

Iconic Images of War:

photographs that changed history

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[Editors intro here](#)

The recent photographs taken by US of troops apparently abusing Iraqi prisoners-of-war in Abu Ghraib Jail have attracted attention across the world. Although it is too early to say whether these images will come to represent the essential character of the current Iraq conflict, they have altered public perceptions, producing doubt about the wisdom of the war that was not so apparent when the fighting began. Furthermore, they have been used in the Middle East by groups seeking to show that Western troops are engaged in a modern crusade against Arab nations rather than a so-called 'war against terrorism'. In this paper we explore images of war, which have gained iconic status. Each has captured a change in perception or an underlying mood not yet fully expressed. Often adopted by campaigners or governments for propaganda purposes, their powerful message may be modified over time as ideas attached to the event itself evolve. It is important to understand the genesis of iconic images of war because they can fundamentally alter the beliefs of future generations without necessarily capturing the complexity of such events.

The rise of the iconic war photograph

Although photography emerged as a new visual medium in the mid-nineteenth century, iconic photographs of actual warfare are a relatively recent phenomenon and largely date from the Second World War. The reasons are both technical (relating to the design of cameras, methods of processing film and the advance of mass communication) and social (relating to the changing nature of public interest in the experiences of soldiers). Although Roger Fenton, among the first war photographers, was sent to record the Crimean War, he remained under military supervision and avoided taking any pictures that might suggest mismanagement. He had been sent in March 1855 specifically to counteract the critical reports of William Howard Russell published in *The Times*. In addition, Fenton applied a form of self-censorship, believing that the Victorian public would not tolerate the grim realities of battle. He refrained, for example, from photographing mutilated bodies left after the Charge of the Light Brigade.¹ Only when soldiers had recovered from the worst of their wounds did Fenton photograph them in formal portraits. Moreover, the technical demands of the camera, requiring exposure times of several minutes, limited its application to static subjects or carefully posed compositions. Arranged in albums, Fenton's pictures did not attract a widespread interest from Victorians and sold sluggishly.²

Photographers recording the American Civil War did not refrain from depicting the dead and wounded.³ Many of these images were published in newspapers as woodcuts or engravings but none achieved iconic status during the conflict.

The development of small hand-held cameras allowed the Boer War to be recorded in depth using film. Because photographs were cheaper than drawings by good artists, newspapers were increasingly illustrated with photographs of varying quality. Because the war was fought by mobile columns seeking to track down Boers adept in concealment and movement, it has been concluded that photographs of actual combat were 'virtually impossible to obtain, and the pictures that were taken had a static, lifeless, almost staged appearance about them'.⁴



The notorious Ghraib image



St. Paul's Cathedral during bombing of London. "Standing up gloriously out of the flames and smoke of surrounding buildings, St. Paul's Cathedral is pictured during the great fire raid of Sunday December 29th." London, 1940. *National Archives and Records Administration*

In many ways it is surprising that there so few iconic photographs of warfare from the First World War particularly as reproductive methods permitted their mass publication. Explanations related to the nature of the conflict but also to the potential audience. First, trench warfare was difficult to film such that many battle scenes were in fact reconstructions enacted in the safety of reserve lines or abandoned battlefields. John Warwick Brooke, an official war photographer, was responsible for a rare image, which showed an officer leading his men out of a sap during a battle in spring 1918.⁵ He too took the iconic photograph of a stretcher-bearer party struggling through the mud of Passchendaele in August 1917. Apart from the practical hazards of recording combat, images were censored and only military photographers were permitted at the front. Enlisted as officers, they were instructed to record events for posterity in an illustrative fashion. Although faking was discouraged, the general principle was 'the propaganda of the facts'.⁶ Despite being an official photographer, Lieutenant William

Rider-Rider, whose eye for a striking image had been sharpened when working for the *Daily Mirror* before the war, did not shirk from recording the grim reality of front-line battle. He shot a graphic series of pictures of Canadian troops enduring the mud and shells of Vimy Ridge during 1917.⁷

During the mid-1930s in response to economic slump, photography assumed a new vitality. Like the newflash on the wireless, it made the viewer feel like an eyewitness directly in touch with a new experience. For example, a photograph by Dorothea Lange of an American migrant worker with her young children rapidly became a symbol for the depression. Depicting a woman aged before her time, anxious for the future, it captured the feelings of so many Americans who had been devastated by financial collapse.

Robert Capa's photograph of a Spanish Republican soldier killed in action near Cerro Muriano on 5 September 1936 has a strong claim to iconic status.⁸ Although some have questioned whether it was posed, suggesting that 'The Falling Soldier'

was in fact simply tumbling down a slope, this does not undermine its claim to symbolise sudden death in combat. At the time, it was widely accepted that the soldier had been shot through the head and its publication in the French magazine, *Vue*, brought Capa instant celebrity.

Perhaps the last iconic painting of war was Picasso's 'Guernica' (1937). A response to air-raids in the Spanish Civil War, the picture was used by republicans to discredit fascism. The effects, both physical and psychological, of aerial bombardment on civilians caused considerable concern in the run up to the Second World War. Although 'Guernica' came to represent the horrors of modern war, the latter part of the twentieth century saw the photograph finally supplant the painting as the iconic medium of war.

The Second World War

At least two images rose to iconic status during the Second World War, one British and one American. The first was the photograph of St Paul's Cathedral surrounded by smoking and ruined



left: Australian infantry re-enact the assault at El Alamein, North Africa 1942. *Imperial War Museum, London*

right: After landing on the island of Iwo Jima, in the Bonins archipelago, February 23, 1945, American soldiers raise the star-spangled banner at the summit of the island. *Photo 12*

below: Soviet soldier hoisting the Red Flag on the Reichstag building in Berlin, May 1945. The picture was colorized at a later date. *Photo 12*

1940, when making the short propaganda film, *London Can Take It*, Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings of the Crown Film Unit, sought images to illustrate in the words of Quentin Reynolds, the narrator, the 'determination, confidence and high courage' of Londoners subjected to air-raids.¹² The dome of St Paul's was used as a backdrop to the title sequence and a distant view of the cathedral from Fleet Street was included to show that life went on much as usual after a night of bombs. It proved to be the most popular film assessed by Mass-Observation during the year and a modified version, *Britain Can Take It*, was produced for American viewers.¹³

As an icon of resilience and the triumph of civilization in extreme adversity, St Paul's caught the popular imagination and was widely reproduced to buttress morale. The cathedral surrounded by bomb damage was also chosen by Walter Spradbery as a theme for one of six posters issued by London Transport for its 'Proud City' series in 1944. This image was intended, in the artist's words, to convey 'the sense that havoc itself is passing and

buildings. Taken at the height of the Blitz on 29 December 1940, it appeared in the *Daily Mail* two days later under the caption 'War's greatest picture: St Paul's stands unharmed in the midst of the burning City.'⁹ The image became a symbol of survival to serve as an example to the rest of the Britain and the Empire. Although attributed to Bill Brandt, who had been commissioned by the Ministry of Information to record air-raid shelters in the capital,¹⁰ it was in fact the work of Herbert Mason positioned on the roof of the *Daily Mail* building in Fleet Street. However, the published image had been doctored to enhance its dramatic effect. At a time the picture was taken it looked as though St Paul's would be consumed by fire. Only the cathedral's own water supplies saved the structure after a telegraph had been dispatched to New York reporting the building's destruction.¹¹

In fact, St Paul's had already served as a symbol of resilience before Mason's photograph confirmed its iconic status. In





with new days come new hopes¹⁴ – a slightly different message to that of 1940.

The second image also represented triumph in adversity and reflected a significant change in US censorship policy. In 1943 President Roosevelt authorised the concept of ‘restricted realism’ to allow the portrayal of the hardships of warfare. Soon afterwards, *Life Magazine* published the first picture of a dead American, followed soon afterwards by a photograph of an amputation under combat conditions. Yet neither of these achieved iconic status in contrast to Joe Rosenthal’s image of a group of American marines raising the US flag on the summit of Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima on 23 February 1945. Although there had been an earlier flag-raising event, photographed by Staff Sergeant Louis R. Lowery a counter-attack by a Japanese survivor destroyed both the film and the monument.¹⁵ The raising of a much larger flag, recorded on film by Rosenthal of the Associated Press, was not therefore a staged reconstruction. Sufficient light filtered through the overcast skies to give the figures a sculptural quality and the flagpole was so heavy that the soldiers strained to raise it upright, while the broken terrain and shattered shrubbery at their feet exemplified the turbulence of war. This image caught the public

imagination because it depicted the first time that an American flag had been raised on Japanese territory. The photograph was celebrated on postage stamps, used to great effect to publicise the most successful war bond drive held in the US during the Second World War, and formed the basis of the Marine Corps monument in Washington.

Both of these examples of iconic war photographs show how an apparently straightforward message can be used for propaganda purposes. As a result such images were widely reproduced, which is a further reason why they became famous and were thought to express an essential characteristic of the Second World War. These two photographs also reveal a second important aspect of iconic war images: they served the purposes of the victors. By contrast, images of defeated armies are much less likely to obtain iconic status.

Iconic images do not necessary have to be genuine representations, though they do perhaps need to contain a core of the truth. A popular image of British troops fighting in the Western Desert, showed an officer in silhouette with drawn revolver leading his men through a battlefield of exploding shells. The picture had been staged in 1941 on the outskirts of Cairo close to the

Pyramids by an official army photographer Sergeant Lenart Chetwyn. Although fake, it captured something of the courage and determination of the Eighth Army and was widely reproduced. As another example, the picture by Yevgeni Khaldei of triumphant Russian soldiers raising the Soviet flag over the ruined Reichstag (a staged picture) became a powerful symbol of Germany’s utter defeat. Indeed, a Georgian had been included in the banner party by political officials as a special present to Stalin.¹⁶ Several wristwatches on the arm of a Russian soldier supporting the flag bearer had to be retouched to prevent it from becoming an icon of looting.

The Vietnam War

One image of the Vietnam War achieved global prominence; that of the young Vietnamese girl running naked down a street in fear and pain after being burned by napalm. This photograph, taken in June 1972 by Nick Ut, a Vietnamese, graphically revealed the suffering of innocent civilians and was used for propaganda purposes to suggest that the war was being waged against innocent civilians and not just against communism. Another popular image, which brought home the cruelty of war, was that of a Viet Cong guerrilla being shot through the head by Brigadier



The Realities of war
Left: "A Harvest of Death." Gettysburg, July 1863.

below: US napalm attack on a Vietnam village. Young girl Kim Phuc runs for safety in terror, screaming.

Right: Viet Cong guerrilla being shot in the head by Brigadier Nguyen Ngoc Loan, on the second day of the Tet offensive.

National Archives and Records Administration

Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a South Vietnamese police commander, on the streets of Saigon during the second day of the Tet offensive. Eddie Adams, a veteran photographer of Korea, who took the picture won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for this image. It too was used by anti-war campaigners to show that brutality was not confined to the Communist forces.

The Gulf War

During the Gulf War of 1991, film and photographic images of smart bombs and missiles entering doorways and windows with precision accuracy were supplied to the press on numerous occasions by the US military. They were designed to show that collateral damage was limited and that there was minimal of civilian life.

However, these images came to symbolize the overwhelming superiority of the US military and its technology. In reality, only five per cent of the ordnance dropped on Iraq were smart weapons so the images were somewhat misleading, similar to a number of iconic war images.

The Iraq War of 1993-1994

The images from the Abu Ghraib prison have received much publicity, been widely reproduced and have been used for propaganda purposes, particularly in Arab countries. On this basis, they may already have achieved iconic status, at least in the short term. Whether in the long run they come to represent the essential nature of the war will probably depend on the outcome of the current conflict. In Iraq develops into a relatively peaceful



and democratic country, these images will probably fade from prominence. If the war is eventually perceived as a disaster for the West, the depiction of prisoner abuse may well come to represent an unjust and brutal war without capturing the military, social and historical complexity of this foreign intervention.

Conclusion

The rise of the photograph as an iconic image of war not only owes much to the technical development of the camera and mass communication, it also reflected the growth of a receptive market. In the nineteenth century, differences in class, levels of education and wealth meant that few paintings or photographs would have a wide and lasting appeal. Furthermore, photographers themselves became more ambitious and were sometimes granted broader licence. Until the 1930s they largely limited themselves to recording what they saw. During the Second World War they sought to capture the action of war, its impact on combatants and to illuminate the wider social and moral issues. Throughout this conflict official US Army and Marine photographers were at a disadvantage when compared with their civilian counterparts. The former were issued with the 4 x 5 inch Speed Graphic, a heavy and awkward camera, dating from 1911, while the latter used the lighter and more versatile 35mm Leica and Contax. The development of hand-held cameras in effect transferred ownership of the depiction of wartime events from governments to individual reporters and even soldiers as has occurred in the recent war in Iraq.

Although the government and military tightly controlled the production of wartime images, democratisation has created a mass market for the opinion-shaping photograph, while governments and campaigners have adopted increasingly sophisticated methods to mould popular opinion. Whilst photo magazines, such as *Life*, and houses such as Magnum, have died, images are now spread more rapidly by television and the internet. Today, perhaps, corporate agencies, whether public or private, are more effective in creating and presenting images that will convey a message or feeling. The speed at which pictures can be broadcast around the world has been transformed by computer technology.

For an image to become iconic it has to express a meaning that resonates with a mass population. This message may not be completely accurate and may serve to perpetrate a myth that reinforces qualities, which people on the winning side wish to possess. Because iconic photographs are a product of technology and the mass communication age, the development of



instantaneous satellite links, the internet and digital photography will doubtless ensure that images of war continue to influence popular opinion.

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