PHOTOGRAPHY AT WAR

Jonathan Marwil tells how the wars of the mid-19th century, in Europe and beyond, proved the perfect subject for a new medium to show its amazing potential.

Major Daniel Bamfield photographed by surgeon John McCosh during the Second Sikh War. He was killed at Chilianwala on January 13th, 1849.

Roger Fenton's photographic van, both portable dark-room and home, during his Crimean expedition. This 1855 photo shows Fenton's assistant Marcus Sparling in the driving seat, before embarking on a potentially dangerous trip to photograph 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death'.

ON JULY 13TH, 1839, the chemist and physicist Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac reported to the French Chamber of Peers on the photographic process recently invented by Louis J.M. Daguerre. Among its uses, Gay-Lussac argued, was the capacity of the daguerrotype to render a landscape precisely. He cited one particular kind of landscape to make his point:

. . . as three or four minutes are sufficient for execution, a field of

battle, with its successive phases, can be drawn with a degree of perfection that could be obtained by no other means.

Thus from its birth did the adherents of photography stake out its claim on war. Within a generation artists were beginning to be dispossessed of theirs. 'It is well enough for some Baron Gros or Horace Vernet to please an imperial master with fanciful portraits', wrote the American poet and essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes in July 1863, but 'war and battles should have truth for their delineator', and the photographer could best supply that.

Less than a year before, while walking over the battlefield of Antietam in the aftermath of the bloodiest day in the American Civil War, Holmes had been 'disgusted', walking the battlefield, by what seemed 'like the table of some hideous orgy left uncleared'. Shortly after this he had seen the photographs of the battle dead exhibited by the photographer Mathew B. Brady in New York. The truth that Holmes was thinking of when he dismissed Gros and Vernet was the truth of what 'a repulsive, brutal, sickening, hideous thing it is, this dashing together of two frantic mobs to which we give

'The battle of Aboukir', by Baron Gros glorifies Napoleon's 1799 victory against the Turks, underscoring the issue of patronage in the way war was depicted by artists prior to photography.

the name of armies'. This was not quite the truth that Gay-Lussac had had in mind, or the truth that the early photographers of war had gone out to shoot. But it was a truth that had inevitably drawn their attention and fascinated their audiences.

From its inception, photography was celebrated as a truth-telling technology, practised as a fine art, and exploited for its commercial potential. War was only one of many subjects that lured early photographers, but it was one that promised a large audience, given its inherent appeal as spectacle and its habitual role in the shaping of national identities. Conveniently, after 1839 there were a number of wars, large and small, that engaged European and American photographers. Dozens of anonymous daguerreotypes survive from the Mexican War (1846-48), while several hundred calotypes, the work of Dr John McCosh, record the Second Sikh War (1849-50) and the Second Burmese War of 1852. There also exist a remarkable set of calotypes taken by Stefano Lecchi of various buildings in Rome shelled during the siege of 1849, and a group of collodion prints of the Indian Mutiny (1857-58) by Felice Beato. But it was the Crimean War (1853-56), a general, easily accessible, European conflict, that first produced a large corpus of photographic images.

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Photographers from several countries went to the Crimea, some hired by governments seeking a means of memorialising their military accomplishments. The mission, though, could be extremely hazardous. Richard Nicklin, a commercial photographer, sailed to Varna in June 1854 along with two British army sappers. Five months later the trio, along with their pictures, were lost when their ship sank in Balaklava harbour during a hurricane. The army then sent out two officers trained in photography. Both survived the experience, but the prints from their collodion plates faded and were eventually discarded without having ever been seen by the public. A French duo, Jean-Charles Langlois and Leon Mehedin, were much luckier. Commissioned by Napoleon to create a panorama of the siege of Sebastopol, Langlois hired Mehedin to take the photographs that would serve as the visual basis for the work. While in the Crimea, however, Langlois himself did some photography, and the pictures both men took were eventually assembled into individual albums. Although never published, these can be seen today in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Those photographers who went to the Crimea on their own enjoyed considerably better fortune. Not only did all survive the ordeal, but some had their pictures seen and praised even before the guns had stopped firing. The best-known of these, Roger Fenton, sailed to the Crimea with the financial support of a Manchester publisher (William Agnew) who thought to make a profit from the images Fenton brought back. The photographer also had the blessing of a government that hoped his images would help recharge
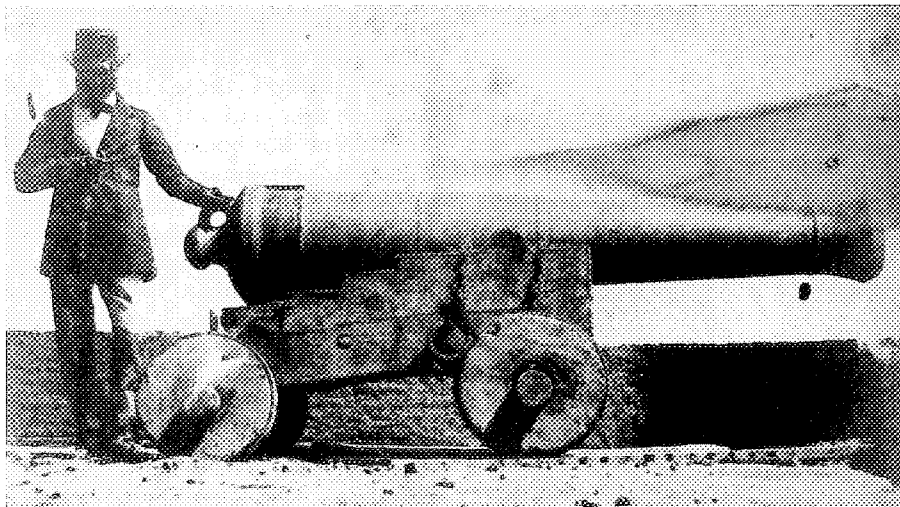
Captured guns at Rangoon, Burma c.1853 by John McCosh. Slow exposure time prevented early photographers from obtaining shots of actual battle actions.

Fortunes of war: Roger Fenton, famous for his photographs of the Crimean War, on the other side of the lens in the garb of a Zouave soldier (1855).

public support for the war. Elsewhere, James Robertson absented himself from the Imperial Mint in Constantinople to photograph the war, while the Hungarian Carol Popp de Szathmari left his photographic studio in Bucharest. All these men were middle-aged, experienced photographers, professionals by the standards of the day. Szathmari had his studio, Fenton had been the first secretary of the Photographic Society of London, and Robertson had already published *Photographic Views of Constantinople* (1853).

Today these photographs may strike viewers as largely unexciting exercises in landscape and portraiture. Pictures of soldiers, weaponry, camp and battle sites, and war-damaged buildings and fortifications abound. There are no shots of battle actions, the kind of images we have come to expect from war settings but which were then impossible to take. Slow exposure times – three seconds was Fenton's best – precluded such pictures. Although one of the handful of surviving photographs by Szathmari is captioned 'The Bombardment of Silistria', the blurry image does not really conform to its title.

Also absent from this large body of photographs are pictures of the dead. At one point Fenton deliberately refrained from photographing the half-buried remains of troopers

who had fallen during the notorious charge of the Light Brigade. It is as if the caution 'No dead bodies' – allegedly flashed to Fenton on his departure by Prince Albert – had been heard by the others as well. Of course, everyone knew that after an engagement battlefields were littered with bodies, and there were some

photographers who went so far as to take pictures of the freshly dug graves of the recently slain. (Two such photographs are among the Mexican War collections.) Artists did only slightly better. While the dead and wounded had been portrayed in art for centuries, artists rarely illustrated the graphic horrors of war: the torn-off limbs, gaping abdominal wounds spilling viscera, headless torsos or severed heads. Missing even was the depiction of corpses swelling after a day or two in the open. Artists rarely showed these details, not because they had not seen or imagined them, but because they sensed that their patrons and the public did not want to see such things. And the early war photographers, many of them, like Fenton and Szathmari, artists *manqués*, abided by these same conventions probably without much

Boredom at Balaklava: Fenton's image of a mortar battery conveys something of the tedium that, as much as the tension, characterised the daily reality of war.

Sons, brothers, fathers (British soldiers in the Crimea): photography helped to convey the human face of war .

medium inspired. 'These are sworn copies', wrote an English reviewer of Fenton's pictures:

> real evidence, and indeed, but for colour, unsurpassable. When men draw a scene, there may be error – but when the scene draws itself there can be no mistake. It is nature seen through a square mirror, and transferred to the mirror.

thought. A decorous pictorialism, not visual truth, was their highest aim. Indeed, Szathmari was wont to take a brush to his pictures.

Nevertheless, when they first appeared, these photographs were a revelation. Viewers saw people and

Photography revealed the physical locations of war in detail for the first time (here, fortifications at Sebastopol after evacuation by the Russians, 1855).

places as they actually were, not as a painting or a published engraving of a photograph made them appear. They thought they were seeing the Crimea as if they were actually standing there. 'Nous sommes devant Sebastopol', exclaimed Ernest Lacan in 1855 after viewing at the Paris Exhibition, Fenton's panoramic photograph of the famous site. As well as the exhilarating sense of being there, there was also the unreserved trust in the image itself that the

Such words capture the extent of people's faith in photography when it was new. They also indicate why the public were so fascinated by the first war photographs to be seen in their own time, and why it already seemed as if the camera might have a place in every soldier's pack, at least according to Punch:

> I send you, dear Alfred, a complete photographic apparatus which will amuse you doubtlessly in your

Panoramic landscapes of war, like this by Felice Beato (China, 1859), conveyed a sense of reality that was novel and impressive to a 19th-century audience.

moments of leisure, and if you could send me home, dear, a good view of a nice battle, I should feel extremely obliged. P.S. If you could take the view, dear, just in the moment of victory, I would like it all the better.

By the 1850s, stage shows and panoramas based on war had become popular entertainments. Why shouldn't the soldier or ordinary bystander add his view for the benefit of family and friends?

Three years after the Crimean War, a young Englishman, known to us (from the letters he sent home from Italy to the journal *Photographic News*) only by his initials, J.L.., did try to get a 'good view' of a battle. In the spring of 1859, while taking pictures in Switzerland, J.L. learned that the war Italians refer to as '*la seconda guerra d'indipendenza*' had broken out in northern Italy. He quickly decided that it would be more 'exciting' to photograph a battlefield than 'glaciers and ice peaks'. It was not mere curiosity that persuaded him to go to view the conflict, nor was he seeking images of victory. Instead, his was a more sombre ambition – to capture images of pity and horror: to

take pictures of what 'a battlefield is really like, when the excitement of the conflict is past', so that people might not 'talk so flippantly of war'.

Hiring a mule to carry his equipment, J.L. walked from Martigny in Switzerland across the Great St Bernard Pass, and by early May had arrived in the village of Casalrosso, not far from Vercelli in Piedmont. At the end of May he was present at the battle of Palestro (May 30th-31st), but perched in a tree, he was unable to use his camera. Afterwards, however, he photographed the dead, making several plates showing victims scattered about, others lying side by side ready to be thrown into a burial ditch. This was effectively the first time that the war dead, barely cold, had been photographed. In India in 1858, some time after the siege of Lucknow, Felice Beato had taken a picture of scattered skeletal pieces. But in this form the dead were more like symbols than human beings. Unfortunately, no prints from J.L.'s plates have ever surfaced;

possibly none were ever successfully made. The glass plates used in the collodion process were easily damaged, and making a good print from them was not easy, certainly not for an amateur like J.L. It is even possible that he did not survive the war, which would explain why his photographs have disappeared.

A war zone has many kinds of danger, as Leon Mehedin, who turned up again in July 1859 in Italy as '*photographe à l'Etat-Major de l'Empereur*', discovered when he nearly died of a fever. Whatever happened to J.L. and his plates, his willingness to photograph the dead in all their humanity and vulnerability deserves notice.

It was a willingness that was shared by others during that brief, largely forgotten, war. There is one photograph of the dead that survives. Taken after the battle of Melegnano (June 8th) by either a French or more likely an Italian photographer, it shows the dead heaped up for burial, 'flung together like sacks of grain, some terribly mutilated, some without mark of injury'. This description was penned for the July 1861 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* by Oliver Wendell Holmes, who had seen the photograph in a friend's stereograph collection. Holmes was clearly shocked by the image, and warned his readers that the 'young maiden and tender child' ought not see pictures of 'what war leaves after it'.

What might not be suitable for the young and innocent had evidently become acceptable for others. Death-bed photographs of the famous and obscure had long been popular, but what had happened that suddenly made those killed in wars an appealing subject? One answer lies in the contemporary

More symbolic than representative, death is powerfully present in Felice Beato's 1858 photograph of the interior of the Secundra Bagh, Lucknow, where more than 2,000 met a violent end during the Indian mutiny in November 1857.
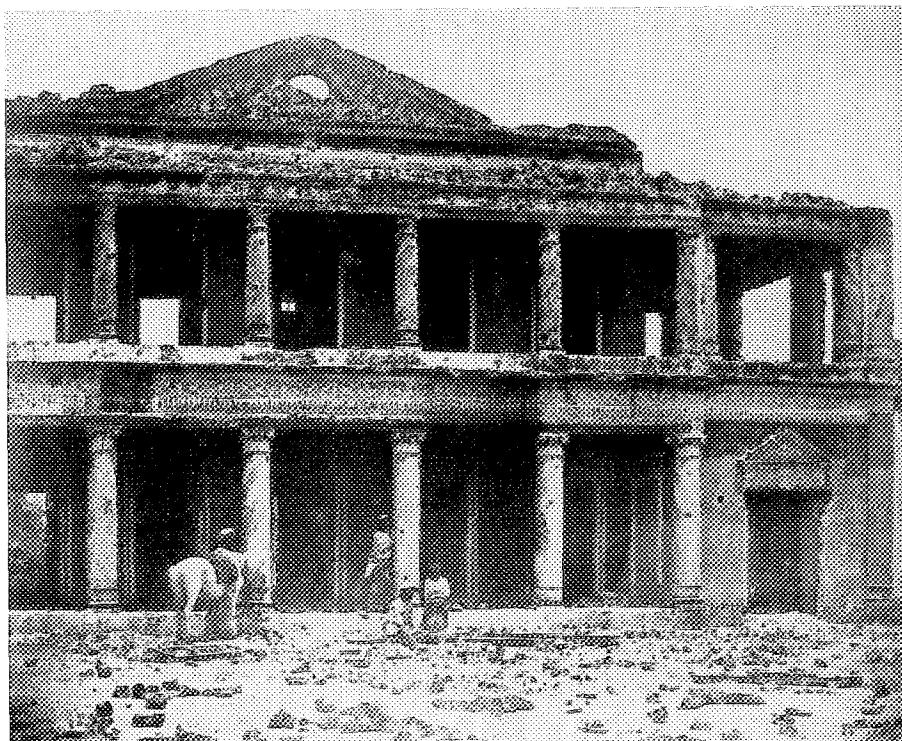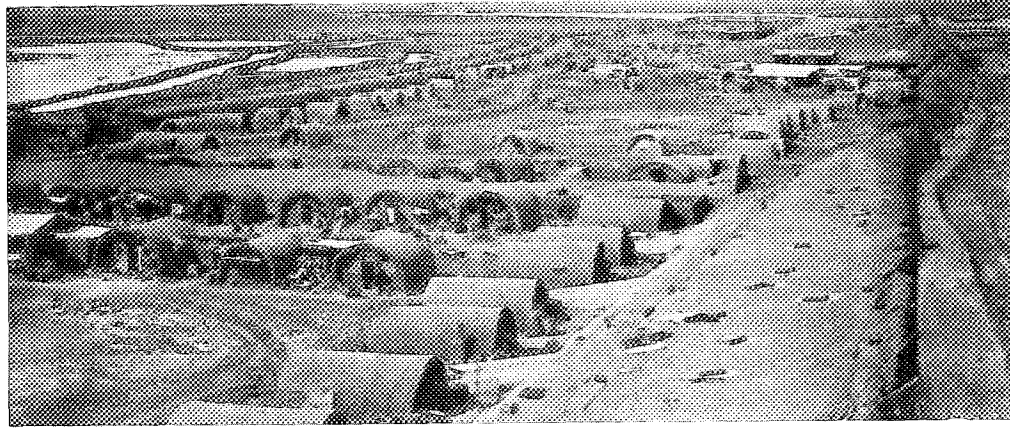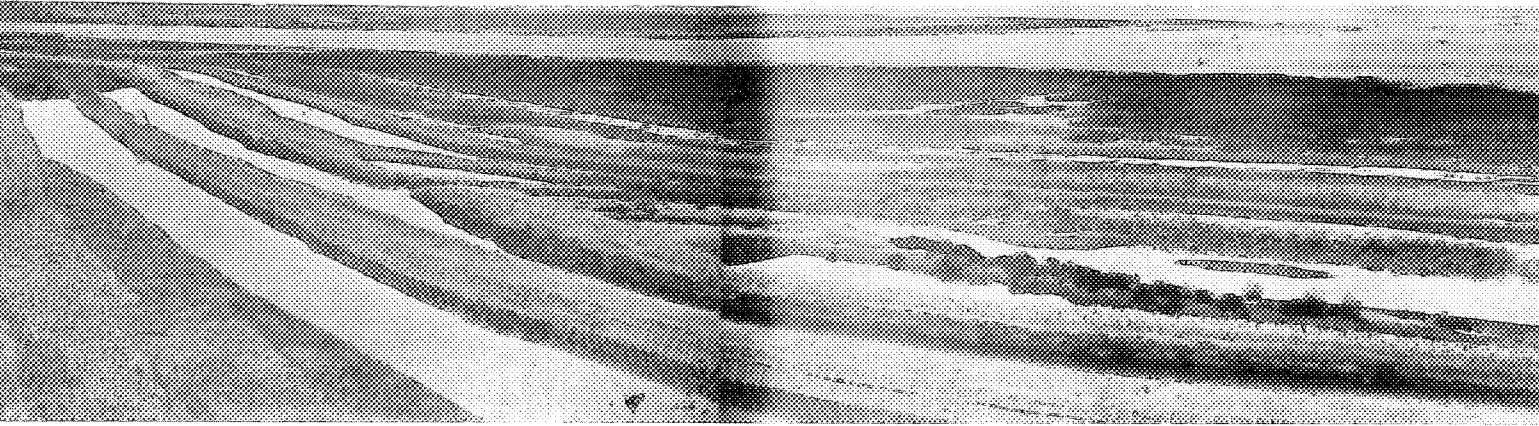
acclaim for photography as a truth-telling art. How long could it have avoided picturing the dead – 'what,' as Holmes put it, 'war leaves after it'? The highly favourable reception given to the pictures taken of the Crimean War might have prodded photographers to extend their subject matter, sensing that this new kind of picture would appeal to the voyeurism of their audience. Perhaps most important was the growing respect and concern accorded to the common soldier. Thanks to a journalistic coverage not possible before the telegraph wire, and to the etchings, paintings and photographs that inundated the public during and after hostilities, the common soldier had begun to acquire a human, suffering face. A cartoon in *Punch* in the winter of 1855 featuring two soldiers, bootless and in rags, exemplifies the more sympathetic depiction the English public was having to consider. The soldiers' exchange, as the snow swirls around them, wonderfully foreshadows the sardonic cartoon characters Willie and Joe that soldier/artist Bill Mauldin regaled Americans with during the Second World War:

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'Well Jack! Here's good news from Home. We're to have a Medal.'
'That's very kind. Maybe one of these days we'll have a coat to stick it on?'

From the willingness to draw this scene, to the willingness to photograph such men after they had given their lives for the nation, would have been a small step, and one photographers and the public were ready to take. Soldiers were not yet 'our boys', but they were increasingly regarded as fellow citizens – sons, brothers, fathers – not as the 'scum of the earth' derided by Wellington and others.

The 1859 war had been too brief to be much photographed. After the terrible Battle of Solferino (June 24th) Napoleon III decided to make peace, to some extent moved by what he had seen that day. The fifteen-hour battle had been so grisly (40,000 casualties, at least 4,500 dead) that the Swiss philanthropist Jean Henri Dunant, after a visit to the battlefield, was inspired to create the organisation that would become the Red Cross. It also prompted the creation of the first great war ossuary, that was inaugurated less than a month before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. By then the American Civil War had been fought, the first conflict whose fame owes much to those who photographed it. For generations these images have shaped public understanding of the war and what it was like, stirring public empathy for those who had taken part. Without these pictures the war would not have seized the imagination as it perennially has. When we think about the war we are apt to do so in images provided by these photographers.

Tens of thousands of photographs were taken during the Civil War. The great majority of them were portraits of soldiers taken in hometown studios or in the field by one of the hundreds of '*cameristas*' who followed the armies. As one contemporary wrote, 'the wise soldier makes his will, and seeks his photo as possibly the last tokens of affection for

'What war leaves after it': dead Neopolitan soldiers after the siege of Gaeta, Italy 1861.

The camera never lies? Contemporaries' 'truthful' idea of the US Civil War rested largely on posed photographs (here, showing gleaming Northern artillery).
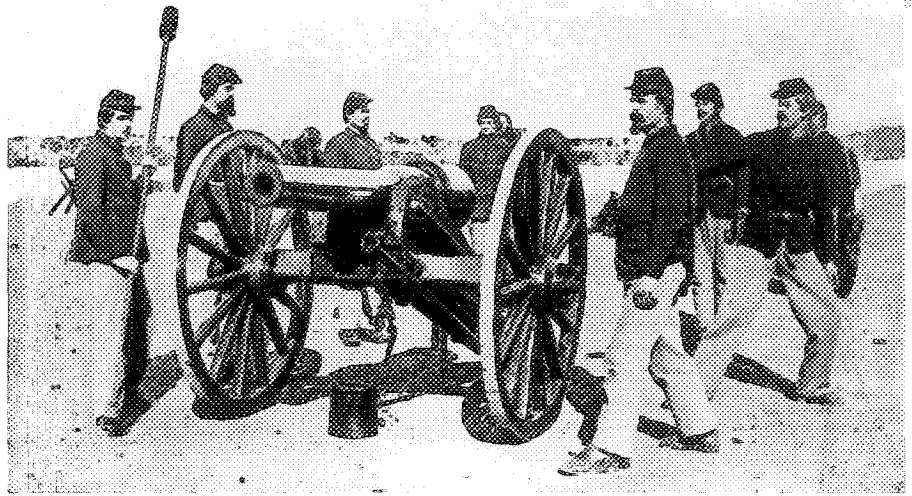
the dear ones at home'. The trade was remunerative: the profit on a $1 picture in the summer of 1862 was estimated to be 95 cents. But it was not for profit that the American Photographic Society sent a delegation to the Secretary of War in June 1861 suggesting that a photographic record of the conflict be made. Nothing came of the embassy, 'owing to the extraordinary preoccupation of the Department'. But in the next four years the photographers working in the field, virtually all of them on the Union side, did record considerable portions of the conflict. Of these, Mathew Brady is the best known, though he took few photographs himself. Instead he hired other 'operators' to work for him, such as Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan, and it is their images that have so profoundly shaped our vision of this war.

Brady was an adept entrepreneur, who knew not only whom to hire but how to display their work. The exhibition of the Antietam photographs, taken almost entirely by Gardner, is a landmark in the history of war photography. Crowds flocked to Brady's gallery, undoubtedly drawn by the exhibition title, 'The Dead of Antietam', and once inside stood in hushed silence. Here were not the mannequin dead commonly found in paintings and engravings, but real corpses bloated by gas, arms outstretched, mouths agape. These dead were incontestably human, and disturbingly present. 'If he [Brady] has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards,' wrote one reviewer, 'he has done something very like it.' The Gardner pictures startled eyes that had never seen such sights before. They showed 'the terrible reality and earnestness of war', and in doing so challenged their audience to view war not as presented by the 'melodramas of Versailles and the Louvre' but as it actually was.

In defining the historian's task – to write history 'as it actually happened' – Leopold von Ranke would have seen little to compare between the efforts of photographers and historians. His subjects were in eras before photography and his purpose as a historian was not merely to represent accurately what had happened but to offer credible explanations for why it had. However, Ranke's contemporaries were ready to see more in the comparison. They were intensely interested in the emerging history of their own time, not least in the wars that were shaping the destinies of states and peoples. Already in 1855 the *Athenaeum* was suggesting that the photographer would soon be able to chronicle those wars as well, or almost as well, as the historian:

> As photographists grow stronger in nerve and cooler of head, we shall have not merely the bivouac and the foraging party, but the battle itself painted; and while the fate of nations is in the balance we shall hear of the chemist measuring out his acids and rubbing his glasses to a polish.

This prediction seemed to have come true in July 1862 when the *New York Times* announced that photography was to be 'at once the Minerva and Clio of the war' in progress. 'The Dead of Antietam' was a success. What five years earlier had been a taboo subject had now become a profitable one. And a conveniently manageable one, too. Those at Antietam were photographed as they lay; ten months later Gardner and his assistants moved bodies around Gettysburg like so many props, assem-

bling scenes they wanted to record. Other photographers also arranged *tableaux*, or, in the case of George P. Barnard, exercised their creativity in the dark. Following an already accepted practice in landscape photography, Barnard double-printed in his photographs of Sherman's march through Georgia, snatching clouds from one image and inserting them in another.

In the 1860s, as in the 1850s, war photography was not quite what it seemed or was advertised to be. The camera was disinterested, but not necessarily the men behind the lens. They conducted themselves as artists: they offered truth, but it was likely to be of their own composing.

Today, though aware of the duplicity in some Civil War photographs, we still admire them and depend on them to inform us of the war they portray. We ignore what we know of their making in the belief that the images still convey meaning and a sense of presence. What does it matter that the rebel sharpshooter of Gardner's famous picture was placed in the den only after his death, so long as we can imagine that some living sharpshooter might have occupied such a site? Do clouds switched from one sky for use in another change our appreciation of what the war has done to the earth below? We might smile at the claim made in 1861 that 'photography never tells a lie,' but despite a more sophisticated sense of the photographer as a maker of his images, we are hardly more ready than our nineteenth-century forebears to worry over how a picture came to be and scarcely less willing to accept what we see in it as real.

In 1866 both Barnard and Gardner published album narratives, thereby attempting to fulfill an expectation that photography might be the 'Clio of the war'. Gardner's *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*

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Bodies awaiting burial at Cold Harbor, Virginia, from Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book* – such images transformed the public understanding of war.

surveyed the war in the East; Barnard's *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign* had a narrower focus. Neither man invoked Clio as his muse, but both served her deliberately and confidently, believing, as Gardner wrote in his preface, that 'verbal representations' of the 'places and scenes' of the war 'may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but photographic presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith'.

While Gardner proved to be a good prophet, neither his nor Barnard's book was a success. Both albums were expensive since every copy contained its own set of photographic prints. (Not until the halftone process was developed in the 1880s could photographs be printed directly onto paper.) But the timing was also wrong. What people had been eager to look at when the war was in progress they wanted to forget once it was over.

Still, these books recording the

Confederate dead at Spotsylvania, 1864. Photographers were not above contriving scenes in the US Civil War as public appetite for their work intensified.
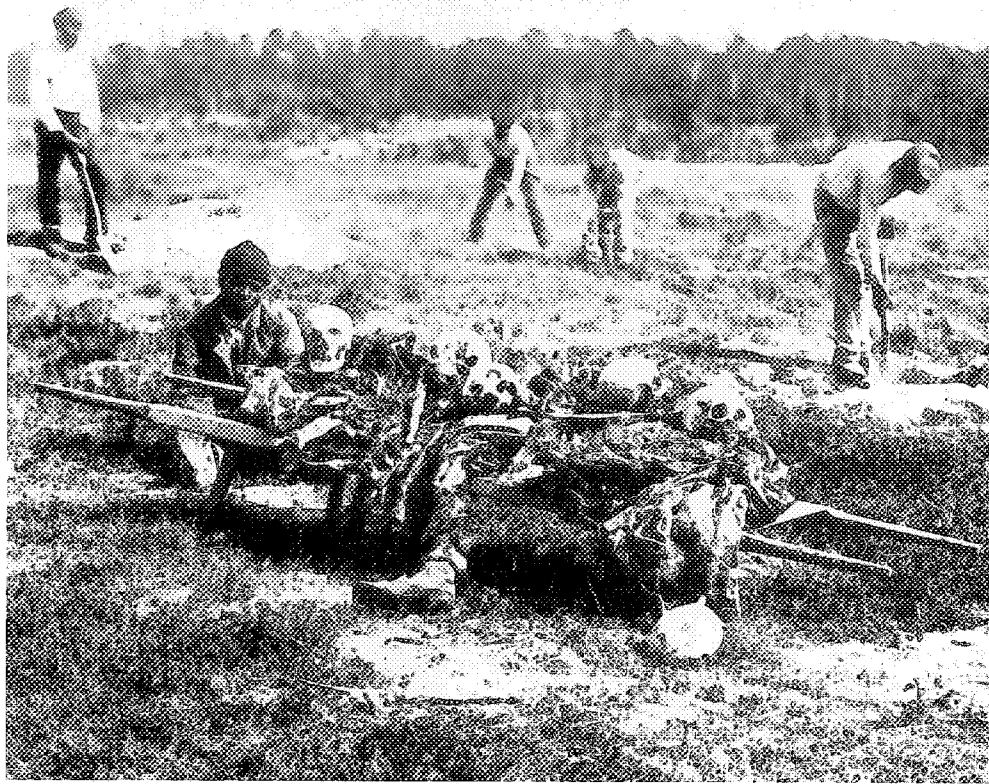
American Civil War mark another milestone in war photography. Several of the photographers of the Crimean War had publicly displayed their work in exhibitions. Szathmari had put together an album of his photographs and given copies to a number of people, including Napoleon III, Emperor Franz Joseph, and Queen Victoria. But he had not tried to offer albums to the general public. And from the description we have of the contents of Szathmari's album it does not seem that he intended it to be read as a narrative. Neither is there a narrative thrust to the portfolio of

Fenton's pictures offered to the public by Agnew in the spring of 1856, nor to *Photographic Views of Sebastopol, Taken Immediately After The Retreat of the Russians, September 8, 1855*, an album compiled by a young Englishman, G. Shaw Lefevre.

Thus it is Barnard and Gardner whose books we may term the first photographic histories of war, a genre that within a generation would become popular and profitable. Those who have assembled such works in the last hundred years may not have known these two originators of the genre, but they may well have thought true of their own work the claim of the editor of the ten-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War* (1911): 'The hand of the historian may falter, or his judgment may fail, but the final record of the American Civil War is told in these time-dimmed negatives'.

FOR FURTHER READING

Michael L. Carlebach, *The Origins of Photojournalism in America* (Smithsonian Institution, 1992); Heinz K. Henisch, *The Photographic Experience 1839-1914* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Pat Hodgson, *Early War Photographs* (Graphic Society, 1974); Matthew P. Lalumia, *Realism and Politics in Victorian Art of the Crimean War* (UMI Research Press, 1984); James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualisation of the British Empire* (Reaktion Books, 1997)

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