is being talked about in the essay is the American Civil War, which was caused due to the Northern and Southern halves of the United States disagrees with the policy of slavery. Photography during this time was still relatively new and was not exactly the super simple and quick process of the digital era or the current kind of film that is used now. Photographers back then had to use a process called the Wet-Plate or Collodion Process which was the fastest and best way to do darkroom photos with a crisp quality to them. The start of the process saw the photographers coat their plate with collodion to make it light-sensitive before immersing the plate in silver nitrate and placing it in a light-tight container. They would then place take the photo that they needed and go to the darkroom to develop it in a solution of pyrogallic acid. Once the plate is washed and dried, the plate is coated in varnish and is now a perfect negative to produce the images. What’s important about this process was that the plate could never dry even for a second, otherwise, the whole process would be ruined, which is why it was called the wet plate process. To add on top of the complexity of having to take photos and even take photos of war, almost all the photographers had to travel with every chemistry, plates, and camera or two with them in a wagon wherever they went. Despite the complexity of the process, in the 1860s, this was the most primitive and technologically advanced process during its time.

Many photographers photographed the ongoing war, but some of the most significant photographers during this time is were Mathew Brady and George N. Barnard. Mathew Brady was born in 1823 in Warren County, New York and when he was old enough, he used and even manufactured cases for daguerreotypes before opening up his own studio. When the war first began, Brady switched from a portraiture style of photography to more of a documentarian style and even led a team of photographers into the field to help bring attention and documentation of the war. George N. Barnard was born in 1819 in Connecticut and began photographing in his 20s with a daguerreotype. One of his notable pieces of work was his photo of a mill in Oswego burning down which became one of the earliest photos of News photography. When the Civil war arose, he joined Mathew Brady to document the war and eventually became the official photographer of the Military Division of Mississippi. The photos that these men took were primarily documentary of the aftermath of battles and portraits of the battalions and soldiers of each side of the army, but never is there a picture of the men actually in combat due to the inconvenience of the long exposure times of the camera. The controversy that rose up from the photographs came from the aftermath of the battles. Some photographers would move the dead

bodies to make a scene look more dramatic, having the battle and deaths be true but the exact spots where the men died a lie. This will not be the last time any controversy would be sprung up for illegitimate events taking place in a photo.

After the Civil War, the technical aspect of photography grew even further, with cameras becoming smaller for easy transportation and the film format allowing quicker exposure time making World War I an easier time of photographing. The start of World War I began when an organization called the “Black Hand” hand assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and surrounding countries and alliances were brought into the war. Due to the technological advances, photographs were being shot with the type of celluloid film that is still used today. The celluloid film was developed in 1885 by George Eastman who is also the founder of Kodak. Eastman made photography easier for every type of person to achieve and shortened exposure times to make it even quicker, including for kids.

With the medium becoming more accessible for a wider range of audience, the number of photographers that were in World War I was substantially higher than the civil war, but only a select few photographers stand out like Ernest Brooks and Edward Steichen. Ernest Brooks was born on February 23, 1878, in the United Kingdom and became famous for his photos of World War I. His photos show a lot more character of the men out in the trenches during the war with even some action shots of the men charging or in a middle of a battle. Brooks eventually came under some backfire when viewers found out that he staged some of the scenes in his photographs by remembering the scene during a battle and trying to recreate it later. Supposedly, he did this to not have the viewers and censors see the true horrors of the war, but after the backlash, he vowed to keep all of his photos straight-up original and did not shy away from disturbing scenes. Brooks photos truly showed a heroic side of the allies and their fight in the Great War and his photos truly reached the level of high tier photojournalistic photos in their impact on the media.

Edward Steichen contributed a lot to the war effort and in the photography world. Before the war, Steichen was a pictorialist which means that he created photos that looked like paintings and was the leader of the pictorialist movement. When the war began, Steichen enlisted and became an aerial photographer for the United States military. Aerial photography was a new way of taking photos of the battlefield, the photographers would photograph the surrounding area in to have the military map out their attacks. This style of photographing changed Steichen to be a straight photographer and began freelancing work in advertising. Due to the many photographers on the battlefield, there was coverage of the war on all fronts compared to the two styles of photography in the civil war. The biggest change between the two wars was that there was coverage of soldiers actually on the battlefield and not in their camps. Although there were not many photos of the men actually in battle, there are definitely photos of men down in the trenches ready for battle, the barren waste of No Mans Land, and even medics carrying injured men out of the battle. Many photographers took photos of the barracks, ammunition, and the new technologies being used in the war, like tanks and artillery cannons. The medium of photography has grown quite a bit since the civil war and served more to be heroic propaganda and photo documents of the war than the portraits.

From one great war to another, not many predicted that there would be another world war after the “war to end all wars” ended, but decades later, World War II began with many photographers going to document this horrendous war. World War II started when Adolf Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, with Britain and France declaring war on Germany. The

new war stayed mainly in Europe until the Japanese military bombed an American base called Pearl Harbor which looped in the neutral United States to join the fight with Britain and France. The cameras during this time had evolved to look more recognizable of the cameras that are used for today and the film used was still the celluloid type, this allowed photographers of the action and get back into it. Just like World War I, World War II had a plethora of cameras and photographers in the war to document and journalize the war raging on. Edward Steichen makes a prominent return to the war with aerial photography but different from before. The aerial photography that he took in World War I was of the landscape for maps and plans for bombing runs while his work in World War II dealt with more of the actual planes in the war since aerial warfare was more prominent than previous wars.

Another prominent photographer was Carl Mydans who traveled all across Europe and Asia to document the life and deaths that came from the war. He would photograph the civilians as they try to escape from the war or the soldiers when they had the rare chance to have a break, and he would photograph the end of battles or bombings like the Japanese air raid in Chongqing of the casualties that have suffered from it. Photography during the war seemed extremely prominent in every aspect, in the sense that from the start of the war to the very end, everything under the sun was photographed but not everything was seen by the public. The photographs during the war were meant to inform and inspire the folks back home but not every photo was seen due to censors restrict some shots that they deemed too graphic for the public. The photos that due make it through compose of soldiers taking a break, the new technology that was being used, the camps and ammunition, the injured soldiers and civilians, some action of the men in combat, the land and architecture devastated by the previous battle, the planes in action with bombings, and even the celebrations of the end of the war.

From a decade with high hopes and full support for the military to a decade of war that made United States civilians call the soldiers monsters and even made the government end a war because of the photography that came out of it. This war was the infamous Vietnam War, there is not really an exact time when the Vietnam war started. The United States sent advisers into South Vietnam and then months later, they sent 3,500 marines to protect those advisors, then troops to protect the marines who are protecting the advisors and so on and so forth till it became a full-on war. The reason that advisors were sent to South Vietnam was to convert them to a capitalist government and not the communist government that North Vietnam is. The photographs that came out of Vietnam started off pretty heroic, but as the war prolonged, the photos got darker. Many of the photographs depict the actual true horrors of war, the way the war was being fought with napalm and innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

Two photographers that stand almost completely opposite in the subject matter that they photographed was Larry Burrows and Nick Ut. Larry Burrows was a LIFE magazine photojournalist and went around the world to photograph international conflicts before going to Vietnam. He would use color film for a more realistic depiction of the war for Life magazine, he photographed hard scenes with injured men being carried to safety by comrades and soldiers worrying about their brothers in arm who were injured. He would also deliberately set up scenes to depict a certain emotion of the war based on observations he has seen on the battlefield. Burrows depicts the soldier as heroic men who honor their brothers and fighting for honor, but then there is the other side of the photos from Vietnam. Nick Ut was a Vietnamese photographer for the Associated Press (AP) in Vietnam after his brother, who originally worked there, was killed in combat. Ut’s photos depicted a harsher and crueler version of the war going on, like little kids naked running away from their village that was recently bombed with napalm.

All of their faces are scared, and many are in pain due to the napalm being “accidentally” being dropped on their village with some articles talking about how Ut ran to the girl and washed in in some water and seeing that she has received third-degree burns from the bombing. Photos like these show a much harsher view of the war that was raging in Vietnam and in many cases, changed how United States civilians saw the war. America was already having trouble with having support with the war with people protesting for the United States to fix the issues that were actually in the country and not be trying to fix problems that were overseas. Things intensified, even more, when a college group of protesters was shot at on their campus, further creating tension between the citizens and the government. Then to add on top of it all, Nixon told the public that the end of the war was near and then months passed with no end to the war and troops still being deployed to Vietnam, this started the distrust of the public and the government, especially after the Watergate incident. When the veterans of the Vietnam war returned, they were not hailed as heroes like in previous wars but as savages who attacked innocent people with no gain and were treated like garbage for the war. Photography grew in such a way that the medium changed the opinions of an entire country to end a war that had no end in sight, because of this, the government faces a dilemma for all future wars to come.

After the media turned completely against the Vietnam war, the united states government faced a dilemma of what should be censored and what should be told and shown to the media. They do not want to restrict the people of their free will to photograph but in an era of the internet, showing too much information can be costly to a government that is fighting a war or even conducting secret missions that could be compromised by the media. In today’s society, it is plagued with never-ending conflict and America is engaged in its longest war to date. The Afghanistan War has gone on for so long that many people have just become desensitized to it and there are not many civilians are as excited like in previous wars, but that does not mean that people are not supporting the war effort though. Despite what seems to be the carelessness of the wars and conflicts, there is still photojournalist who care about these issues and are willing to risk their lives to inform the world of the problems that are occurring.

Living in the digital age is truly marvelous because there are now many ways to photograph everything and many ways for the photos to be disrupted across the world. One of the brave photographers of today was Tim Hetherington, he graduated from Oxford in 1992 with a degree in Classics and English. He eventually earned a second degree in photojournalism and set out on his quest to document the horrors and consequences of war and conflict. He lived in Africa for several years to document the conflict and the root of the cause of the violence in the continent. Later he traveled to Afghanistan to photograph the American troops fighting in their war, while there he photographed the American men who were fighting the war in their barracks and on the battlefield. Hetherington eventually was killed while doing work in Libya by a mortar in 2011, although gone, his work has left a longing impression on the world and his photographs did what he intended, to show the consequences of conflict and to show those brave faces trying to deal with it.

A photographer that has earned her reputation as one of the best modern war photographers is Anja Niedringhaus. She became a photojournalist in 1990 for the European Pressphoto Agency (EPA) in Germany. She is one of the toughest photojournalists to exist, while many others went to photograph the aftermaths of conflicts or participate in the actual battle while also taking photos, she would be being in the middle of riots, conflicts, and warzones with only her camera. She has been shot, beaten, and bombed many times in her long years as a photojournalist and has won even won the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news photography. Although a prominent and

impactful photojournalist, she was killed while sitting in a car with a reporter when an Afghan police officer opened fire upon them. What most people do not really realize is how much these photojournalists and photographers put themselves at risk just so that the world is informed of the problems going on in this world. The evolution that the photographs have gone through is the amount it is shown in the photos, the fallen soldiers in the civil war are powerful but no as explicit as the modern photographs which depict the more realistic side of a war. The photos taken today are way harsher than any of the past wars but also just as heroic, they show the true devastation that will occur in war without censoring it, while many of the heroic photos give just as much of a human side to the soldiers fighting in the conflicts.

War Photography has gone through many changes throughout its existence and will continue to change as long as conflicts exist in this world. Just like war, photography never really changes and will continue to be the same for as long as humanity is still around. Many people do not really realize how much at risk someone will put themselves for just a single photo to inform the public of the problems occurring in the world. These men and women throughout every single generation have put their lives on the line to document the destruction and cruelty of war and they deserve more recognition than they actually get. Even if they are not fighting for their own countries, they are willing to stop at nothing to inform the public on whatever issue is going on.