

Donald E. English

French Photographic Images of the Hero during World War One

In recent years scholars of the First World War in France have posed some fundamental questions about how and why the French army, as well as French society, held out for four years, despite all the sacrifices and suffering created by the conflict. Among others, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, and Jean Jacques Becker have done much to set the research agenda in the field. They argue that the French soldiers, like their civilian counterparts, ultimately accepted the conflict as a crusade for a just cause, since a German victory would have meant a challenge to civilization itself. That decision to persevere was constantly reinforced by a war culture that gave meaning to the conflict and its sacrifices. Among the components of this war culture was a system of propaganda that was both structured and spontaneous at the same time. Censorship was imposed from the top down by governmental and military authorities. Yet the soldiers and the general public also created for themselves their own more spontaneous system of representation about the war from the various official and unofficial sources, which ultimately also contributed to its acceptance of the conflict.¹

In this essay I would like to explore briefly the role of one component of this system of representation—the medium of photography in the censored press. In particular I am interested in the contribution that photographic images of heroes made to legitimizing the French Army and the war itself in the eyes of the French people.²

Given the various forms of communication during the era of the First World War, why was photography such a significant medium for conveying information about the conflict and its heroes? First, despite two generations of compulsory primary education, most French men and women in 1914 could still not read very well. So any kind of visual image was probably more important as a conveyor of information than print.³ However, among the forms of visual communication, photography was especially compelling because there was an implicit epistemological code hovering around the photograph. A relatively new technology itself, photography

was the one form of communication most closely associated with contemporary discourses of knowledge and truth, for it was considered then (and still is by many today) to be an unmediated copy of “reality.”

However, most modern scholars of communication and representation, including literary critics, semioticians, communication theorists, philosophers, and cultural anthropologists, to name just a few, agree that photography as communication is far more complex. Photographs are, in effect, poly-semic in that they concurrently function in the various modes of an icon, an index, and a symbol. In addition, they also interact with the historical traditions, and the social, political, and economic structures of an era in order to inform and situate their meaning for their producers and viewers. So photographs are not just reproductions of reality, but are visual statements within a historical and discursive context that reproduces, circulates, and even helps to legitimize the existing systems of power and authority within a culture.⁴

The official photography of WWI was part of a large system of military and civilian censorship.⁵ Within the Ministry of War itself was a vast organization known as the Bureau des Informations Militaires (BIM).⁶ It had several subsections, each responsible for different facets of information control, including press censorship and the production of propaganda. Among these was the Section Photographique de l'Armée Française, which was created in April 1915. Once established, the Section Photographique grew rapidly in order to fulfill its three-fold mission. It was to take photographs that would serve as propaganda, as documentation of the destruction of French buildings, and as a visual history of the conflict that could later be studied by the officers of the French command. By March 1916, the Section had reached its full complement of 62 men under the command of Lieutenant Marcel Lévi, including fifteen photographers, as well as numerous technicians and archivists. At the end of the war the Section had either taken or collected from other sources approximately 170,000 photographs.⁷ Hundreds of images from the Section Photographique appeared in the press every week, as it became the central supplier of war photographs.⁸

Just how these photographs legitimized the war in the eyes of the French people and helped them stand firm was a complex process. In a period of profound crisis peoples' sense of reality is often disrupted and overturned. What seems impossible becomes possible and what seems unreasonable becomes the norm. In order to provide internal mental equilibrium, both individuals and societies create for themselves a coherent, orderly new view of the world that integrates the altered circumstances of life.

This process, widely characterized by social psychologists as cognitive dissonance, is a defense mechanism of the psyche. Ultimately a new internal reality is created,

transforming the previous reality to meet the need for cognitive coherence and order. In the process, people feel a renewed sense of power over their lives and a greater ability to deal with unexpected chaos and disruption.⁹

During the First World War the photographs of the conflict provided precisely the information needed by the French to create for themselves a new internal reality, thus enabling them to endure the unexpected changes in their lives. In the structure of this new reality several traditional visual themes of French heroes were evident. These images provided continuity with the past, but also helped to serve as mediators in a process where the French readjusted themselves to the new reality of modern technological war.

Within a few months of the outbreak, it was obvious that this new type of trench warfare would be much more violent and destructive to the individual French soldier than any previous war. With new technologies such as the machine gun and heavy artillery, thousands were often killed or wounded within minutes of an over the top attack. It was precisely this dehumanization that made the visual emphasis on the French soldier as an individual hero even more important.¹⁰ The French had a longstanding familiarity with this visual theme in war art going back to the heroic paintings of the French monarchy and Napoleon, as well as in popular prints known as the Image d'Épinal, that circulated widely in France throughout the nineteenth century. Poster art that came out within the early days of the war reinforced this theme of the heroic individual soldier defending the homeland or attempting to drive out the invader. (photos 1, 2, 3) Typical photographs early in the war used this visual context as the basis for its subject matter. We see in these photos of middle class and lower class





soldiers together with family the suggestion of homeland defense, or these officers standing firm in the trench as if to ensure that the invader will not pass. (photos 4, 5, 6)

The official military doctrine of the French Army in World War One was based on the idea of the offensive, where the heroic will of the individual French soldier in the face of fire would lead the nation to victory. However, the representation of battle was a problem for the military photographer intending to glorify the exploits of the individual soldier. It was simply too dangerous to be out in “No Man’s Land” with the others. Consequently, photographs of the attack were often taken from the safety of the trench and showed groups of soldiers from behind. (photo 7) Yet these types of images did not lend themselves to very heroic depictions of the individual in battle. So fabricated images of the attack which made it possible for the viewer to see better the individual faces of heroism were published. (photo 8)



In this modern technological war two types of soldiers, however, still fought the enemy in more “one on one” encounters—the airplane pilot and the miner who dug under the German lines to set explosive charges. While one fought in the sky and the other underground, both were glorified for their heroic actions.¹¹ These soldiers provided the photographer with precisely the visual theme needed to construct an individual heroic image. Photos 9 and 10 show not only the individual soldier, but also present close up views of their actions that were uncommon at the time, but which lent visual immediacy to the personal courage of the soldiers. Typically then, those soldiers who distinguished themselves in battle were photographed receiving medals for their valor, while the unfortunate ones who lost their

lives would be photographed in burial ceremonies with full military honors. (photos 11,12).

With the scale of conflict in WWI the number of wounded soldiers on both sides was staggering. And on the homefront, it was no secret that there were thousands of casualties every month.¹² But to assure the public that these casualties were acceptable, depictions of these French soldiers had to be conservative with no graphic documentation of the horrible wounds that they received. Instead photographs frequently were published of individual soldiers being assisted by a brother in arms, while later every effort was made to comfort and rehabilitate the wounded heroes. (photos 13, 14, 15).

Yet when the fabric of everyday life has been thrown into doubt and confusion, it is fairly predictable what photographic images of soldiers would not be shown to the public through a medium noted for its authenticity and correspondence to reality. Any photograph suggesting news that might weaken the resolve of the home-front would obviously have to be prohibited. For example, with rare exceptions photographs of dead French soldiers and the more disfiguring wounds caused by the instruments of modern technological war—such as poison gas, machine guns, and heavy artillery—were among the most frequently censored. (photos 16, 17, 18, 19)

How best to represent the enemy while maintaining the heroic stature of the French soldier was also an issue. When Germans were depicted it was often in the context of a group scene that disguised the individual identity of the soldier. (photo 20) Photographs of individual German soldiers often showed just body parts, or the cadavers of the dead. (photo 21, 22) Not only did these pictures signify that the German soldier was not invincible, but that Germany was paying a high price for its decision to invade France. Given their frequency in the press, the French authorities undoubtedly deemed these views of the ugly horror





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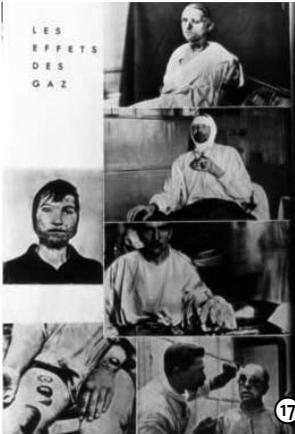
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of death to be relatively safe for public consumption. And apparently there was little demoralization or emotional transference among the French civilians to their own lost loved ones after viewing the horribly decomposed bodies of German soldiers.

Images of French and German soldiers together were more rare, but usually represented the French soldier in an ascendant position to the German. In Photo 23 we see French soldiers standing next to the frozen cadaver of a dead German, as if to suggest their heroic conquest over the foe. Photo 24 was a more unusual photograph to appear in the French press, since it depicts a dead French soldier along side a German in a shallow trench. The caption suggests this was the product of individual combat between the two, where both fought to the end. The implied heroism of the French soldier in this scene apparently overrode the normal hesitance to place a German soldier in a relatively equal position to a French soldier and to allow the publication of a French casualty in the press.

While many of these images we have just seen clearly resonated with deeply rooted cultural myths and stereo types of the hero, the vast majority of other photographs produced by the Section Photographique and approved for publication were far more mundane. This meant that literally thousands of rather stock and even uninteresting images of troops' daily life in the trenches, marching soldiers, and equipment were published. At the very least, the ministry could hope that these images would suggest the efficient organization of the military effort and how well supplied the soldiers were at the front. Overall, these photographs appeared more frequently than the more heroic individual images in the press and in other official publications during the war. And eventually they wore thin with the

public, encouraging a phenomenon known as the “bourrage de crane.”

Meaning literally “eyewash,” the “bourrage de crane” came to connote the boring, banal, or monotonous stories and photographs found in the press. French civilian and military authorities, of course, were aware of this discourse among the public and their political critics.¹³ They settled on one strategy that would help undermine the “bourrage de crane” by providing more visually interesting photographs of the war.

These included the publication of more funny pictures of French heroes, either in a comic or ironic way. The psychological value of humor lay in the sense of power or superiority over oppressive circumstances that laughter engenders, thus liberating the individual and society from some of the ill effects of the war.¹⁴ Photo 25 shows French officers wearing gas masks while engaging in a common game of cards. It draws its humor from a traditional heroic theme in which French officers were to reflect a certain gaiety, non-chalance, or “panache” in the face of danger. Here they attempt to create humor by wearing these bizarre looking masks at a time when they are not expected to be worn, and in a their deliberate denial of the potentially dangerous gas attack in disrupting their card game. Photo 26 shows colonial Algerian troops being checked for syphilis by a French doctor. The amusement of this image lies not so much in the visualization of a routine medical procedure, but in the depiction of the nude form, which elicited an aesthetic, if not sexual, response from French viewers who had long been acquainted with the nude form in art but never quite in this unique circumstance. More ironic is Photo 27, which comes from an official publication of the Section Photographique.



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It presents a French soldier standing over a captured German cannon, gesturing with the hand signal commonly associated with the notion “screw you.” The caption written in chalk on the cannon reads “on a eus,” suggesting that the French have screwed the Germans with their own technology—the phallic shape of the cannon leaving little to the imagination.



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In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the photography of the war, including these various images of French heroes, went a long way toward legitimizing the French military and the war. From this flow of visual information the French were able to create for themselves a visual “reality” which supported their morale through four years of hardship. That reality, however, was constantly shifting due to the needs and circumstances of the viewers. But once the major criticisms of the “bourrage de crane” were addressed, the home-front could easily continue to believe that it was seeing enough of the real war. In effect, the heroic ideal may have presented a sanitized view of the war, but it still provided enough authenticity and visual continuity with the past to help the French to sustain themselves in this time of crisis.¹⁵



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Notes

1. See Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 14-18, *Understanding the Great War* (New York: 2002), pp.108-112; Leonard V. Smith, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: 2003), pp. 53-60; and Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People* (New York: 1986), pp. 5, 59, 323-327.
2. The scholarship on this facet of culture is enormous, encompassing several disciplines, theories, and methodologies. Among the authors and books which have been influential in shaping my thinking include: Peter Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: 1966); Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: 1976); Peirre Boudieu, *Un art moyen, essai sur les usages de la photographie* (Paris: 1965); Hans-Geog Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: 1975); Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: 1972); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: 1976); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: 1973); and Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: 1983).
3. *Annuaire statistique. Annees 1914-1915. Resume retrospectif* (Liechtenstein: 1968), p. 19. See also Ouriel Reshef, *Guerre, Myth, et Caricature* (Paris: 1984) for the influence of caricature on the collective consciousness of the French in the late nineteenth century.
4. For more on the polysemic functions of photography see Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (London: 1997), pp. 1-31; see also Michael J. Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Policy Analysis* (Madison: 1988); Frederic Lambert, *Mythographies, la photo de presse et ses legends* (Paris: 1986); Victor Burgin, *Thinking Photography* (London: 1983); Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1976); W.J.T. Mitchel, *Iconology: Images, Music, Text* (New York: 1987); and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucinda* (New York: 1981).
5. Becker, pp.48-49.
6. Etat-Major de l'Armee de Terre, Service Historique, Chateau de Vincennes (cited hereafter as EMAT), Series 5N 550, "Rapport de la Ministere de la Guerre sur le Services d'Information Militaire", December 9, 1917.
7. EMAT, Series 5N 550, "Ministere de la Guerre: Instructions relatives au choix des films ou clichés", November 1, 1915; EMAT, Series 5N 550, "Notes sur le fonction de la Section Photographique de l'Armee", March 16, 1916; Dominique Pascal, "Les Debuts du Service Photographique des Armee", in *Prestige de la Photographie*, September 1977, p. 76.
8. Among the dozens of photo-illustrated magazines and newspapers during World War One, two of the most prominent were *Le Mirror*, and *L'Illustration*. For a history of *L'Illustration* during the war see Part 3, Chapter 2, pp. 207-231 in Jean-Noel Marchandiau, *L'Illustration, 1843-1944, La Vie et Mort d'un Journal*, (Paris: 1987).
9. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: 1974), passim.



10. For more on the individual identity of the soldier at the front during World War One see Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One* (Cambridge: 1979), passim.
11. On the heroism of the underground miner see Leed, *No Man's Land*, pp. 138-150. The cult of heroism for pilots in France was reinforced during the war by a photo-illustrated weekly journal called *La Guerre Aérienne*; see also John H. Morrow, "Knights of the Sky: The Rise of Military Aviation", in Franz Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds.), *Authority, Identity, and the Social History of the Great War* (Providence: 1995), pp. 305-324.
12. For more on the knowledge of the civilians at home about conditions at the front see the role of private correspondence in an era of postal censorship during the war by John Horne, "Soldiers, Civilians, and the Warfare of Attrition: Representations of Combat in France, 1914-1918", in Coetzee (Eds.), *Authority, Identity, and the Social History of the Great War*, pp. 223-250.
13. Archives de Minister des Affaires Etrangères, Maison de la Presse, Information, et Propaganda, 1914-1918, Dossier 60, "Rapport", September 8, 1917; see also Catherine Slater, *Defeatists and Their Enemies: Political Invective in France, 1914-1918* (Oxford: 1981), pp. 32-41; and Allan Douglas, *War, Memory, and the Politics of Humor: The Canard Enchaîné and World War One* (Berkeley: 2002).
14. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: 1976), passim.
15. For more on the enduring appeal and strength of traditional themes in the social and cultural life of the Great War see Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Site of Mourning: The Great War and European Cultural History* (Cambridge: 1995), and *The Experience of World War One* (Oxford: 1989).

List of Illustrations

1. War Bonds Poster. Three Soldiers Attacking.
2. War Bonds Poster. On Les Aura (individual soldier attacking).
3. War Bonds Poster. Debut dans la Tranchee. (Soldier guarding trench).
4. Middle Class officer with Family. Etablissement Photographique et Cinematographique de l'Armée (hereafter cited as EPCA).
5. Idle moment, soldier with young peasant woman, 1916. EPCA.
6. General Le Bocq touring the front. EPCA.
7. Charge of a section of Zouaves. *L'Illustration*, June 19, 1915, pp. 628-629.
8. On the southeast ridge of the Notre Dame-de-Lorette. *L'Illustration*, May 15, 1915, pp. 494.
9. Sapeur aux écoute au fond d'une galerie. *Le Mirroir*, April 16, 1916, p. 7.
10. A pilot photographed by his bombardier. *La Guerre Aérienne*, May 16, 1918, pp. 432-433.
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12. Burial of a soldier. EPCA.
13. Retrieval of a soldier. Oise, 1917. EPCA.
14. Hospital care of wounded Zouave. EPCA.
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16. Facial wounds caused by gas. EPCA.
17. Effects of gas. *Images secretes de la Guerre. 200 Photographies censures en France* (Paris: 1933), p. 32.
18. To conceal the horrors of war. *Ibid.* p. 23.

19. Battle of Courcelles, 1918. EPCA.
20. Prisoners. *L'illustration*, September 7, 1918, pp. 234-235.
21. A boring picture for the Kaiser. *Le Mirroir*, December 26, 1915, p. 10.
22. German thrown into a tree by French artillery explosion. *Le Mirroir*, May 14, 1916, p. 5.
23. A frozen German soldier near Arras. *Le Mirroir*, February 21, 1915, p. 7
24. After a duel. *Le Mirroir*, October 6, 1916, p. 1.
25. A bridge party during a gas attack at the front. *Le Mirroir*, June 17, 1917, p. 16.
26. Algerian soldiers being examined for syphilis. EPCA.
27. Screw you. *La Guerre: Documents de la Photographie de l'Armee*, p. 1. EPCA.

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