

WAR AND ART

A VISUAL HISTORY OF MODERN CONFLICT

Edited by Joanna Bourke

REAKTION BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

JOANNA BOURKE

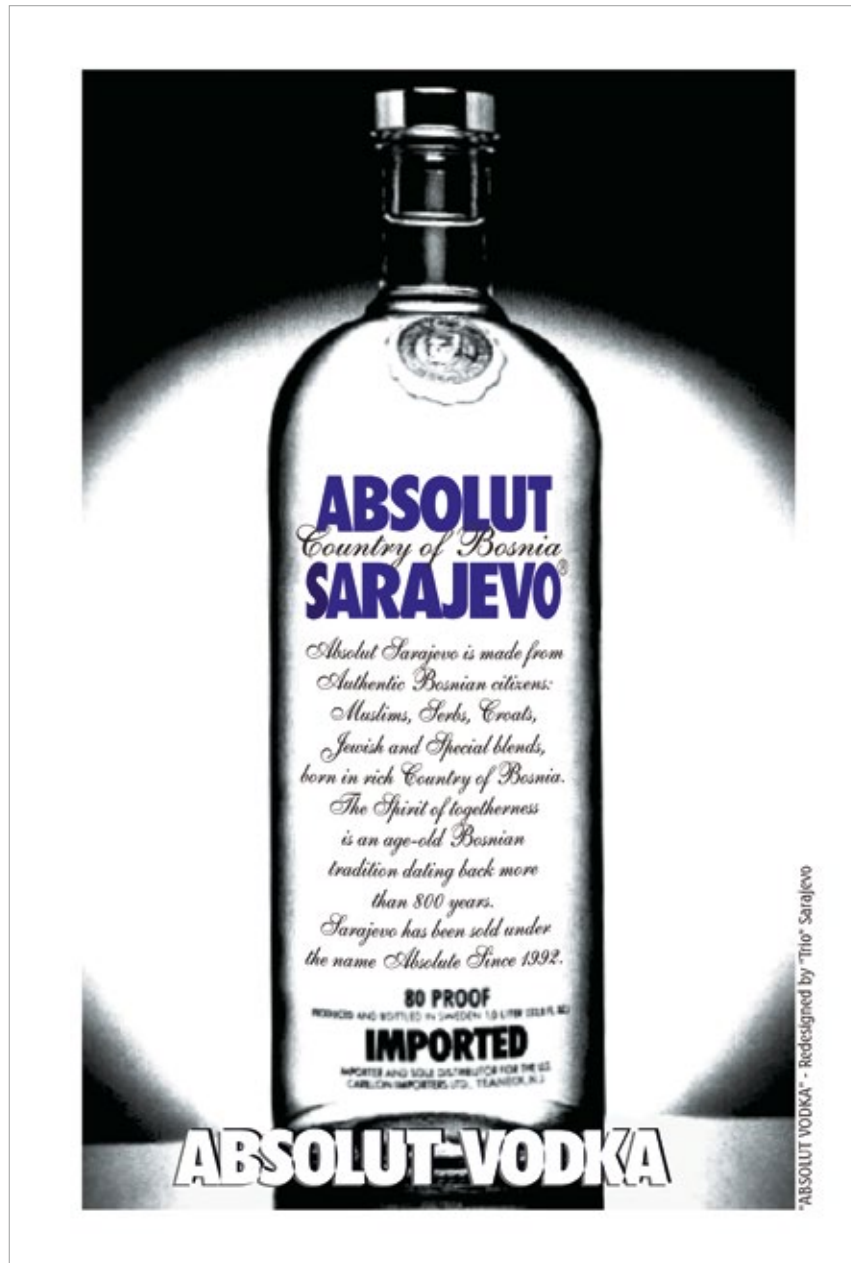
One cannot look at this . . . This is too much! . . . Why?
Francisco Goya, 'The Disasters of War' (1863)

War is the most destructive activity known to humanity. Its purpose is to use violence – plunder, forced migration, wounding, starvation and slaughter – to compel opponents to submit and surrender. Looking closely at military violence can itself be painful: along with Goya, we may simply exclaim, 'This is too much!'

Throughout history, though, the practice and representation of war have been intertwined: the 'art of war' refers both to the strategic aspects of military operations and to its depiction in artistic imaginaries. This is exemplified in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, a treatise dating from the fifth century BC. In it, military strategists are reminded that just as 'in battle, there are no more than two methods of attack – the direct and indirect – yet these two in combination give rise to an endless series of manoeuvres', so, too, 'there are not more than five primary colours . . . yet in combination they produce more hues than can ever be seen.' This global history of war art explores some of the ways artists have blended colours, textures and patterns to depict wartime ideologies, practices, values and symbols. It investigates not only artistic responses to war, but the meaning of violence itself.

Representations and reflections on war are legion. Artists have turned to oil and water paints, pencils and crayons, silk and wool, carved wood,

photographic film, digital technologies and blood. The mark of war has been imprinted on everything from stretched canvases to the fuselages of fighter planes. Cheap and easily reproduced woodcuts and stencils have proven essential to artists everywhere, but particularly to those with a political message to communicate to the masses. Front-line participants in war have carved art from the flotsam of battle – bullets, shell casings and bones – often producing unsettling accounts of the calamity that had overwhelmed them. Tools of cruelty have been turned into testaments of compassion, as in the Mozambique project TAF (Transferring Arms into Ploughshares) in which recycled weapons are crafted into useful farming tools.¹ Civilians have been equally resourceful. Creating ‘art out of rubble’ has engaged the imaginations of millions of people trapped



1 Absolut Vodka redesigned by TRIO Sarajevo, 1994.

in war zones. This includes Sarajevo artists Bojan Hadžihalilović and Dada Dalida Duraković, who used pop designs and icons such as Absolut Vodka, a Campbell's chicken soup can and Superman to comment on the war in Bosnia (illus. 1).² As Izeta Gradevic (director of the Obala Art Centre, an alternative art space in Sarajevo) explained, art is more effective than news reportage in drawing international attention to the plight of ordinary people at war. 'When you face an art form,' Gradevic explained, 'it is not easy to escape death.'³

It is impossible to do justice in one volume to such variety. Attempting to write a global history of *any* phenomenon is necessarily reductive. Human culture is infinitely complex. When the timeframe extends over the two centuries between the Crimean War and the present, there is also a risk of emphasizing similarities over differences. Although there are many shared 'graphical communities',⁴ this must not be exaggerated.

The declaration of war typically triggers practical difficulties for artists. At the very least, the sense of crisis risks relegating the arts to a minor role in society. As Charles C. Ingram, acting president of New York's National Academy of Design, complained in 1861, the 'great Rebellion' had 'startled society from its propriety, and war and politics now occupy every mind'. He lamented that 'No one thinks of the Arts' and even artists had set aside 'the palette and pencil, to shoulder the musket'. He begged artists not to 'in love of country, forget the love of art'.⁵ Those who continue to practise their art often find that the changing circumstances radically constrain their creative enterprises. The state appropriation of space sees exhibition possibilities plummeting. Economic sanctions severely limit the availability of supplies. Japanese artists during the Second Sino-Japanese War, for example, faced restrictions not only of paint, but of materials such as silk, gold and mineral pigments (including semi-precious stones) that had been used to create *Nihonga* or traditional Japanese-style paintings.⁶ Galleries, museums and art studios are reduced to rubble.

Everything from excitable patriotism to down-to-earth curiosity has led millions of artists into the heart of darkness. Some artists were official appointees, sent by their governments to create a record of 'what was happening' or to offer visual slogans to aid morale. Voluntarily engaging in active war service could allow artists to circumvent some of the restrictions created in wartime. In fact, governments often proved willing to support artists who threw themselves into the war effort. As the New York literary journal *The Knickerbocker* extolled at the start of the American Civil War, 'ARTISTS! . . . remember that your elegant brushes are recording the history of a nation.'⁷

This required artists to serve the interests of the collective, however. Many struggled to resolve the tension between artistic freedom and censorship. Was their art supposed to bolster recruitment or demonize the enemy? Were they expected to provide a visual reminder for people back home of the travails of modern combat or to honour those who suffered? Were the two incompatible? Should

their representations of violence aim to reduce the possibility of future carnage? Were they expected to be 'official war artists' (as British artists were called during the First World War) or 'official recorders' (as they were renamed during the first Gulf War)? Even the most message-orientated artist might find that they had little control over the way their images were used. They returned from the front lines to discover that their sketches had been altered or even brazenly distorted by publishers and propagandists.

Was it the job of artists to reconcile people to war? German artist Otto Dix thought not. His painting *Trench* is a searing indictment of the inhumanity of war, but critics were appalled. In the *Kölnische Zeitung*, Cologne's most popular daily paper, Walter Schmits complained that *Trench* weakened 'the necessary inner war-readiness of the people' and offered people 'no moral or artistic gain'. Museums are 'for art . . . not propaganda', he insisted.⁸ An unnamed author writing in the *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* in 1918 agreed that war art should be positive. He argued that it was 'the peculiar function of the imaginative arts' during times of military conflict to 'hint at uncanny meanings, to



2 Saburo Miyamoto, *The Meeting of General Yamashita and General Percival*, 1942, oil on canvas.



3 Tsuguharu Fujita, *Desperate Struggle of a Unit in New Guinea*, 1943, oil on canvas.

reconcile the human spirit to the things which the human flesh must undergo'. It was even more imperative, he continued, for artists to boost morale. To make this point, he told a story about a pet ape whose master dressed him in a silk hat and a high collar. One hot summer the master took pity on his pet and so removed the stifling collar. Immediately the ape 'fell . . . upon all fours and became a wild beast again. He had simply lost his "morale".' The lesson was clear: a similar reversion to the primitive might occur if 'we allow ourselves to be divested of the arts which civilization has evolved'. Art, sculpture, music and literature were essential for the healthy 'morale of the community, the family, and the individual'.⁹

Many artists embraced this role. In Japan, for example, *sensōga* (or Japanese war painting) maintained its well-established propaganda function. Saburo Miyamoto's *Meeting of Commanders Yamashita and Percival* (illus. 2) is a powerful example. The painting shows negotiations between Japanese and British generals during the surrender in Singapore, one of the most humiliating defeats in the history of the British army. In contrast to the forceful presence of General Tomoyuki Yamashita ('The Tiger of Malaya'), the commander of the forces of the British Commonwealth (Lieutenant General Arthur Percival) is portrayed as cowardly and arrogant. The painting won the Imperial Art Academy Prize for 1943 but, more importantly, it was hoped that it would bolster morale at a difficult point in the war.

The *sensōga* tradition was awkward for artists who sought to depict the horrors of war. Artists became embroiled in controversy when they exhibited more brutal representations of war. In 1943, for example, Tsuguharu Fujita exhibited *Desperate Struggle of a Unit in New Guinea* (illus. 3). It depicts a fierce battle scene based on the defeat of Captain

Yasuda's troops in 1942. Drawn in muddy browns, there are no clear distinctions between combatants on either side. War hurts. Everyone. Although military commentators praised the realism of the work, even using it to encourage kamikaze pilots,¹⁰ others were disparaging. Ishii Hakutei, one of the founders of the *sōsaku hanga* (creative print) movement, doubted that the painting would be 'useful . . . in drumming up war spirit'. There was 'a danger that the viewer will sense evil before admiring the loyalty and bravery of the imperial troops'. Previously, he continued, artists 'exercised consideration by not showing dead bodies', despite the fact that 'a war without dead bodies is unthinkable.' Artists like Fujita had gone to an extreme, 'evoking oppressive associations for bereaved families and others'.¹¹

Conscious of the power of representation, governments routinely seek to control the framing of visual messages. During the Second World War, for example, American photojournalism was limited to images produced by members of the Still Photographic Pool, consisting of three major picture agencies (Associated Press, International News Service and Acme Newspictures) and *Life* magazine. As a journalist in *Popular Photography* explained in 1943, all photographs had to be 'cleared officially through Washington before being released to the press'. The 'pool has been a complete success', the journal hastened to reassure readers worried about being manipulated.¹²

Another way the military attempt to control their image is through embedding artists within military units. During the wars of independence, for example, Vietnamese and Cambodian artists were expected to be fully functional 'cultural soldiers of the revolution'.¹³ Not only did artists travel with the army, but an art school was even stationed within the Việt Minh revolutionary planning hideout in the hills of Việt Bắc.¹⁴

In contrast, the free-ranging American artists of the Vietnam War era (immortalized by the photojournalist played by Dennis Hopper in *Apocalypse Now*) and the subsequent public outrage expressed when they showed images of carnage made the military services profoundly wary of civilians near the battlefields. However, official attempts to severely limit the movement of artists and journalists during the first Gulf War also met with indignation. More successful was the Pentagon policy of officially attaching journalists, including photographers and other artists, to military units, where they shared tough training regimes and front-line hardships. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, nearly 600 were embedded with the u.s. and coalition forces.¹⁵ Cynics expressed concern that artists were actually being implanted in the propaganda machine, entrusted with the job of selling the war to the American public and their allies. More hostile voices made snide comments about 'Stockholm syndrome'. In any case, official attempts to either censor or seduce war artists have more recently been undermined by digital technologies and the proliferation of independent producers and distributors, as well as online sharing facilities.

Not all artists who turned their creative energies towards questions of military conflict had links to the armed forces or other governmental bodies. Many identified themselves as independent painters, photographers, printmakers, sculptors, advertisers, graffiti artists or cartoonists who only incidentally addressed the topic of war. Some were journalists, NGOs, international activists and even guerrillas. A large proportion may not have seen themselves as ‘artists’ at all: they made sketches or trench art for their own private purposes and only later did these representations enter the public sphere as ‘art’.

Inevitably, such heterogeneity means that the very term ‘war art’ is intrinsically contested. Not all ‘war art’ focuses on combat. Thousands of official war artists produced paintings and sketches that never hinted at battle, let alone wounds. Indeed, one tradition of war art treats it as a kind of tourist billboard: ‘exotic’ locations are conjured up, strange customs fondly exposed. Nothing could be further from the tradition of war art that insists on the desperate hopefulness of prisoners-of-war or the visceral horrors of trench warfare, the Holocaust or atomic bombardment.

The term ‘war art’ also problematizes the concept of ‘war’. Should art produced in connection to ‘peacekeeping missions’ (in Cyprus or Northern Ireland, for example) be considered ‘war art’? In periods of ‘total war’, where the entire population is engaged in war-work, what is *not* ‘war art’? At the other extreme, many populations are ‘at war’, yet they don’t recognize it. This is the case in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Britain and America, whose armed forces conduct military actions in many parts of the world, yet very few artists living in London or Washington would acknowledge that they live in war capitals.

While the category of ‘war art’ is unclear, it is often assumed that artistic representations of combat represent its exemplary form and that it reached its peak in the nineteenth century. The ‘authenticity’ of combatant-artists is revered: the ability to say ‘I was there’ and so ‘*this* is what it looked like’ is powerful. Art critic and dealer Robert Ross was adhering to this ‘authenticity myth’ in a letter addressed to the novelist Arnold Bennett in 1918. He observed that C.R.W. Nevinson’s *Harvest of Battle* might seem fanciful ‘to older people’, but soldiers ‘who know nothing of art (and are therefore the best judges)’ claim that it represents ‘the spirit of the war better than anyone else’s’.¹⁶ The actor Leon M. Lion agreed. In a talk given at the Watford Labour Church entitled ‘The Importance of Art in War-time’ (1920), he argued that Nevinson’s art was ‘implacable in its insistence on the truth, – War as it really is, – and awakening in us precisely that responsive emotion that the artist aimed at’.¹⁷ It was a point that war artists themselves recognized. For example, Dix once used pen and ink to draw a self-portrait of when he was a machine-gun team commander. *This is How I Looked as a Soldier* (1924) shows a grim-faced soldier holding a machine gun: his uniform is torn; there is a bullet-hole in his helmet. The drawing insists on Dix’s membership of the warrior caste, as well as being an assertion of defiance in the face of palpable violence.

This veneration of the artist as ‘witness’ to front-line experiences has two important consequences. The first is a refusal by some galleries and collectors to purchase ‘war art’ when the artist has portrayed scenes that he could not have actually seen. This was the fate of Peter Howson’s extraordinary 1994 painting *Croatian and Muslim*, which depicts a vicious rape during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Although Howson was a government-sponsored war artist, the Imperial War Museum decided not to include his painting in their permanent collection on the grounds that Howson could not have witnessed the rape that he painted on his canvas. It was not sufficiently ‘authentic’. As Paul Gough explains, the painting

polarized two schools of thought: those that felt it necessary to depict the true face of warfare using whatever means available to an artist, and those who argued that an artist must bear witness, ocular not just circumstantial, to a scene of horror before committing it to canvas.¹⁸

In other words, ‘bearing witness’ requires a certain kind of fidelity to the ‘scene of war’ as *seen*. Manipulating war environments for artistic purposes was disparaged, if not scandalous. Famous exposés of artistic ‘stage management’ involved two photographers from the American Civil War, Alexander Gardner and Timothy H. O’Sullivan, who are believed to have moved bodies and objects before taking their now-famous photographs.¹⁹ The debate about whether Robert Capa faked *The Falling Soldier: Loyalist Militia at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936* still incites passion on both sides (illus. 4). Of course, one of the consequences of this emphasis on ocular authenticity is that innumerable acts of war – most notably, as Howson discovered, wartime rape – would rarely, if ever, enter the war canon. By definition, raped women (and men) are rendered invisible.



4 Robert Capa, *The Falling Soldier: Loyalist Militia at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*.



5 Lady Butler (Elizabeth Thompson), *Calling the Roll after an Engagement*, 1874, oil on canvas.

This implicit hierarchy of war art – the closer the artist is to ‘the action’, the more ‘authentic’ – has another significant implication: it largely excludes female artists. It is not only that male artists have been more attracted to military tropes and are significantly more likely to be appointed as official war artists; they are also much more likely to have the type of front-line combat experience that represents the pinnacle of the genre. Gender ideology has frequently constrained female painters to ‘softer’ topics, specifically those associated with women and children on the home front. A feminist politics of representation takes this argument even further, pointing out that war itself is phallic: women artists have a duty to repudiate its destructive fury.

This is not to say that female artists have been absent altogether. Margaret Bourke-White (known as ‘Maggie-the-Indestructible’)²⁰ was the first American female artist to be allowed to work in combat zones and she and Lee Miller (noted for her images of the Blitz, field hospitals in Normandy, the atrocities of Dachau and Buchenwald, and Hitler’s apartment) were distinguished photographers during the Second World War.

Arguably, though, the most influential female war artist of the modern period was the painter Elizabeth Thompson, later Lady Butler. She became an overnight sensation when, in 1874 and at the age of 28, her oil painting *Calling the Roll after an Engagement* was exhibited at the Royal Academy and acquired by Queen Victoria (illus. 5). It showed a company of wounded and exhausted Grenadier Guards after an engagement during the war in the Crimea between 1854 and 1856. The painting changed the genre of war painting by focusing on the ordinary men who suffered in war. She even positioned a dead soldier lying in the snow near the middle of her canvas. Butler’s painting differed from

previous academic paintings in its social realism and anti-heroism. Although her compositions were extremely popular, like many other female artists Butler struggled to maintain her artistic renown after her marriage. Her male successors were able to sketch the 'real' action, near the front lines, while she was forced to make compositions only by interviewing survivors. Her husband's peripatetic life as an army officer and her responsibility for caring for their household (including six children) limited the time she had available for creative pursuits. It is interesting to note that while she constantly referred to her husband's achievements in her memoir, he never referred to her in all 455 pages of his autobiography.²¹

The dominance of male artists in war art has skewed the representation of women in times of war. Women are frequently absent. When they are represented they are typically nurses or nurturers. Some male artists used their portrayals to denounce women's roles. In the art of the Weimar period, for example, women are often represented as 'whores' who spread syphilis. Prominent examples are the corpulent prostitutes who tower over disfigured soldiers in Dix's etchings entitled *Visit to Madame Germaine's in Méricourt* and *Front-line Soldier in Brussels* (both 1924). Such paintings even imply that women might be responsible for the carnage of the war. Might war be proof that women's 'natural' pacifism had failed? Women had not only sent their brothers, husbands and sons to be mutilated or killed, but had profited from the conflict.

From the 1960s the gendered nature of war art underwent dramatic shifts, largely as a result of two phenomena. The first is the rise of feminism within the politically left-wing counter-culture while the second is the increasingly prominent role of women as perpetrators of wartime violence. In the U.S., the war in Vietnam was crucial. In a popular anti-war poster of the 1960s, folk singer Joan Baez and her two sisters pose on a couch under the slogan 'Girls Say Yes to Boys Who Say No' (illus. 6). Although the 'no' in the slogan refers to men who said 'no' to the draft, it is also a sardonic response to the threat of sexual violence in war, in which it is the 'girls' who say 'no' to sexual demands by soldiers. As privileged, white women, Baez and her sisters were, in effect, offering their bodies so that the 'boys' would not end up forcibly 'taking' the bodies of 'foreign' women. Sex was being traded: the message is: 'we will voluntarily give you sex if you don't go to war, where you might rape unwilling women'.

It was a message of sexual liberation (for privileged women) that is no longer plausible during conflicts in which women are profoundly implicated as *aggressors*. Since 9/11 it has been the military services who represent themselves as 'sexually liberated', encouraging young women to say 'yes' to military service, while (foreign) 'boys' say 'no' to the American invasion. One of the most stark artistic critiques of this phenomenon can be seen in Coco Fusco's 2006 performance *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America*. For Fusco, equality feminism – that is, feminism that insists that women should be allowed the same privileges as men – turned feminists into equal-opportunity torturers and killers.

GIRLS SAY YES



to boys who say NO



Proceeds from the sale of this poster go to The Draft Resistance.

6 Unidentified postermaker, *Girls Say Yes to Boys Who Say No*, c. 1968, photomechanical lithograph.