



Representing Conflict of Russia-Ukraine war and Israel-Hamas Through Portraits: A Study of Visual Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how portrait photography captures human experience during war and disorder. It draws on scholars like Azoulay, Sontag, and Nachtwey to discuss representation, memory, and ethics. It shows how portraits shape public opinion and challenge dominant narratives. Ultimately, it reflects on the human cost of warfare and its aftermath.

Keywords: Portrait Photography, Conflicts, warfare, Narratives

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of historical wars, portrait photography emerges as a poignant tool for capturing untold stories of human resilience and vulnerability. From World War I to modern conflicts like those in Aleppo, photographers like Robert Capa and Don McCullin have immortalized the faces and experiences of individuals amidst turmoil. These portraits serve as powerful representations of courage and suffering, shaping our collective memory of war. Iconic images like Capa's "The Falling Soldier" and McCullin's "Shell-shocked US Marine, Hue, Vietnam" become symbols of specific conflicts, ensuring that the memories of war endure across generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Portrait photography has for a long time been realized to be a powerful medium that captures human experience even in the most difficult situations. During periods of war, artists have used this mode of visual storytelling to depict the effects of conflicts on people and communities. This paper provides literature review about the different research works, and scholarly articles that have analyzed portraiture during wartime focusing on themes such as representation, memory, ethics, and the role of photographer.

Representation:

One of the principal concerns addressed by sources discussing portraiture in times of wars is representation. The works by scholars like Susan Sontag (1977) and Ariella Azoulay (2008) are examples of how photographic representations of war shape public perception and understanding. In "Regarding the Pain of Others," Sontag explores these issues, revealing how war images can tell us things about ourselves by both speaking to us and hiding important aspects concerning conflicts because they accentuate predicaments that come along with portraying human suffering: what it means to be terribly haunted by photographs; how we might actually use these images; why they don't work as instruments; what their real meaning is; where one should go from here with them; when they just exploit or aestheticize suffering instead of drawing attention upon it or do nothing at all; etc." Arguing her point around this concept Azoulay calls it "civil contract" which supposes that viewers become responsible participants who transform photographs into documents testifying their experiences.

[Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, titled "The Terror of War", taken at Trảng Bàng during the Vietnam War on June 8, 1972.](#)



On Saturday, November 11, demonstrators advocating for a truce in the conflict between Israel and Hamas participate in the "National March For Palestine" in central London while carrying olive branches, a symbol of peace.

Henry Nicholls/AFP/Getty Image

The Napalm Girl –

Nick Ut(Vietnamese American photographer

9/11 – Joel Meyerwitz(American Photographer , 2001

Memory:

Hirsch's concept of "post memory" highlights how war photography, like Capa and McCullin's work, becomes ingrained in collective memory, shaping how later generations perceive conflicts. These images serve as powerful symbols, influencing the narratives passed down through family stories and cultural influences. Hirsch's research underscores the enduring impact of visual representations in shaping our understanding and remembrance of historical events.



Children react during the funeral of the Fajojo family, who were killed in an Israeli bombing on Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on Saturday, November 11.

Said Khatib

Ethics:

The ethical complexities of photographing war, particularly in portrait photography, prompt discussions among experts. Martha Rosler (2004) discusses the challenges faced by photographers, questioning their intentions and the consequences of depicting suffering. Rosler argues that while documenting war can be witnessed, it can also exploit subjects, emphasizing the need to scrutinize portrayal. Likewise, James Nachtwey (2001) explores photojournalism ethics, stressing the importance of respecting the dignity and humanity of subjects in portrait setting.

Role of the Photographer:

Scholars have examined how photographers like Susan Meiselas and Sebastião Salgado use portraiture to challenge dominant war narratives, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. Wendy Kozol's 2015 research explores photographers' roles as both documenters and storytellers in war photography, demonstrating how portrait photography can disrupt power structures and offer alternative viewpoints. Overall, scholarly discussions highlight the ethical complexities of capturing war images, the influence of portraiture on collective memory, and photographers' potential to challenge established narratives. Looking forward, further research is needed to explore the evolving relationship between portrait photography and warfare in the digital age and within interconnected global conflict.



Thursday, Nov. 9: At the Kuwaiti Hospital in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, a Palestinian girl who has been injured is receiving medical attention.
Mohammed Abed/AFP via Getty Images



Tuesday, November 7: On Salah al-Din Street in Bureij, a lady uses a pole with a shirt attached as a white flag to stop being shot at as Palestinians evacuate from Gaza City to the southern Gaza Strip.

Mohammed Dahman/AP



Tuesday, November 7: In the midst of the rubble of the family house damaged in an Israeli strike in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, Amal al-Robayaa makes bread using flour recovered by her sister-in-law Nesrine. According to Robayaa, an Israeli bombardment damaged the apartment where she was living. She spends the night in a U.N. school in Rafah with other family members, but she comes home in the morning to discover food and water.

Said Khatib/AFP/Getty Images



Tuesday, Nov. 7: After an Israeli bombing in the Khan Younis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip, Palestinians recover a wounded girl from under the debris of a demolished structure.

Mohammed Dahman/Associated Press



After kidnapping Yarden Bibas on October 7, 2023, from his home in Nir Oz, an Israeli kibbutz close to the Gaza border, Palestinians and Hamas terrorists carry him to Gaza. Upon storming the Israeli border, Hamas fighters killed over 1,200 Israelis and kidnapped over 200 more.

(AP Image)



On Monday, October 9, 2023, in Ashkelon, Israel, an Israeli firefighter kneels to gather himself after he and his colleagues put out automobiles that had been set on fire by a missile fired from the Gaza Strip. (Ohad Zwigenberg/AP Photo)

A Palestinian girl reacts as a child



ay, Oct. 21, 2023. (AP

Photo/Fatima Shbair)



An injured Palestinian boy cries as rescuers try to pull him out of the rubble of a destroyed building following an Israeli airstrike in Bureij refugee camp, Gaza Strip, Thursday, Nov. 2, 2023. (AP Photo/Mohammed D)

OBJECTIVES

1. Investigate how portrait photography in wartime chronicles conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel-Hamas conflict, exploring motivations and impacts on public perception.
2. Analyze the role of wartime portraits in shaping opinions, political discourse, and policymaking, assessing their influence on empathy, apathy, and international responses.
3. Examine ethical considerations in photographing portraits during conflicts, including consent and misrepresentation issues
4. . 4. Anticipate future trends in wartime portrait photography with technological advancements and evaluate its potential for education, activism, and reconciliation efforts.

METHODOLOGY

This study on portrait photography and conflict utilizes qualitative research methods to explore the complexities of the subject. Qualitative techniques, such as narrative analysis and visual analysis of war photographs, are employed to uncover underlying themes, emotions, and meanings conveyed through visual imagery. Additionally, content analysis of existing literature and photographic collections contextualizes and analyzes data gathered from interviews. By combining diverse qualitative data sources, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how portrait photography shapes war narratives and influences public opinion, policy actions, and historical memor

DISCUSSION

Understanding the Role of Portrait Photography in Conflict Documentation:



On Saturday, November 11, demonstrators gather at Place de la Republique in Brussels to show sympathy for Palestinians and to call for an urgent ceasefire in Gaza. They are carrying a large Palestinian flag.

John Thys

Portrait photography is essential for chronicling wars such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict. It provides a glimpse into the human aspect of battle, depicting the faces and experiences of those affected by the bloodshed. Understanding the importance of portrait photography in conflict documentation requires looking into a few essential aspects:

1) Humanising the Conflict:



Sat., Nov. 11: After an Israeli bombing of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, this aerial photo depicts civilians huddled around a wrecked structure.

Said Khatib

Portrait photography humanises battle by giving faces to statistics and geopolitical strategies, which frequently dominate the debate. Photographers want to depict the genuine emotions, hardships, and perseverance of those touched by the conflict, whether they are troops, civilians, refugees, or activists. Portrait photography, by focusing on individual tales, helps to illustrate the human cost of conflict and instill empathy in viewers.

2) Raising Awareness and Advocacy:

Portrait photography is a strong tool for spreading awareness and pushing for change. Photographers capture the plight of civilians, the severity of war crimes, and the hardships of marginalised communities, using their photos to bring attention to injustices and human rights violations. These photos frequently appear in media sources, exhibitions, and advocacy campaigns, sparking public outrage and demands to action. Photographers use their art to promote the voices of people who are frequently overlooked or silenced in war zones.

3) Fostering Dialogue and Understanding:

Portraits can also help disputing parties communicate and understand each other. By portraying the compassion of people on all sides of the battle, photographers invite viewers to go past the political hyperbole and interact with the difficult reality of war. Portraits of soldiers, citizens, and activists can all serve as catalysts for empathy, causing viewers to rethink their own biases and preconceptions. Portrait photography has the potential to help with reconciliation efforts and promote peacebuilding activities.



On Saturday, November 11, Palestinians at the Khan Younis hospital grieve for their relatives who were murdered in the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip.

Overall, portrait photography is an effective technique for chronicling wars like the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict. Photographers humanise war by capturing the faces and experiences of individuals in the midst of disaster, preserving historical memory, conveying identity and resilience, raising awareness and advocacy, and fostering discussion and understanding. Photographers use their lenses to shape public perception and historical narratives, ensuring that the human side of combat is not overlooked.

Impact on Public Opinion and Policy:

Portrait photography in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict is critical in moulding public opinion and policy responses. Images depicting the human cost of these conflicts, such as photographs of civilian casualties or displaced families, have the potential to elicit empathy and outrage from viewers. Portraits of war-affected Ukrainian citizens or Palestinian children caught in the crossfire, for example, can provoke international indignation and appeals for assistance. These photographs can also influence governmental decisions by bringing attention to human rights violations and atrocities, encouraging diplomatic or humanitarian actions to alleviate the suffering of individuals affected by the wars.



On Saturday, October 7, 2023, police officers in Ashkelon, southern Israel, rescue a mother and a child from a location where a missile fired from the Gaza Strip had struck.

(Tsafir Abayov/AP Photo)

Ethical Considerations and Representation:

In portrait photography of the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict, ethical considerations include informed consent, dignity, and the possibility of misrepresentation. Photographers, for example, must manage the complications of acquiring agreement from subjects in conflict zones, which may involve coercion or manipulation. Additionally, there is a responsibility to portray humans with dignity and respect, avoiding sensationalism or exploitation in order to capture compelling images.

Representation in these conflicts raises concerns about the balance between depicting the realities of combat and reinforcing preconceptions or biases. Photographers must try to provide a nuanced and truthful picture of the varied experiences and viewpoints found in war zones, challenging simplistic narratives, and boosting marginalised voices. This includes avoiding the reinforcement of preconceptions about victims or perpetrators based on ethnicity, religion, or nationality, and instead emphasising the uniqueness and humanity of those affected by conflicts.

Future Trends and Technologies:



On Saturday, October 7, 2023, civilians slain by Palestinian militants lie covered in Sderot, Israel. On Saturday, militants from the Palestinian organization in the Gaza Strip broke into southern Israel and launched thousands of missiles into the nation. Israel retaliated by attacking targets in Gaza. (Ohad Zwigenberg/AP Photo)

Future wartime portrait photography trends will be shaped by technological advancements, social media, and digital storytelling platforms. Virtual reality (VR) technology offers immersive experiences, allowing viewers to step into war zones depicted in photographs. VR headsets enable interaction with individuals and a deeper understanding of human experiences captured. Artificial intelligence (AI) systems enhance the curation and analysis of wartime images, facilitating sorting, tagging, and identification of individuals. AI-powered facial recognition aids in locating missing persons and reuniting families separated by conflict. These technologies will revolutionize how wartime photographs are perceived and shared, fostering more immersive storytelling in the digital age.

Educational and Advocacy Initiatives:

Wartime images also serve educational and advocacy purposes, fostering empathy, understanding, and dialogue. They are valuable teaching tools in educational programs, providing direct insight into the human realities of war. Exhibitions spark public debate and reflection, connecting visitors with the experiences of those affected by conflict. Community discussions around these images promote empathy and understanding, facilitating dialogue among diverse groups. Wartime portraiture humanizes the "other" and challenges stereotypes, laying the groundwork for genuine peacebuilding initiatives grounded in empathy and shared humanity.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinians celebrate and raise their national flag outside an Israeli tank that has been destroyed near the southern Gaza Strip boundary, east of Khan Younis.



(Photo by Yousef Masoud/AP)



On Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2023, Palestinians injured in an Israeli assault of the Gaza Strip wait for medical attention in a hospital in Khan Younis.

(Photo by Fatima Shbair/AP)



Tuesday, Nov. 28, 2023, near kibbutz Re'im, at the site of the Nova music festival in southern Israel, Israelis hug beside pictures of individuals murdered and captured by Hamas terrorists during their deadly assault. (Ohad Zwigenberg/AP Photo)



EDS NOTE: GRAPHIC CONTENT - On Thursday, October 19, 2023, Palestinians gather around the bodies of children who perished in an Israeli shelling of the Gaza Strip in a morgue in Khan Younis. (Photo by Fatima Shbair/A

CONCLUSION

The study of portrait photography in war highlights its multifaceted role in documenting and humanizing the complexities of conflict. Through capturing the stories of soldiers, civilians, and refugees, photographers provide poignant reminders of the realities of instability and tragedy. Literature underscores the importance of informed consent, dignity, and avoiding stereotypes in depicting conflict. Historically, wartime images have influenced public opinion and memory. Future research may explore combining art therapy with conflict resolution and the therapeutic potential of photography. Advancements like virtual reality offer new avenues for immersive storytelling. Ultimately, portrait photography in war serves as a testament to humanity's resilience and offers hope for empathy, understanding, and peacebuilding amidst adversity.

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