

From Regarding the Pain of Others

Susan Sontag
(2003)

In June 1938 Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, her brave, unwelcomed reflections on the roots of war. Written during the preceding two years, while she and most of her intimates and fellow writers were rapt by the advancing fascist insurrection in Spain, the book was couched as the very tardy reply to a letter from an eminent lawyer in London who had asked, "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" Woolf begins by observing tartly that a truthful dialogue between them may not be possible. For though they belong to the same class, "the educated class," a vast gulf separates them: the lawyer is a man and she is a woman. Men make war. Men (most men) like war, since for men there is "some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting" that women (most women) do not feel or enjoy. What does an educated—read: privileged, well-off—woman like her know of war? Can her recoil from its allure be like his? Let us test this "difficulty of communication," Woolf proposes, by looking together at images of war. The images are some of the photographs the beleaguered Spanish government has been sending out twice a week; she footnotes: "Written in the winter of 1936–37." Let's see, Woolf writes, "whether when we look at the same photographs we feel the same things." She continues:

This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting room. . . .

FYI

The late Susan Sontag, an essayist, novelist, theater director, and antiwar activist, had an abiding interest in photography and culture. Her 1978 book *On Photography* is often cited as groundbreaking in its analysis of the role of photographs in the media and society. Sontag applied a background in literature to critique photographs in terms of their status both as art objects and as forces that shape belief and culture. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, from which this essay is taken, she updates her position on the power of images to change the ways we think about violence. The excerpt reprinted here reflects Sontag's thinking about images and war, although it was written before the war in Iraq began.

The quickest, driest way to convey the inner commotion caused by these photographs is by noting that one can't always make out the subject, so thorough is the ruin of flesh and stone they depict. And from there Woolf speeds to her conclusion. We do have the same responses, "however different the education, the traditions behind us," she says to the lawyer. Her evidence: both "we"—here women are the "we"—and you might well respond in the same words.

You, Sir, call them "horror and disgust." We also call them horror and disgust. . . . War, you say, is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped at whatever cost. And we echo your words. War is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped.

Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists. We hope only (so far in vain) to stop genocide and to bring to justice those who commit gross violations of the laws of war (for there are laws of war, to which combatants should be held), and to be able to stop specific wars by

imposing negotiated alternatives to armed conflict. It may be hard to credit the desperate resolve produced by the aftershock of the First World War, when the realization of the ruin Europe had brought on itself took hold. Condemning war as such did not seem so futile or irrelevant in the wake of the paper fantasies of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, in which fifteen leading nations, including the United States, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Japan, solemnly renounced war as an instrument of national policy; even Freud and Einstein were drawn into the debate with a public exchange of letters in 1932 titled "Why War?"

Woolf's *Three Guineas*, appearing toward the close of nearly two decades of plangent denunciations of war, offered the originality (which made this the least well received of all her books) of focusing on what was regarded as too obvious or inapposite to be mentioned, much less brooded over: that war is a man's game—that the killing machine has a gender, and it is male. Nevertheless, the temerity of Woolf's version of "Why War?" does not make her revulsion against war any less conventional in its rhetoric, in its summations, rich in repeated phrases. And photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus.

Invoking this hypothetical shared experience ("we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses"), Woolf professes to believe that the shock of such pictures cannot fail to unite people of good will. Does it? To be sure, Woolf and the unnamed addressee of this book-length letter are not any two people. Although they are separated by the age-old affinities of feeling and practice of their respective sexes, as Woolf has reminded him, the lawyer is hardly a standard-issue bellicose male. His antiwar opinions are no more in doubt than are hers. After all, his question was not, What are your thoughts about preventing war? It was, How in your opinion are we to prevent war?

It is this "we" that Woolf challenges at the start of her book: she refuses to allow her interlocutor to take

a "we" for granted. But into this "we," after the pages devoted to the feminist point, she then subsides. No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.

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aimed? That "we" would include not just the sympathizers of a smallish nation or a stateless people fighting for its life, but—a far larger constituency—those only nominally concerned about some nasty war taking place in another country. The photographs are a means of making "real" (or "more real") matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.

"Here then on the table before us are photographs," Woolf writes of the thought experiment she is proposing to the reader as well as to the spectral lawyer, who is eminent enough, as she mentions, to have K.C., King's Counsel, after his name and may or may not be a real person. Imagine then a spread of loose photographs extracted from an envelope that arrived in the morning post. They show the mangled bodies of adults and children. They show how war evacuates, shatters, breaks apart, levels the built world. "A bomb has torn open the side," Woolf writes of the house in one of the pictures. To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street. (Kabul, Sarajevo, East Mostar, Grozny, sixteen acres of lower Manhattan after September 11, 2001, the refugee camp in Jenin. . . .) Look, the photographs say, *this* is what it's like. This is what war does. And *that*, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.

Not to be pained by these pictures, not to recoil from them, not to strive to abolish what causes this havoc, this carnage—these, for Woolf, would be the reactions of a moral monster. And, she is saying, we are not monsters, we are members of the educated class. Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind.

But is it true that these photographs, documenting the slaughter of noncombatants rather than the clash of armies, could only stimulate the repudiation of war? Surely they could also foster greater militancy on behalf of the Republic. Isn't this what they were meant to do? The agreement between Woolf and the lawyer seems entirely presumptive, with the grisly photographs confirming an opinion already held in common. Had the question been, How can we best contribute to the defense of the Spanish Republic against the forces of militarist and clerical fascism? the photographs might instead have reinforced their belief in the justness of that struggle.

The pictures Woolf has conjured up do not in fact show what war, war as such, does. They show a particular way of waging war, a way at that time routinely described as "barbaric," in which civilians are the target. General Franco was using the same tactics of bombardment, massacre, torture, and the killing and mutilation of prisoners that he had perfected as a commanding officer in Morocco in the 1920s. Then, more acceptably to ruling powers, his victims had been Spain's colonial subjects, darker-hued and infidels to boot; now his victims were compatriots. To read in the pictures, as Woolf does, only what confirms a general abhorrence of war is to stand back from an engagement with Spain as a country with a history. It is to dismiss politics.

For Woolf, as for many antiwar polemicists, war is generic, and the images she describes are of anonymous, generic victims. The pictures sent out by the government in Madrid seem, improbably, not to have been labeled. (Or perhaps Woolf is simply

assuming that a photograph should speak for itself.) But the case against war does not rely on information about who and when and where; the arbitrariness of the relentless slaughter is evidence enough. To those who are sure that right is on one side, oppression and injustice on the other, and that the fighting must go on, what matters is precisely who is killed and by whom. To an Israeli Jew, a photograph of a child torn apart in the attack on the Sbarro pizzeria in downtown Jerusalem is first of all a photograph of a Jewish child killed by a Palestinian suicide-bomber. To a Palestinian, a photo-

graph of a child torn apart by a tank round in Gaza is first of all a photograph of a Palestinian child killed by Israeli ordnance. To the militant, identity is everything. And all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions. During the fighting between Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the recent Balkan wars, the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings. Alter the caption, and the children's deaths could be used and reused.

Images of dead civilians and smashed houses may serve to quicken hatred of the foe, as did the hourly reruns by Al-Jazeera, the Arab satellite television network based in Qatar, of the destruction in the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002. Incendiary as that footage was to the many who watch Al-Jazeera throughout the world, it did not tell them anything about the Israeli army they were not already primed to believe. In contrast, images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties are invariably dismissed as having been staged for the camera. To photographic corroboration of the atrocities committed by one's own side, the standard response is that the pictures are a fabrication, that no such atrocity ever took place, those were bodies the other side had brought in trucks from the city morgue

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and placed about the street, or that, yes, it happened and it was the other side who did it, to themselves. Thus the chief of propaganda for Franco's Nationalist rebellion maintained that it was the Basques who had destroyed their own ancient town and former capital, Guernica, on April 26, 1937, by placing dynamite in the sewers (in a later version, by dropping bombs manufactured in Basque territory) in order to inspire indignation abroad and reinforce the Republican resistance. And thus a majority of Serbs living in Serbia or abroad maintained right to the end of the Serb siege of Sarajevo, and even after, that the Bosnians themselves perpetrated the horrific "breadline massacre" in May 1992 and "market massacre" in February 1994, lobbing large-caliber shells into the center of their capital or planting mines in order to create some exceptionally gruesome sights for the foreign journalists' cameras and rally more international support for the Bosnian side.

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Photographs of mutilated bodies certainly can be used the way Woolf does, to vivify the condemnation of war, and may bring home, for a spell, a portion of its reality to those who have no experience of war at all. However, someone who accepts that in the world as currently divided war can become inevitable, and even just, might reply that the photographs supply no evidence, none at all, for renouncing war—except to those for whom the notions of valor and sacrifice have been emptied of meaning and credibility. The destructiveness of

war—short of total destruction, which is not war but suicide—is not in itself an argument against waging war unless one thinks (as few people actually do think) that violence is always unjustifiable, that force is always and in all circumstances wrong—wrong because, as Simone Weil affirms in her sublime essay on war, "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force" (1940), violence turns anybody subjected to it into a thing. No, retort those who in a given situation see no alternative to armed struggle, violence can exalt someone subjected to it into a martyr or a hero. In fact, there are many uses of the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for regarding—at a distance, through the medium of photography—other people's pain. Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen. Who can forget the three color pictures by Tyler

Hicks that the *New York Times* ran across the upper half of the first page of its daily section devoted to America's new war, "A Nation Challenged," on November 13, 2001? The triptych depicted the fate of a wounded Taliban soldier in uniform who had been found in a ditch by Northern Alliance soldiers advancing toward Kabul. First panel: being dragged on his back by two of his captors—one has grabbed an arm, the other a leg—along a rocky road. Second panel

(the camera is very near): surrounded, gazing up in terror as he is being pulled to his feet. Third panel: at the moment of death, supine with arms outstretched and knees bent, naked and bloodied from the waist down, being finished off by the military mob that has gathered to butcher him. An ample reservoir of stoicism is needed to get through the great newspaper of record each morning, given the likelihood of seeing photographs that could make you cry. And the pity and disgust that pictures like Hicks's inspire should not distract you from asking

what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are *not* being shown.

For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war.

Fourteen years before Woolf published *Three Guineas*—in 1924, on the tenth anniversary of the national mobilization in Germany for the First World War—the conscientious objector Ernst Friedrich published his *Krieg dem Kriege!* (*War Against War!*). This is photography as shock therapy: an album of more than one hundred and eighty photographs mostly drawn from German military and medical archives, many of which were deemed unpublishable by government censors while the war was on. The book starts with pictures of toy soldiers, toy cannons, and other delights of male children everywhere, and concludes with pictures taken in military cemeteries. Between the toys and the graves, the reader has an excruciating photo-tour of four years of ruin, slaughter, and degradation: pages of wrecked and plundered churches and castles, obliterated villages, ravaged forests, torpedoed passenger steamers, shattered vehicles, hanged conscientious objectors, half-naked prostitutes in military brothels, soldiers in death agonies after a poison-gas attack, skeletal Armenian children. Almost all the sequences in *War Against War!* are difficult to look at, notably the pictures of dead soldiers belonging to the various armies putrefying in heaps on fields and roads and in the front-line trenches. But surely the most unbearable pages in this book, the whole of which was designed to horrify and demoralize, are in the section titled “The Face of War,” twenty-four close-ups of soldiers with huge facial wounds. And Friedrich did not make the mistake of supposing that heartrending, stomach-turning pictures would simply speak for themselves. Each photo-

graph has an impassioned caption in four languages (German, French, Dutch, and English), and the wickedness of militarist ideology is excoriated and mocked on every page. Immediately denounced by the government and by veterans’ and other patriotic organizations—in some cities the police raided bookstores, and lawsuits were brought against the public display of the photographs—Friedrich’s declaration of war against war was acclaimed by left-wing writers, artists, and

intellectuals, as well as by the constituencies of the numerous antiwar leagues, who predicted that the book would have a decisive influence on public opinion. By 1930, *War Against War!* had gone through ten editions in Germany and been translated into many languages.

In 1938, the year of Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, the great French director Abel Gance featured in close-up some of the mostly hidden population of hideously disfigured excombatants—*les gueules cassées* (“the broken mugs”) they were nicknamed in French at the climax of his new

J'accuse. (Gance had made an earlier, primitive version of his incomparable antiwar film, with the same hallowed title, in 1918.) As in the final section of Friedrich’s book, Gance’s film ends in a new military cemetery, not just to remind us of how many millions of young men were sacrificed to militarism and ineptitude between 1914 and 1918 in the war cheered on as “the war to end all wars,” but to advance the sacred judgment these dead would surely bring against Europe’s politicians and generals could they know that, twenty years later, another war was imminent. “*Morts de Verdun, levez-vous!*” (Rise, dead of Verdun!), cries the deranged veteran who is the protagonist of the film, and he repeats his summons in German and in English: “Your sacrifices were in vain!” And the vast mortuary plain disgorges its multitudes, an army of shambling ghosts in rotted uniforms with

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mutilated faces, who rise from their graves and set out in all directions, causing mass panic among the populace already mobilized for a new pan-European war. "Fill your eyes with this horror! It is the only thing that can stop you!" the madman cries to the fleeing multitudes of the liv-

ing, who reward him with a martyr's death, after which he joins his dead comrades: a sea of impassive ghosts overrunning the cowering future combatants and victims of *la guerre de demain*. War beaten back by apocalypse.

And the following year the war came.

CONSIDER

- 1 What point does Susan Sontag make about men, women, and war? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 2 Has the public become desensitized to images of war and violence now that newspapers, television news, and the Web bring combat and terror incidents directly into our homes? What would we gain in sensitivity—if anything—by restricting the number of graphic images presented?

CHALLENGE

- 3 The embedding of journalists and photographers with coalition combat troops during the Iraq War has been the subject of much controversy. The public receives battlefield reports and films of combat almost instantly. Some analysts argue that the objectivity and independence of the journalists is compromised by the close relationships they develop with coalition troops, as well as the restrictions placed on them by the need to conceal troop movements, numbers, and strategies. Use library and Web resources to explore the issues raised by embedded coverage of the Iraq War, and then write a paper evaluating the strategy from the point of view of the public. Does it help citizens understand the war better?