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Photographs and the Construction of Past and Present

Olli Kleemola & Silja Pitkänen

Approaches to the Research of Historical and Contemporary Photographs

This book concerns photographs as sources in the research of history and social sciences. The idea is to present various approaches to analysing both past and present through photographs. The intended target audience is students and researchers interested in historical or contemporary photographs and their meanings. The emphasis of the chapters is on history and social sciences, yet the book also includes perspectives of art history and cultural studies. The focus is on qualitative analysis; however, quantitative approaches are also taken into account.

During the 20th and 21st century, the world has become more and more visual. Indeed, as historian Gerhard Paul states, we are living in a “pictorial cosmos”¹. The philosopher Gottfried Boehm uses the concept “homo pictor” to describe modern people, whose attention is caught much more effectively by photographs than textual information.² For these reasons, research into images – historical and contemporary – is

¹ Paul 2009, 125; 2017, 15.

² Boehm 2007, 84–116.

crucial. The pictures of our pictory cosmos are, very often, photographs. Therefore, it is essential to ponder how photographs can be analysed, what questions they can answer, and what kind of knowledge they can produce.³

Photographs have had a remarkable role in our culture almost since the invention of photography in the 1830s. The earliest photographs analysed in this collection are from colonial Rhodesia from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the most recent images are social media photographs of the Syrian war, taken after the Ghouta chemical attacks in 2013. Images from the Second World War era are at the centre of this book, and the closing chapters of the volume explore the dimensions of digital humanities and reach towards the future possibilities in the research of large corpora of images. Overall, the emphasis of the photographs analysed in this compilation is on wars, conflicts and crisis. As Paul states, in addition to deadly weapons, contemporary wars are fought with cameras. The photos and videos form our *image* of conflicts and may even have an effect upon their outcomes.⁴

The media has an important role in news reporting – in other words, in producing and delivering photographs and videos. Therefore, to explore photographs is in most cases to explore media, and gain a better understanding of how visual media produces information and how this kind of information affects us and our actions. Ideally, this helps us to read media critically. This does not necessarily mean that one should criticise the media⁵, yet understanding the media can be considered an essential skill in our pictory cosmos.

The visualisation of culture means that our historical perception, too, tends to rely on images. Indeed, German social psychologist Harald Welzer has stated that current historical memory is solely anchored to photographs and other images. He even argues that there may be pictures without history but no history without pictures.⁶ This underlines how

³ See, for example, Oakley 2000. See also Ronkainen 2002, 129; 133.

⁴ Paul 2009, 134–135.

⁵ At the time of writing, August 2018, Donald Trump is again in the headlines for his open criticism on the press and other media.

⁶ Hamann 2011, 24.

crucial it is to analyse how photographs create meanings and how they are used in constructing history.

Essentially, photographs can help us to understand the past, both on the personal and communal levels. Family photos and private photo albums offer viewpoints on everyday lives before and now, and can be of use in researching the experiences of individuals.⁷ On the level of nations, photographs have been and are important aids in imagining nations and constructing national identities. Thus, in addition to reflecting past and present, photographs also take part in constructing them. Illustrations are used abundantly, for example, in history textbooks. Through these books, photographs visualise history and are used in building the historical image of nations. In this way, photographs are also a crucial part of socialisation processes in many countries.⁸

Some photographs have become symbols of certain events in the past; in other words, they have become *iconic*. Images that are considered iconic are important for our understandings of the past and, moreover, might have had an effect upon the depictions of later events.⁹ From *Migrant Mother* (1936) to *Raising a Flag over the Reichstag* (1945), and from the photograph from the Vietnam War, *The Terror of War* (1972)¹⁰, to the image of the dead Syrian child Alan Kurdi (2015), photographs have coloured our *view* of the past and present. This underlines the importance of the research of historical and contemporary photographs.¹¹

In the chapters of this compilation, iconic images are not at the forefront, although several chapters touch photographs that could be considered iconic. Instead, the importance of photographs in the processes of constructing past and present is one of the leading ideas in

⁷ On research of private images, see, for example, Autti 2011; Mathys 2013; Mäkiranta 2008; Tinkler 2015 and Ulkuniemi 2005.

⁸ On the relationship of textbooks and national myths, see, for example, Ahonen 2017.

⁹ See, for example, Dreier; Fuchs; Radkau & Utz (eds.), 2008.

¹⁰ For more examples on iconic photographs, see, for example, *TIME: 100 Photos. The Most Influential Images of All Time*; <http://100photos.time.com/>, last visited on 10 August 2018.

¹¹ Media often declares contemporary photographs as iconic. It is to be seen, how well contemporary photographs considered as iconic are known after 20 or 30 years.

this book. The emphasis is on less known photographs which, however, have and have had a role in national understandings, as well as in representations and understandings of crises and conflicts. In addition to visualising every day practices, as well as politics and international relations, photographs can also illuminate phenomena less known, almost hidden.¹²

Every chapter includes several photographs, yet presenting photographs *per se* is not the aim of this book. Instead, this volume explores the meaning of photographs, and presents several approaches to the research of photographs. Thus, the photographs in this collection do not *illustrate* the chapters; they are the research *sources* and *subjects*, and, in most cases, examples of larger corpora of images. Moreover, publishing photographs is a complex field, both technically and with regard to copyright and ownership. Especially in the case of photographs taken during conflicts and wars, publishing involves complex ethical questions. How photographs should be cited is also an important question. Several of the chapters touch upon these themes, especially in the context of contemporary media images.

We believe that these approaches offer a wide analytical spectrum to the research of historical and contemporary photographs. In addition, our focus is photocentric, and we pay less attention to the barriers of academic disciplines. In this manner – we hope – we are able to offer wider perspectives on the research of photographs. At the end, to widen the horizon still more, we also present a selected bibliography for further reading on the subject.

Photographs as Research Subjects: Milestones

Since the invention of photography, the relationship between photographs and the past has fascinated people – can photographs “freeze time”, as the saying goes, and even restore the past? Despite the relatively long

¹² For examples of uncommon and rare photographs, see, for example, Donat 2016; Kalha (ed.) 2016; Kalha & Tahvanainen 2014 and 2017; Ostman 1996.

history of photography, the history of photographs as research subjects can be traced back only several decades.

In Europe, mostly in French speaking countries, the movements of the *Annales*, *Nouvelle Histoire* and *Histoire Culturelle*, turned their attention from the 1960s onwards to other than textual sources in the research of history, as well as to research subjects perceived as marginal at the time. Furthermore, the role of visuality in culture was recognised. In the United States, the first steps towards researching photographs were taken in the 1970s, as the visual studies workshop collective was established. In the United States, too, photographs were mostly analysed in such contexts as minorities and marginal groups.¹³ From the 1980s onwards, cultural studies, or visual (cultural) studies, became popular in Britain and in the United States. Researchers among the cultural studies movement were interested in all kinds of visual materials and in the role of images in societies, and they utilised pictorial sources extensively.¹⁴

The interest towards the visual flowed from France, Britain and the United States, and received special attention in German-speaking countries. In the field of German historical research, the debates on the importance of pictures as sources for the history of mentalities and for the history of everyday lives¹⁵, as well as for the cultural studies, were extensive.¹⁶ This led to the birth of *Historische Bildkunde*, or *Visual History*.¹⁷ While visual history first focused solely on photographs, its scope was later widened to various kinds of images.¹⁸ One of the

¹³ Seppänen 2001, 10.

¹⁴ Arnold 2009, 35–41; Paul 2009, 131; Rimmelé et. al. 2014, 149–151; Rogoff 2014, 155–157; Seppänen 2001, 10.

¹⁵ These can be considered to belong to the wider Marxian historical movement, “history from below”.

¹⁶ Jäger & Knauer 2009, 13. During the 1980s, the ideas from Britain and United States flowed to Finland, too, and many classics on photography research theory were translated to Finnish. See Seppänen 2001, 10.

¹⁷ Paul 2006, 7–18.

¹⁸ Visual History school has organised many conferences and established a book series (*Visual History. Bilder und Bildpraxen in der Geschichte*, see <https://www.wallstein-verlag.de/buchreihen/visual-history-bilder-und-bildpraxen-in-der-geschichte-1.html>, last visited on 15 August 2018) and a research portal (*Visual History Online-Nachschlagewerk für die historische Bildforschung*; <https://www.visual-history.de>, last visited on 15 August 2018).

main questions for visual historians is how the images from the past create images within our minds – that is, how pictures “make history”.¹⁹ With this compilation, we wish to take part in discussions in the field of visual studies from the perspective of photographs and their role in constructing past and present.

Currently, it seems that the German visual history movement is the most vital research trend focusing on historical photographs. Consequently, many chapters within the volume are related to the German trend of visual history, yet, several chapters are also connected to the French and British–American traditions. Our focus is on photographs as sources in the research of history and social sciences, as well as art history and cultural studies. Ethnology and anthropology also utilise photographs both as sources and as research instruments, but due to the constraints of the book form, we pay less attention to these aspects. The perspectives of ethnology and anthropology have been comprehensively presented in various methodological books.²⁰

Approaches to and Aspects of Photographs as Sources

In addition to different approaches, this compilation highlights the variety of research questions that can be asked when analysing photographs. Moreover, our purpose is to offer examples and tools for those who use photographs as research sources. Some of the chapters highlight more technical and quantitative approaches, for example, by presenting grouping and categorising tools that can be used when examining large amounts of photographs. Other chapters present more abstract and qualitative techniques of reading and analysing the images in their historical or contemporary contexts.

We have arranged the chapters into four sections. The first part is centred on photojournalistic images that are crucial in communicating

¹⁹ Paul 2004; Paul 2009, 125; Paul 2017, 23–24. See also Seppänen 2001, 11, and Vovinckel 2017.

²⁰ See, for example, Rose 2012.

and interpreting critical events. The chapters of the second section concern propaganda photographs from the Second World War. These topics are supplemented by the chapters of the third section, which deals with photographs, representations and memory politics. The theme of the fourth and final section is photographs in the age of digitalisation, and it aims to update and continue the discussion that Walter Benjamin began with his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

The collection includes 11 chapters, and each chapter presents a case study – historical photographs, research questions, means of analysis and results. The contributors to the compilation are historians with various orientations from political history to cultural history, social scientists, and experts in art history and cultural studies.

The photojournalistic section is opened by a chapter from Annette Vowinckel, whose focus is on photojournalism, and who analyses the role of “image agents” in the 20th century. By image agents, she means professionals who, for example, produce, edit, publish, exhibit, censor or destroy images. Vowinckel remarks that historians are not yet trained to analyse visual sources, but are perfectly qualified to understand image action. She draws her pictorial example from the GDR, pointing out various interpretations of Sibylle Bergemann’s photo *Das Denkmal*. Moreover, she indicates that the photographs of the Vietnam War produced by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the photographs produced by the East German state-owned photo agency Zentralbild were not that different from each other.

Heike Kanter analyses journalistic photographs of contemporary politicians. Her perspective is visual sociology, utilising the documentary method and assuming that photographs are shaped by their producers. Kanter presents a case study of photos published in five German-language newspapers between 2009 and 2013, demonstrating how photojournalism has a great impact on ways that photographs are received and interpreted. She considers the perspective of how image agents *imagine* and represent society. Furthermore, Kanter’s chapter demonstrates how archetypal images are circulated through different eras and contexts – an issue that any researcher interested in photographs and other kinds of images will likely often encounter.

The chapter of Laura Todd discusses the role of photography and photojournalism during the Yugoslav Wars, and the role of photographs as evidence of war crimes. Todd reminds us that the televisual history of the wars has been well discussed in academic literature, but less attention has been paid to the history of photography and its role during and after the wars. She outlines how photography had two interlinking, but distinct roles in the Bosnian War – as evidence and as *aide-mémoire* for both the international community and the domestic population.

The Finnish-German collaborative exhibition *War in Pictures* that was held in the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, Finland, in 1942, is at the centre of the chapter by Marika Honkaniemi, which opens the Photographs and Propaganda section of the book. Honkaniemi asks what kind of methods are applicable in the research of war art exhibitions and their photographs, and contemplates that researching photographs is often a multi-method as well as multi-source undertaking, as it most likely involves a significant amount of contextual research. This is the case in Honkaniemi's study. She also includes into her analysis the organisational viewpoint: how and why organisations take and use photographs and what is meant by these practices.

The subject of Olli Kleemola's chapter are photographs from the Finnish Continuation War (1941–1945), published in several photobooks. Kleemola focuses to the question how the Finnish Army and soldiers' lives at the front were represented. In the analysis, Kleemola utilises the serial-iconographic model, based on that developed by the art historian Erwin Panofsky. Kleemola analyses the use of propaganda images in various publishing contexts, as well as the narratives told via the photographs.

The first chapter of the section *Photographs, Representations and Memory Politics* is by Timo Särkkä. In his contribution, Särkkä discusses the intersection of photography and colonialism, taking part in a wider conversation on how colonisers have used photography and photographs to analyse the visual aspects of human bodies and constructed colonial identities, as well as racial and national histories. Särkkä's case study revolves around photographs attributed to Carl Theodor Eriksson (1874–1940), a Finnish-born settler who migrated to Rhodesia in the late 1890s. Särkkä suggests that the close reading of Eriksson's pho-

tographs provides new analytical possibilities through which one can reappraise photographs from Rhodesia of the early colonial era.

Silja Pitkänen analyses the representations of children with military technology in photographs taken at schools of the Leningrad region in the 1930s. Starting from microhistorical perspective, she pays attention to such details as the locations where the photos were taken and to the expressions, postures and clothing of the students. The archival data attached to the photographs is scarce, and the chapter also ponders upon the value of photographs without extensive contextual information. Pitkänen also briefly scrutinises the history of the photographs as archival objects.

Andrea Průchová Hružová analyses Czech modern history through visual representations of the Nazi occupation of 1938 and the Soviet occupation of 1968. She focuses on the ways these occupations have been represented visually in history textbooks, a museum exhibition, and television news broadcasting. She categorises four repetitive visual figures of memory related to the both events and maintains that these figures manifest the dynamics of cultural memory. Furthermore, Průchová Hružová states that these figures are highlighted by their presence in various official media of contemporary Czech society. She underlines that images actively construct the past in the individual as well as collective experience.

The final section of the book is entitled *Photographs in the Age of Digitalisation*. Kimmo Elo regards the visual side of the East German opposition movement, especially the Jena peace movement, from the viewpoint of visual history and digital humanities. His primary source is a photograph corpus of the GDR opposition maintained by the Robert Havemann Society in Berlin as part of its archive of the East German Opposition. The method Elo applies, historical network analysis (HNA), is a sub-field of digital humanities. Elo maintains that the GDR opposition aimed to protect its networks and, thus, members of the movement avoided being photographed. However, at the same time, the movement documented its political actions and support via photographs, and photos were also used as illustrations in the movement's underground magazines such as *die andere*. Elo additionally ponders

upon the metadata of photographs, and considers photographs as material, archival objects.

In her chapter, *Investigating and Understanding Social Media Image Flows*, Noora Kotilainen discusses the role of social media imagery in mainstream media news production and international politics. She notes that amateur imagery has become a vital source of material for traditional media and that social-media-originating images are utilised as proof of dramatic events and suffering in global crisis zones, as well as in governmental reports. In her contribution, Kotilainen points out how images of the Syrian Civil War, especially social media images of the Ghouta gas attacks (2013), were used in legitimising drastic political acts, such as the planned military intervention. In the case of the Ghouta attack, the origin of the images on social media, interpreted as local and amateur, was seen to guarantee their objectivity and authenticity. Kotilainen also notes how U.S. President Barack Obama compared these images to historical iconic images, such as images from the Holocaust, as well as to photographs of poison gas attacks during of the First World War.

The chapter by Kimmo Elo and Olli Kleemola, *Bridging from Close Reading to Distant Reading. A Methodological Note to "Computational Visual History"*, is the closing chapter of the book and reaches out to the future of using photographs as research sources for history and the social sciences. Elo and Kleemola note how visual history as a research paradigm heavily leans on the close reading of images. They propose a model designed to serve as a system to store results from visual close reading, in other words, a standardised method of describing the essential content of visual material. They remark that this kind of visual vocabulary is crucial for the effective processing of large corpora of visual materials. Furthermore, they envisage how the evolution of visual history research requires a crucial shift from close to distant reading.

We hope that these texts offer inspiration, encouragement, new perspectives and methodological tools for researchers interested in using photographs as sources. We look forward to taking part in further discussions and seeing forthcoming publications on this emerging and innovative field.

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