War Photography: The Anti-War Impasse

How do we respond to suffering in the present without the benefit of historical distance? Amir Nassar suggests we reconsider how we engage with images of suffering.

/ Amir Nassar February 12, 2026

What does an image of a war-torn body look like? Or an image of a pivotal historical watershed moment? To gain a better understanding, we can turn to the war photography of Robert Capa (1913-1954), one of the founders of the esteemed Magnum Photos agency, alongside Henri Cartier-Bresson, Maria Eisner, and others. Stationed in Spain during its civil war - a bloody period in the nation's history - Capa also documented major events, such as World War II. His most famous photograph, *The Falling Soldier* (1936), seemingly captures the exact moment bullet strikes a soldier, his body crumpling in mid-air, a life extinguished before our eyes. For Capa's generation, such images carried a sense of urgency, stirring viewers to action, as if the photograph itself were a witness calling for peace. Yet in hindsight, and in light of mounting evidence that *The Falling Soldier* may have been staged, our trust in this moment - and in photography as a medium - becomes unsettled. As Susan Sontag writes, "The photographs we are particularly dismayed to find out have been posed are those that appear to record intimate climaxes, above all, of love and death"1. If authenticity is fragile, can we trust what we see at all?

Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936



[1]Robert Capa, Death of a Loyalist Soldier (The Falling Soldier), 1936

This article examines the complex relationship between war photography, truth, and the limits of empathy. Drawing on Sontag's book Regarding *The Pain Of Others* (2003), I argue that while war photography is often framed as an anti-war instrument/medium, its effectiveness in preventing war remains uncertain. Through the case study of Capa's *The Falling Soldier*, I question the assumptions we hold about the authenticity of images and the ethical responsibilities of photographers, subjects, and viewers alike. Ultimately, I propose that we must reconsider how we engage with images of suffering - especially in the digital age, where the flood of images risks desensitization - and reflect on the enduring tension between witnessing and acting in the face of war.

At first glance, it seems obvious that war photography aims to prevent war - by showing the consequences of violence, it appeals to our shared humanity. The logic goes: if we see the horrors of war, we will be moved to stop it. Capa's images, with their stark depictions of trenches, maimed bodies, and battlefields, seem to embody this logic. Yet Sontag cautions against taking this assumption for granted. As she writes, "The appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked."2 War photographs, then, may satisfy a certain voyeuristic curiosity rather than instigate meaningful action. Furthermore, Sontag reminds us, "To photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude"3 —every image is a construction, a selective snapshot that leaves much unseen.

When it comes to war photography, perhaps we cannot entirely dispense with the question of authenticity - this is, after all, what gives such images their power. If we were to discard authenticity as a requirement, we might as well turn to cinema, the so-called "big brother" of photography, where storytelling and constructed reality are part of the form. Films such as *Come and See* (1985), directed by Elem Klimov, often cited as one of the most harrowing anti-war films ever made, depict the psychological devastation of war through the eyes of a Belarusian boy, confronting viewers with surreal, nightmarish imagery that resists glorification. Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) presents a scathing critique of military authority, highlighting the absurdity of war and the inhumanity of those who orchestrate it from a distance. Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) takes a more philosophical approach, exploring the tension between nature's indifference and human violence, and questioning whether war is an inherent part of the human condition. Yet even these films, though rooted in historical realities - Come and See is based on the German occupation of Byelorussia during World War II - are not subject to the same demands of authenticity as photographs are. The moving image allows for an aesthetic distance, a mediated form of engagement, while photography claims to show us the "real".

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[3]A frame from the movie Come and See, (1985).

Alexey Rodionov, cameraman,
From Russian Wikipedia.

[Theatrical poster for the American release of Paths of Glory (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1957).] **[4]**



[5]Theatrical poster for the American release of Paths of Glory (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1957).

As Sontag writes in *On Photography*, “There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera”.[4] The photographer’s gaze has the power to frame, to immortalize, and at times to exploit. The subject of the photograph - often a victim - is captured at their most vulnerable, while the photographer maintains a position of control, and the viewer remains at a safe distance.[5]

There is always an ethical responsibility at stake somewhere. When it comes to “the other,” this is precisely what defines our ethics and codes of behavior. Without the presence of an ‘other’ - without the capacity to be addressed by their suffering - there is no framework for ethical action. As Emmanuel Levinas argued, it is the very face of the other that calls us into ethical relations. Yet today, it is increasingly difficult to maintain that sense of responsibility. In an age of dopamine-fueled, screen-mediated interactions, it becomes all too easy to grow numb. Perhaps the task is to cultivate a sense of distance - a critical distance - not to withdraw from engagement, but to temper the rush of stimulation and remain alert to our obligations.

Sontag’s perspective offers a sobering realization: “Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers.”[6] Photographs may provoke momentary outrage or empathy, but whether they lead to lasting action is far from certain. Instead, they often haunt us: “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us.”[7]

Our modes of engagement have shifted dramatically. In the past, viewers might have encountered war photography in the quietude of an exhibition or a carefully curated book, as Sontag details in her own examples. Today, however, there is little space for sustained reflection. A 30-second snippet of footage from a war zone is swiftly followed by a clothing ad or a trending meme. The way we receive

and process such information has fundamentally changed, as the constant churn of images risks dulling our capacity for an ethical response.

Looking back at history is, of course, a privileged position. What we struggle to comprehend through the fog of the present becomes clearer to our descendants — this has always been the case, and it likely will remain so. Yet even in hindsight, there is still a sense of urgency in what we see. The question persists: how do we respond to suffering in the present without the benefit of historical distance? And can we translate the images that haunt us into something more than passive consumption?

To return to the original question: can photography prevent war? Perhaps not directly. Sontag writes that while photographs may provoke outrage or horror, “they are not much help if the task is to understand.” They document, shock, and haunt[8] - but whether they can lead to structural change is uncertain. Yet if we abandon the hope that images can stir us to action, we risk cynicism and apathy. The challenge is not merely to look, but to act, to interrogate the power structures embedded in the images we consume, to remain alert to the suffering of others, and to resist the impulse to scroll past without reflection.

Having outlined this argument on the potential and limits of war photography, how do we approach the same subject today? Are we still engaged to the same extent as earlier generations, or has our visual environment fundamentally changed? Contemporary war photography still relies on traditional practices, such as photojournalists traveling to conflict zones to portray ongoing violence. These images continue to circulate through exhibitions, museums, and news media. Yet they now coexist with the constant flood of digital images that reaches us in real time, a saturation that has, to some degree, dulled our capacity to respond. Our task today is to counter that effect and to recover a capacity for empathy when engaging with and reflecting on the suffering of others.

- 1. Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Penguin Books, 2003, 47.
- 2. Ibid, 34.
- 3. Ibid, 39.
- 4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin Books, 2002, 7.
- 5. When it comes to AI-generated images, the stakes change entirely. This is perhaps a topic best left for another paper, as the ethics of synthetic imagery present their own challenges, distinct from those of photography and cinema.
- 6. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 88.
- 7. Ibid, 78.
- 8. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 77.

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