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The still Image as History: Historical Narratives in World War I Photography

With each subsequent international military conflict, the American populous at home is continually being drawn closer and closer to the combat because of modern advancements in technology. This relationship between warfare and technology has resulted in today’s American generation becoming desensitized to images and videos of military conflict, as this information is so readily available with a quick internet search. This American generation will never be able to comprehend the reaction the 'Lost Generation' of World War I had towards images of conflict in Europe. These images, which came to the United States from World War I Europe, were some of the first images Americans had seen of a current military conflict. Images we would look at and respond to with well that happened, the ‘Lost Generation’ looked at with shock and were left speechless. The current generation of Americans has lost the ability to interact with and respond to photographic images due to the virtual onscreen world we view everything through. The ‘Lost Generation’ saw photographic images for what they were and were able to respond correctly and comprehend the underlying narratives. This paper will offer a single example of a World War I photograph, a photo the ‘Lost Generation’ was familiar with, to show that war photography produced more than just black and white images of death and destruction; they told narratives, narratives that defined an entire generation.

Taken by H.M. Wyckoff in 1918, the photo at the center of this discussion needs no title, as the content within produces a narrative clear enough all can understand. This photo is 0.74 square feet of pure American history and offers forth a peek into the conflict that altered the path of international policy and foreign relations for centuries to come. Taken in Russia, Wyckoff's photograph depicts a ceremony that followed the news of the morning of November 11, 1918, the announcement of the signing of the Armistice. Affixed below the image is a short-typewritten description that reads,

Early in 1918, President Wilson, together with the heads of other Allied governments, decided to send troops to keep the German submarines from occupying the ice-free harbors of Murmansk and Archangel. The people of North Russia invited this action. Five thousand American troops and others from England, France and Italy were used. This occupation lasted about one and a half years.

This photo from H.M. Wyckoff shows the ceremony celebrating the news of the Armistice. The American contingent is shown on the left facing the camera (Wyckoff).

On the surface, this image appears to be a black and white antique photograph, but it is so much more. This photo is history; it is a narrative, a narrative of the end of one of the darkest periods of time the world has ever seen.

 While Wyckoff’s photograph purports to depict a multination celebration following the news of the long-anticipated Armistice, the description could have read that this was an image of a funeral and the two would still be compatible. An interpretation of this image as a funeral is not incorrect due to the mournful appearance of the soldiers present and the inherent lack of celebration among their ranks. Panning across the photograph, soldiers have their hands at their side, with some looking at the ground, members of the marching band are holding their instruments at their sides, and the gentlemen inside the perimeter of soldiers, who are assumed to be higher-ranking officers, all appear to be staring off into the distance. Wyckoff claims this to be a ceremonial celebration of Armistice, but there is little to no celebration present in the photograph itself. These men appear sad, and the photograph itself displays a somber mood, like what you would expect from a military funeral. One can argue that this had to be a result of the realization that the war these men had dedicated their lives to was suddenly over. This idea was something that all soldiers had to deal with and, once they realized the war was over, they all had to ask themselves what do I do now, to which none could respond with an answer. The war had consumed their very existence for so long that most soldiers knew nothing but war, and, following the Armistice, they did not know what to do or how to function in normal society. The realization that they now had to fend for themselves is why these men could not celebrate the Armistice announcement. It is almost as if these soldiers, instead of treating this as a ceremony of war's end, considered this to be a funeral for the Great War.

Beyond the narrative of postwar confusion created by the Armistice, Wyckoff’s photograph tells of another aspect of World War I, the deployment of American troops to the Eastern Front, specifically Russia, to halt the advances of the burgeoning communist Red Army. According to the accompanying description, the contingent of American troops was deployed to Russia by President Woodrow Wilson, in conjunction with orders from other Allied powers, to assist in the protection of the vital port cities of Murmansk and Archangel. While the photograph’s description tells the viewer one reason behind the deployment, there is another reason not mentioned. The number of troops deployed, the number of nations involved, and the location the photograph was taken leads to the argument that this force was not dispatched to protect the port city of Archangel from the Germans but from the incoming Red Army. Having just ascended the power ladder, Vladimir Lenin’s communist Red Army was in the process of spreading across Russia and taking control of the once monarchial empire. Understanding that a communist regime endangered a world safe for democracy, President Wilson used the current European conflict and the German’s unrestricted submarine warfare declaration to hide that fact that he was sending an expeditionary force to Russia, for an impending showdown between democracy and communism. The fact that adds validity to this argument is not present in the photograph itself but lies in the location the photograph was taken. These troops are participating in a ceremony in Archangel, the site where the worst fighting would occur during the Russian Civil War. This photo, while it says it depicts one thing, tells the beginning of the narrative of the impending Russian Civil War and the showdown between Lenin’s communist Red Army and the remainder of the Allied-backed White Army.

The example of Wycoff’s photograph has shown that photographic images are more than just black and white snapshots of events or people, they are narratives of our history. The people whose lives were the Great War are gone, and all that we have left to understand what they went through and how they interpreted these events is their writings and photographs. Our generation owes it to not just the ‘Lost Generation’ but all previous generations to carry on the narrative of their experiences. However, this is not occurring, as society has become so enthralled with technology that the past is almost meaningless. With information only a few clicks away, the idea of history, as physical items, has disappeared and become simple facts one can find on random websites. The need for contact with these items of historical importance is gone and with it went the desire to understand what these items offer us. Some argue that photographs are meaningless images, but they are so much more to the ones who know how to read them, as seen by the case offered here. A simple photograph of a World War I Armistice ceremony in Russia offered forth a narrative of the end of one of the worst international wars ever waged and how its conclusion affected those whose lives had become the Great War. Wyckoff’s photograph shows the viewer the importance of photographic images and how the narratives they produce are representative of our history. However, with each generation, the ability to read and understand the importance of these images is fading, which will continue until this ability disappears for good.

Bibliography

Wyckoff, H.W. *Armistice Day ceremony photograph, 1918.* 1918. Photograph. McFarlin Library, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Tulsa. 2933 E. 6th St. Tulsa, Oklahoma 74104-3123

This photograph, taken in 1918 by H.M. Wyckoff, depicts a military ceremony consisting of troops from the allied combatants of World War I. This ceremony was a result of the news that the long-awaited Armistice was agreed to and signed on November 11, 1918. The accompanying description reads, “Early in 1918, President Wilson, together with the heads of other Allied governments, decided to send troops to keep the German submarines from occupying the ice-free harbors of Murmansk and Archangel. The people of North Russia invited this action. Five thousand American troops and others from England, France and Italy were used. This occupation lasted about one and a half years. This photo from H.M. Wyckoff shows the ceremony celebrating the news of the Armistice. The American contingent is shown on the left facing the camera.”

Wyckoff’s photograph tells two narratives, both are significant to understanding the period following Armistice. The first narrative speaks to the confusion soldiers felt after the news of Armistice. Following Armistice, soldiers, who dedicated their lives to the Great War, were suddenly separated from the only life they knew. With the war over, these soldiers had no idea what their next step would be and where they would end up. They were not able to celebrate the end of the war because to them it was as if a loved one had just passed away, hence the somber funeral like feeling present in the photograph. Instead of a celebration of war’s end, this photograph is a depiction of the soldiers attending the funeral of the Great War.

The second narrative in this photograph speaks of an unknown feature of the end of the Great War, the American infiltration of the Russian Civil War. The photograph's description argues that the troops present in the photo were deployed to protect vital Russian ports from the unrelenting German submarine campaign. However, history and the photograph's location tell a different story. These troops were in a position to defend the remains of the once great Imperial Russia from the burgeoning Red Army. Using the Great War as a cover, Allied powers were able to place an expeditionary force in Russia in preparation for the impending showdown between the communist Red Army and the Allied-backed White Army, which just happened to occur in the port city of Archangel.