

## 2.3

# Pictorial Press Reportage and Censorship in the First World War

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Many accounts have been written about how press reportage was organized and controlled by the military authorities during World War I. Most of these accounts are limited to a single country; some attempt a larger overview; and almost all arrive at rather uniform results with only minor national variations. On all sides of the war, we gather, censorship was mercilessly applied and truth heavily distorted, with the Germans surprisingly said to have fostered a rather liberal regime of press management.<sup>1</sup> Some of this is true, but some is altogether mistaken, for the simple reason that all accounts are based on research into the bureaucratic rules and mechanisms set up in the various countries to control press reporting from the fronts. This has produced much useful information; however, with a couple of marginal and unhelpful exceptions,<sup>2</sup> it disregards *what was actually published* in the contemporary newspapers. Recently, the enormous legacy of pictorial world-war reportage has become systematically searchable through electronic scanning, with the result that bureaucratic rules and mechanisms prove to be poor predictors of the actual publication practices—not surprisingly so, because in human affairs, theory and practice, law and execution rarely coincide. For example, even though, in the first year of World War I, both the French and British authorities were in bureaucratic principle opposed to admitting any correspondents to the front—leading the existing scholarship to speak of a total initial news blackout save for quickly suppressed freelance activities—we only need to leaf through the *Illustrated London News* or *L'illustration* to discover that, in point of fact, officially cultivated correspondents/war artists had produced significant amounts of approved reportage already by 1914. Similarly, while common wisdom has it that the official French “Section photographique de l'Armée” was founded in late spring 1915, it actually began in November 1914, to generate publicity for the Commander-in-Chief, as proven by numerous photo stories in *L'illustration*.

German press reportage is the most misunderstood of all. While two British war photographers were active at the Western Front from spring 1915, and the French “Section photographique” comprised fifteen cameramen during its most active periods, the Germans admitted up to fifty photographers to their front-lines at any given time, in a remarkably permissive arrangement.<sup>3</sup> What ultimately mattered, though, was not how many cameramen were around, but what they were allowed to see, record, and publish. On this account, German censorship was marked by draconian severity and downright paranoia.

Consider this example: When Italy pursued a bloody colonial campaign in Libya in 1911–12, without any German involvement whatever, *Berliner Illustrirte* (circulation: one million) gave the episode several pages of pictorial coverage, only slightly less than appeared in the leading illustrated papers of France and Britain. When four years later the biggest battle in the history of the world raged around Verdun, costing German casualties in excess of 400,000 men, *Berliner Illustrirte* devoted only a few more pages to the 10-month struggle, and half of the images were “borrowed” from the enemy press, whereas the allied newspapers overflowed with Verdun imagery. In fact, for every Verdun picture in the German weeklies, their French competitors published ten (if not twenty, if we deduct from the German count the numerous pictures “borrowed” from the allied papers). In France and England, Verdun was big and absorbing news, while from the German picture press it was hard to divine that anything important was happening there. On the pictorial level, the German army leadership treated Verdun and other battles as its private affair that was nobody else’s business; to put it in the words of contemporary pressmen, “the authorities handled the conduct of the war as the exclusive privilege of government and military leadership, instead of informing the people of the current dangers, treating it as a mature partner and permitting the press to carry the will to victory into every home.”<sup>4</sup> As the generals saw it, the sacrifice of hecatombs of young men did not need to be explained to the nation, and the editors of the illustrated weeklies acquiesced to a degree unthinkable in France and England. Where the available research portrays German and allied picture coverage of the war as largely commensurate, the facts are drastically misrepresented.

The *qualitative* differences were even more pronounced. In those German weeklies that paid attention to Verdun at all, belated images of deserted French trenches and imperial troop reviews or prisoner transports far to the rear predominate (Fig. 2.3a); I have found only two photographs of combat situations, one of them fairly idyllic, whereas the French weeklies published scores of photographs of troops under stress and fire in front-line positions around Verdun (Fig. 2.3b), not to mention air reconnaissance pictures of contested trenches used to convince the public irrefutably of French progress in reclaiming lost territory.

French (and British) reportage pictures were usually published within a few days of the event, as timely visual proofs and arguments in a grand media effort to persuade the public of the seriousness of France’s military situation, the glory of the French feat of arms, and the duty of every citizen to give fervent, unstinting support to the national struggle. The allied correspondents and photographers wore uniforms and enjoyed the respect of the officers and men. Quite in keeping, they had the right to interview generals, examine staff reports during battle, and send their reports by wire and telephone every evening, for publication in the morning papers.<sup>5</sup> News pictures traveled more slowly than these wired reports, but still as fast as technically possible. In short, verbal and pictorial press reportage became an *integral* component of the Allied conduct of war, with generals and journalists working hand in glove.<sup>6</sup> Restrictive censorship was only *one* tool used; the other was comprehensive, pro-active advertisement of military successes, without which the public support necessary to win a *total* war would have been hard to muster.

In Germany, by contrast, a few stale, belated photographs void of tangible news value served to hide the seriousness of the army’s increasingly lopsided struggle against the rest of the world, with the troops mainly portrayed at peaceful pursuits far behind the front. This was not without reason, given that the German army was internationally seen as a horde of bloodthirsty barbarians; still, German censorship was unduly obsessed with suppressing any news that might conceivably raise civilian worries about husbands and sons stationed far away from home. Event and reportage were not rarely separated by months; only “short and disconnected accounts of individual battle phases and combat actions” were



Figure 2.3a From fighting around Verdun, *Die Woche*, 13 May 1916.

permitted, “but never any continuous, gapless reportages across a larger period of time”—unless they were published “at least one year after the event.” Most astonishingly, it was forbidden to say anything of substance that went beyond the brief, cryptic army communiqués.<sup>7</sup> The war correspondents were thus reduced to explanations such as that the villages of X and Y mentioned in the *Heeresbericht* (i.e. the daily army bulletin) were situated 3 kilometers apart, the altitude of the first being 40 meters below that



Figure 2.3b The heroes of Fleury at foot of ruined fort, *J'ai vu*, 9 September 1916.

of the second. Clearly, the German military was blissfully unaware of any benefit they could gain from timely and comprehensive press reportage. Matthias Erzberger, the government's unofficial, civilian and only moderately influential propaganda commissioner, observed that the Generals' attitude essentially was: we are victorious; everything else is immaterial.<sup>8</sup> Command centers thus remained impenetrable to press representatives; never allowed to wear uniform, they passed for a tribe of nosy, shameless, and unpatriotic civilians with whom self-respecting Prussian officers refused to have serious contact.

It is true that in France, a permanent contingent of reporters serving the broad spectrum of national newspapers was not admitted to the front until 1917. Yet, the public received ample information from the front—except it came from staff officers, rather than journalists. The French army had traditionally possessed an “historical section” which thoroughly documented all campaigns for use by military academies, historians, and even history painters. As a result, French (picture) newspapers were enabled to publish accounts of grand battles and individual heroism in abundant quantities. Each army employed an “officier informateur” to collect noteworthy episodes, give them literary form, and distribute them via pamphlets to the newspapers. The uniformed army photographers usually roamed the front in tandem with such officers, and they were given a far-sighted mandate to record subjects in three basic categories: (1) The entire range of weapons, munitions, supplies and military installations were to be photographed in order to give “a strong impression of the material and moral might of the army.” (2) Systematic, repeated round trips were advised for “art-historical” purposes, to record the fate of heavily bombarded historical cities such as Reims and Arras. (3) The typical features of the war and its various phases were to be documented to aid future historians in reconstructing the war’s “fundamental conditioning factors and gradual evolution.” (German censorship, by contrast, strictly excluded from publication a long list of weapons, vehicles, and installations, except a few of small caliber and ancient manufacture. Since nearly all photos made near the front were bound to show one of these items, nearly all of them were banned.)<sup>9</sup>

Overall, France’s “Section photographique de l’armée” produced no fewer than 150,000 regular and 20,000 stereoscopic exposures, which ensured a steady and diversified flow of topical military imagery to the newspapers (still preserved in thematically ordered albums at the Musée d’Histoire Contemporaine-BDIC, Paris).<sup>10</sup> But this was not all. Most low brow and several middle brow picture magazines also tapped the amateur market by offering high prices or regular weekly awards for the best pictures sent in by soldiers or bystanders. This material escaped control at the front and could be suppressed only by the Parisian censors—but even though *preventive* censorship had been adopted in France (meaning that offensive texts and pictures were marked for suppression on the galleys just before final printing, leaving white spots on the street edition because there was no time for substitution), lots of unusually revealing amateur imagery did get into print: seeing how far one could go in ignoring the censors’ demands was a favorite sport of French editors—the radical *Bonnet Rouge*, for one, had 1,076 passages marked for suppression by the censors in 1916–17 but printed 316 of them anyway.<sup>11</sup> (In Germany, amateur imagery was strictly *verboten* as well: Advertisement for and editorial use of private photos and memorabilia was illegal, further compounding the dearth of topical picture reportage in the German press.)<sup>12</sup>

As to Great Britain (and America), by the 1890s verbal/pictorial war reportage had become a near-monopoly of an elite group of globe trotting Anglo-Saxon novelists, artists, and photographers earning princely sums for witnessing the many scenes of conflict during the heyday of imperialism: the bloodier the incident, the higher the street sales.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the world war, however, Lord Kitchener at the War Office tried to exclude the regular press from the battlefields, save for a few journalists of distinction and “influence.” Respected as the “fourth estate” in a country of staunch liberal traditions, the British newspapers had high political standing, however, and were much involved in forming and toppling governments. The army treated correspondents such as E. Ashmead-Bartlett and Ph. Gibbs as gentlemen among gentlemen; top commanders and cabinet ministers took them into their confidence, and when a dinner was arranged to honor Gibbs in London, the Prime Minister made sure to attend and give a speech in praise of Gibbs’ services. Kitchener had to relent, and through a series of constructively

resolved conflicts with the top brass, the British correspondents gradually acquired exceptionally far-reaching investigative privileges.<sup>14</sup>

The few accredited and uniformed British war photographers (only two were admitted to the Western Front) had lesser social standing but, from late spring 1915 on, were also given remarkably free access to the front and used it to great effect, accumulating the majority of the 40,000 images still extant and usable today at the Imperial War Museum, London. They focused, however, less on the stress and heroism of front-line combat, as their French colleagues did, than on spatially and materially easily readable scenes of typical army routines, front-line situations, supply lines and the like. Not only the British, but also the Canadian and Australian war photographs, were carefully archived and after the war transformed into publicly accessible museum collections. Like everything else, war was considered throughout the Commonwealth as a public undertaking for which a government was accountable to the people, including the sharing of all kinds of military records—a line of thought unavailable in contemporary, authoritarian Germany.<sup>15</sup>

Typically, as a matter of course and policy, William Robertson, chief of the British General Staff, kept his door open for reporters, editors, and publishers, dined with them and advanced privileged information where it served his purposes; other top commanders did likewise. A case in point is the British navy's attempt in April 1918 to destroy the harbor entrances of Zeebrügge and Ostend, in order to bottle up Germany's U-boat flotilla stationed there. The press received entire verbal/visual information packages *prior* to the event. The attack ended in failure and the German submarines continued to operate out of Zeebrügge, but with the Admiralty's generous help, the very daring (while also extremely costly) attack itself paid great publicity dividends to the navy—which probably was a major reason why it undertook and heavily publicized the raid in the first place, regardless of the uncertain chances of *military* success.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, Robertson's German equivalents, cultivated low-profile contacts with right-wing newspaper publishers but largely considered press dealings as a restrictive and coercive business best left to the censors. By fall 1916, it had become apparent that this repressive approach could do nothing to shore up Germany's then slowly declining public morale. Upon taking over the army leadership, Ludendorff therefore decided to introduce a variant of the French "officier informateur" system, together with official, uniformed moving picture and still camera teams under the aegis of the newly founded *Bild-und Filmamt* (BUFA). In the 18 months of their active involvement, these teams produced numerous movies and upwards of 12,000 still images, which unfortunately were dispersed after the war.<sup>17</sup> Even during the war, the BUFA teams did not make a major difference because the generals remained standoffish and never took the now uniformed reporters into their confidence either; prior, generous information, for the press especially, was out of the question. Even Ludendorff's initially quite successful spring offensive of 1918 translated merely into a short-lived photo boom, not of tough combat scenes mirroring this massive *Materialschlacht*, but of traditional subjects like horse-drawn field artillery careening about muddy fields. BUFA films also remained unexciting and uncompetitive in comparison with the much superior French and British output.

Throughout, the principle was enforced that the German press *had no right* to investigate and report the war events. The army's chief censor, Walter Nicolai, was quite clear about this: "Reporting on the operational conduct of the war," he wrote in an apologetic treatise of 1920, "was the exclusive prerogative of the General Staff and was not permitted at all to be supplemented by any press organs." What rudimentary information services were then left to the newspapers? According to Nicolai, it was the duty of the accredited war correspondents to portray to the public at home "the life and emotional experiences"

(*Leben und Erleben*) of the troops abroad. In other words, German pressmen were obliged to forego news gathering properly speaking and to content themselves instead with innocuous sketching of mood and local color.<sup>18</sup> With remarkable docility, the correspondents indeed proceeded to share feelings with the troops rather than information with their readers. Where French and British battle accounts were rich with investigative detail and narrative excitement, the German reporters could only praise the *gemütlichkeit* of the soldiers' life behind the front, with occasional supplementary articles referring in portentous but vague language to fateful larger events in which the troops performed admirably, though of course no specifics could be shared with the readers at home—who had every right, nonetheless, to rest assured of the army leadership's ultimate wisdom and unstoppable drive towards final victory. The pictorial equivalent to such verbal reportage was an endless stream of “news” pictures showing German soldiers washing their laundry, or smoking pipes, or feeding French children, and so on—not that trivial genre subjects of this kind were missing on the Allied side, but they occupied a much smaller part of the overall, more topical spectrum.

Still, in September 1918, Ludendorff was besieged by the chairman of the German newspaper association to take the population into his confidence by informing it more fully, via the press, of the mounting military dangers. The General seemed to agree, but a few days later the German press was in an uproar when Ludendorff suddenly urged the government to sue for an armistice—that is, to concede defeat—without any prior warning to or coordination with the crestfallen press, which for years had received nothing but affirmations of certain final victory.<sup>19</sup> Though unwilling to the bitter end to lower the wall between conducting and reporting the war, that is, in spite of keeping the nation ignorant of the events at the front, Ludendorff's Intelligence Chief Nicolai left no doubt about who was to blame for the decline of civilian morale from 1916 on: It was the German press (together with an inept civilian government), he claimed, which failed to keep up public war enthusiasm. Paradoxically, in doing so, Nicolai conceded that the army had been content to win victories without bothering to accommodate the press. Nonetheless, in an early formulation of what blossomed into the notorious “stab-in-the back legend” of why Germany lost the war, despite remaining “undefeated” in the field, he held the press responsible for the faltering public war enthusiasm—which of course only the military leadership and its information services would have been in any position to maintain.<sup>20</sup> Left by the General Staff (and, to a lesser degree, by the Chancellor's and Foreign Offices) without substantive visual and verbal news to share, the German press remained a blunt publicity instrument in the world's first “total” war.

## Notes

- 1 This article offers a condensed version of two larger essays on German and Allied picture reportage during World War I which appeared (in German) in the December 2013 issue of *Fotogeschichte* 33.130: 5–85 with 80 illustrations and many more bibliographic references than can find room here. To cite just two typical accounts of the nature of press reporting, 1914–18 (featuring factual details which will on the following pages not be referenced specifically): Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty. The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore: Prion Books, 2004): 83 ff.; Almut Lindner-Wirsching, “Patrioten im Pool: Deutsche und französische Kriegsberichterstätter im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in Ute Daniel, ed., *Augenzeugen. Kriegsberichterstattung vom 18. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006): 113–40.
- 2 Gérard Canini, “‘L'Illustration’ et la Bataille de Verdun,” in *Verdun 1916. Actes du colloque international sur la bataille de Verdun* (Verdun: Association nationale du souvenir de la bataille de Verdun, 1976): 175–86; Thilo

- Eisermann, *Pressefotografie und Informationskontrolle im Ersten Weltkrieg. Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich* (Hamburg: Kämpfer, 2000).
- 3 Ulrike Oppelt, *Film und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002): 203; Jane Carmichael, *First World War Photographers* (London: Routledge, 1989): 142.
  - 4 Ludolf Gottschalk von dem Knesebeck, *Die Wahrheit über den Propagandafeldzug und Deutschlands Zusammenbruch. Der Kampf der Publizistik im Weltkrieg* (Wien: Selbstverlag Fortschrittliche Buchhandlung, 1927): 62.
  - 5 Jean de Pierrefeu, *G.Q.G. secteur I*, 2 Bde. (Paris: Éd. Française Illustrée, 1920), Bd. 1: 169ff.; Jean-Claude Montant, *L'organisation centrale des services d'information et de propagande du Quai d'Orsay pendant la Grande Guerre . . .*: 135ff., here p. 138; Philip Gibbs, *Adventures in Journalism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923): 246.
  - 6 As the chief press officer at British Headquarters put it: "The Press has to be treated as an arm [of the army], like tanks or aeroplanes, suitable for defence or attack." Neville Lytton, *The Press and the General Staff* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1921): VII.
  - 7 *Zensurbuch für die deutsche Presse*, ed. by Oberzensurstelle des Kriegspresseamts (Berlin: Gedruckt in der Reichsdruckerei, 1917), entry "Berichte."
  - 8 Matthias Erzberger, *Meine Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1920): 7f.
  - 9 Pierrefeu, *G.Q.G. secteur I*: 169ff.; Dominique Pascal, "Les débuts du service photographique des armées," in *Prestige de la Photographie 2*, September 1977: 60ff., here p. 69; numerous entries in the German *Zensurbuch* (note 7) barred a broad range of weapons and military installations from reproduction in the press.
  - 10 Cf. Thérèse Blondet-Bisch, "Vues de France," in *Voir ne pas voir la guerre. Histoire des représentations photographiques de la guerre* (Paris: Somogy, 2001): 54ff., here p.57; for the picture quantities produced see Dominique Pascal, "Les débuts du service photographique des armées," in: *Prestige de la Photographie 2*, September 1977: 60 ff., here p. 79.
  - 11 Cf. Marcel Berger and Paul Allard, *Les secrets de la censure pendant la guerre* (Paris: Éditions des portiques, 1932): 206.
  - 12 For the situation in France see Pascal, "Débuts": 73; Laurent Veray, "Montrer la guerre: la photographie et le cinématographe," in Jean-Jacques Becker, ed., *Guerre et cultures 1914–18* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994): 229ff., here p. 233; the prohibition against private images: *Zensurbuch* (note 7), entry "Kriegserinnerungen."
  - 13 Cf. Ulrich Keller, "Blut und Silber: Die Inszenierung der Kubainvasion von 1898 in der amerikanischen Bildpresse," in: *Fotogeschichte 25.97*, 2005: 25ff.
  - 14 Gibbs, *Adventures*: 246, 249, 255, 270.
  - 15 For the British war correspondents and war photographers see Lytton, *Press*, *passim*; Carmichael, *World War*, especially 16, 31, 34, 44 ff.; Martin J. Farrar, *News From the Front. War Correspondents on the Western Front 1914–18* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998).
  - 16 Cf. David R. Woodward, *Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the Great War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998): 31; Paul Kendall, *The Zeebrugge Raid 1918: 'The Finest Feat of Arms'* (London: Spellmount, 2008): 147.
  - 17 Oppelt, *Film*: 106ff.; Hans Barkhausen, *Filmpropaganda für Deutschland im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hildesheim: Olms Presse, 1982): 97ff. BUFA's movie production is not at issue here but Oppelt's and Barkhausen's monographs provide excellent introductions to the subject.
  - 18 Walter Nicolai, *Nachrichtendienst, Presse und Volksstimmung im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1920): 54, 58, 62.
  - 19 Knesebeck, *Wahrheit*: 121f.
  - 20 Nicolai, *Nachrichtendienst*: 86