MICHIGAN WAR STUDIES REVIEW
MiWSR.COM

2015–083

Peter Walther, *The First World War in Colour*. Köln: Taschen, 2014. Pp. 383. ISBN 978–3–8365–5418–3.

Review by Donald Lateiner, Ohio Wesleyan University (dglatein@owu.edu).

Walther organizes his volume[1] of about 320 selected images in chronological sequence, but the on-the-spot presence of the few photographers who worked with color technology determine coverage, not the importance of the World War I events they witnessed (or staged). The images, even those of severed limbs as well as of crushed cathedrals, are haunting and often beautiful. Unexpected subchapters deliver scenes from the Russian front (Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii, photographer to the last Tsar and of Leo Tolstoy), the North African front (Albert Samama-Chikli), and the Palestinian front including the Camel Corps (Frank Hurley). This last pioneer (1885–1962) was from August 1917 the first official photographer of the Australian army—after six Antarctic expeditions (including Shackleton's)—and again an official photographer for the Australian armed forces in World War II.

Walther briefly introduces the history of color photography with James Clark Maxwell (1861), then the three-color process, and the Lumière brothers' autochrome (color) process dating from 1907. The Parisian banker Albert Kahn (1860–1940) financed the largest ethnographic photo project undertaken to its day, Les Archives de la Planète—over one hundred expeditions to fifty countries. Many of his photographers "shot" the war, sometimes in color.[2] Walther's annalistic framework gives way to subchapters usually devoted to one photographer's oeuvre in one location. The resulting volume remains valuable but does not chronicle the war on all its fronts. Appendices provide brief biographies of the photographers and the writers Walther quotes, both famous and relatively unknown: for example, André Gide, Wilfred Own, Ernst Jünger, and Stefan Zweig. Their letters are effectively excerpted—"The connection between yesterday and tomorrow is fundamentally broken."[3]

The Great War attracted civilian, military, propagandist, and press photographers. Pocket cameras supplemented larger professional models producing black and white images. Color images required unmoving subjects. The extant color corpus surprisingly enriches the photographic record of mechanized, man-made European catastrophes, especially in Belgium and France. Nine million were dying a century ago—shot, bombed, and poisoned by chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas. Poison gas lobbed from both sides sometimes killed the gassers, when the wind changed.

The "paralyzed fronts" of 1915 yielded ungracefully to the renewed slaughters of 1916. The few hundred yards of one day's gain at the Somme cost nearly twenty thousand British young men's lives (125) and those of 310,000 altogether in this conflict. And then the gain was lost. At Verdun in ten months of 1916, Walther writes, perhaps "350,000" soldiers perished (139); it was more than 650,000 counting both sides).[4] In February and March 1917, the first Russian Revolution compromised that damaged nation's combat dependability for the Allies. Internal upheavals pitted Soviets against monarchists and other parties, although Russia managed to remain in the war, more or less, for yet another year, until March of 1918. Nearly a full two years after a German submarine had torpedoed and sunk a Cunard ship (May 1915), the "fastest and largest" ocean

1. Orig. *Der Erste Weltkrieg in Farbe* (Köln: Taschen, 2014).

2. When Kahn's fortune declined in the 1930s, the Departement de la Seine acquired his thousands of autochromes. A garden and museum now occupy his estate – www.miwsr.com/rd/1514.htm.

3. Roger Martin du Gard, letter of 27 Aug 1917 (243).

4 See Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (NY: Holt, 1994) 300. For more photographs and art work from World War I, see Hew Strachan, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2014). Jane Carmichael's *First World War Photographers* (NY: Routledge, 1989) discusses the opportunities and controls faced by photographers, especially those allied with the British. The British Naval establishment disliked the very idea of photographers on board, as Rear Admiral Sir Douglas Brownrigg, the Chief Naval Censor, admitted with irritation (98).

liner, RMS *Lusitania*, following a suicidal course off the Irish coast, before the somewhat tardily outraged United States entered the war in April 1917 as a "co-belligerent" of the Entente. The British ship had carried munitions, although the British falsely denied this inconvenient, embarrassing truth. Twelve hundred passengers drowned, including 128 Americans, some of them children. At that time, such barbarity was still a potent propaganda weapon in the Allies' heretofore failed attempt to draw in the Americans.[5] American industries were happily profiting from supplying both sides. After the French commander Gen. Robert Nivelle (see handsome portrait on 197) both cut the length and frequency of the poilus' leaves and failed in his extravagant claims for the Chemin des Dames offensive in October 1917, many discontented French troops mutinied. Meanwhile, the British deployed "Mark" series tanks, a new instrument of death whose significance the German military was slow to recognize (only twenty A7Vs ever saw combat). Soon enough, however, despite disarmament, they would engineer the outstanding World War II *Panzerkampfwagen*. Except in twisted, rusty heaps, few trains or other motorized vehicles appear in the color photographs of the ravaged towns (e.g., 248-49, near Soissons, 358-59, near Reims). After another summer of carnage at the Aisne, the Marne, and the Canal du Nord, but only on 9 November 1918, when the German Imperial Army and Navy had mutinied and Berlin was in chaos, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and fled by back roads to exile in Holland. The German officials delegated by a shaky, new government signed an "armistice." Although they blanched at the terms, realizing that they amounted to an unconditional surrender, they had no real alternatives as both German politicians and generals recognized.[6]

All sides banned press photographers in August 1914. Civilian photojournalism seemed more a threat than an opportunity. Some fronts, for instance, sub-Saharan colonial Africa, were seldom photographed, even in black and white. No color photographs of the war at sea are known; in fact, even black-and-white images are scarce, aside from some grainy shots of the titanic struggle of battleships at Jutland Bank (31 May–1 June 1916).

British authorities banned servicemen from carrying private cameras, but the Germans did not. The photographers' war conveyed each side's material and moral strength but also aimed to sway citizens of neutral states. Some of the color images were reproduced as postcards, but the public usually saw war pictures only in half-tone black and white. The photographer's kit—boxes, plates, tripods, lenses, chemicals—weighed at least thirty pounds (16). Small, inexpensive telephoto lenses had not been developed. Since their subjects had to hold still for six seconds in bright light—no easy thing during combat maneuvers—early war photographers could work more easily during the troops' pauses for eating or recovery.

Other books have tapped the extant half million black-and-white images of the war. Mark Holborn and Hilary Roberts have recently assembled a photographic "narrative" from the British Imperial War Museums' collections of the work of British, French, German, Italian, Australian, and American photographers.[7] Traffic in national, authorized, and sanctified mass murder can still shock viewers. Industrialized warfare has spared few or no innocents from Arras in 1917 to Hiroshima in 1945 and present-day Iraq and Syria. But we find photos and videos of ISIS beheadings more disturbing than radio-controlled drone murders of oblivious children at play on the far side of the world.

Almost ten million troops marched to war in 1914. The German strategy of speedy maneuver warfare (*Bewegungskrieg*) soon stalled and devolved into protracted and static trench warfare.[8] The front line barely budged from the beginning to the end of the war. At the Marne, the French Zouaves' colorful garb made them conspicuous targets for German machine-gunners, and survivors soon changed their colors. Moroccans, Algerians, Indochinese (237), Senegalese, and Sudanese riflemen aided the French forces. The handsome and handsomely putteed generals Robert Nivelle and later Philippe Pétain, "the lion of Verdun" (136–37), commanded them all. POWs had the time to pose, as did the dead in their graves row on row (e.g., 77,

---

5. Gilbert (note 4 above) 157–58, 205.

6. Ibid., 517. I thank an anonymous critic for comments improving this paragraph.

7. *The Great War: A Photographic Narrative* (NY: Knopf, 2013).

8. Men in neat or muddy trenches—eating, reading mail, killing time—feature prominently (e.g., 92–93).

162, 99). Shiny motorcycles, bus-ambulances, balloons, and airplanes (102–11) grace color images as does the bombed out rubble of Châtillon-sur-Morin or Rethel (49, 87). Wounded troops sport immaculate bandages at field hospitals and dressing stations (259, 335); punished troops peel potatoes and carrots (293).

The Great War cast a shadow on the twentieth century. The reporting of the war in words and pictures was always mediated by patriotic, mercenary, and propagandistic motives. Conscious and subliminal personal and consumer tolerances and the censors' shifting parameters determined what images were captured and preserved.[9] Then as now, one did not, could not, ought not display one's own dead countrymen,[10] felled in their myriads by machine guns, flame-throwers, and poison gas—so the thinking went and goes. Handsome hardcover publications now offer introductions, images and captions, chronologies, and implied or explicit forlorn hopes—"never again." Mostly spurious atrocity photos—always of the other side's barbarities—circulated widely on all fronts. Photographers were staging scenes already in the American Civil War. The limitations posed by color processes, depth of field problems, and slow film speeds required the cooperation of most living subjects. No "Falling Soldier" photograph[11] had yet been taken.

Walther has included the work of now forgotten masters of chromatic photography. The Frenchmen Paul Castelnau (1880–1944) and Jean-Baptiste Tournassoud (1866–1951) photographed Reims, near the front, for years, providing a French view of cities shattered by the "pirate Huns." Castelnau worked for Kahn's astonishing Archives de la Planète, photographing and filming buildings and cultures around the world. He documented daily life at the front, mostly during summer 1917. In the Second World War, he was accused of German collaboration and executed (on uncertain evidence). Léon Gimpel (1873–1948) took a surreal series of photos of French children's war games in Paris (112–22) complete with cannon, aircraft, and the "execution" of a POW. Hans Hildenbrand (1870–1957) was the sole official Central Powers color photographer, so his pictures of Champagne (84–101) represent the only color images from the German point of view. Photos of victory parades in London and Paris (366–67) provide a coda of happy mobs blessedly ignorant of the slaughter impending two decades hence.

In general, the documentary impulse yields to the artistic in these color images. The two genres are not incompatible, to be sure. Peter Walther's book is a valuable curiosity, expanding our awareness of early color photography and some of the geniuses behind the cameras. Each image reproduced in it deserves careful contemplation. Though its hit-or-miss purview means it will not be the first or only book of World War I images a student should peruse, *The First World War in Colour* has no competitors for what it colorfully delivers.

—revised 12 Oct 2015

9. Many plates were destroyed by bombing in World War II.

10. Werner Beumelburg et al. published three massive, hard-to-find volumes from the German archives with unsparing images of cratered landscapes, twisted bridges, and dead combatants and animals: *Der Weltkrieg im Bild* (Berlin: Verl. "Der Weltkrieg im Bild," 1926).

11. I.e., the iconic snapshot taken in 1936 by the Hungarian Endre Friedmann (better known as Robert Capa) in the Spanish Civil War. The authenticity of this photo of a running combatant at the instant the bullet strikes his head continues to be fiercely disputed.