

John Whiting's Album of the Great War in Palestine

Issam Nassar

War photography is as old as photography itself. The first pictures we have date from the Crimean War (1853-1856), which started less than two decades after the “official” invention of photography in 1839. Photographic images were also used to document the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Great War of 1914. And, even though some of the images that we have from these two wars were actually staged, they all remain important historical documents.¹ They provide us with concrete information regarding the logistics of the war while suggesting possible motivations and/or intentions on the part of the photographers. In what follows, I will examine a number of images of the Palestinian front during World War I that are currently in the archives of the Library of Congress.

Given the importance of photographs as a primary source for the study of war history, it seems surprising that so few historians use them in their research. Photographs capture a moment that already passed and, yet, remains fixed for us to see, as it appeared to the camera when the lens shutter clicked. In this sense, photographs can tell almost as much of what we see in them as of what we do not. They display important elements to the historians, such as clothing styles, tools and weapons, and enrich our historical imagination. Perhaps even more significantly, they capture what we could call the “aura of history.”

As we all know, the Great War – also called the first “total war” – was fought on many fronts. Despite the large amount of territory it covered, it was heavily photographed. However, not all the war theaters received the same degree of attention. Images of soldiers in their trenches, charred bodies on the western front, together with pictures of leaders in full



“Removing French Post Box, at the time of the abrogation of foreign capitulations.” *Source: Library of Congress.*



The first photo in the album showing “Buyuk [Great] Jamal Pasha, on the shore of the Dead Sea, May 3rd, 1915.” *Source: Library of Congress.*

military attire are widely available even nowadays, close to a century after the cannons fell silent in November of 1918. On the eastern front, the British and the French also utilized photography, perhaps to a larger extent than the Ottomans, though the latter did employ it.

The two photographic albums of John Whiting kept at the Library of Congress present an example of photographic documentation from the Ottoman side and later the British side. Dedicated to Whiting and his wife Grace, the albums are fully devoted to Palestine and Sinai in 1915 to 1917. Whiting himself was a photographer at the photo department of Jerusalem's American Colony, and might be the one who shot most, if not all, the photographs in the albums.²

In 1915, following the establishment of the Jerusalem branch of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society under the leadership of then dismissed mayor Hussein al-Husseini, Whiting was commissioned by the society to document its activities. It was in this capacity that he managed to document soldiers' lives at the Palestine and Sinai fronts. The first of the two albums is fully devoted to the Ottoman war scene, while the second covers the war after the British occupied Jerusalem.³

The first album contains 243 photos. A large number of them are directly related to military activities, as some are of locations near the battlefields. The pictures of flotillas in the Dead Sea, for instance, showing the transporting of grain from the eastern shores, document an activity that was crucial to the troops at the time of the great famine. The British naval blockade, the invasion of the locusts in 1915, and the war economy were the main reasons for the famine. In the same way, the few pictures showing the shutting down of foreign postal services in Jerusalem are war photographs. Shutting down the postal services was the result of the government's decision to annul the capitulation agreements that brought those services to the land.

Still, the core of the collection in the album is devoted to field activities with soldiers, medical staff and officials occupying center stage.

The album appears to be chronologically organized as well as carefully planned. Starting with a portrait of Jamal Pasha, the leader of the Fourth Ottoman Army, and moving on to the "celebrations" held in support of the war effort, the album chronicles the activities of soldiers in trenches pointing their guns, and shows medical staff posing for the camera. Together the pictures in the album tell a story in what appears to be an official narrative presenting the leader, the jubilant population, the marching soldiers and the medics at the front, as if it was a story of success.⁴

In this short contribution, I am unable to discuss the entirety of the album; this task will need to wait for a more elaborate essay that I hope to write in the near future. Nonetheless, there are certain features to the album in general that I would like to draw attention to. The first is the large number of staged photographs in the collection. Most pictures that involve the troops, I believe, were staged. They show soldiers in what appears to be military engagement, like lining up in trenches on their stomachs pointing their guns at what seem to be enemy positions. Others show soldiers, or officers, standing in individual or group portraits in front of official buildings or their encampments. While with the latter, staging is rather obvious in the way soldiers are



“Infantry lines, north of Jerusalem, near Nabi Samuel.” *Source: Library of Congress.*



“Last Review by Jamal Pasha & Von Kress in Jerusalem, 1917.” *Source: Library of Congress.*

lined up against a careful choice of settings, the staging is less apparent in the former. Nonetheless, an examination of such photographs will also reveal a level of staging. While soldiers are keeping low in the trenches, possibly in order to suggest that they were trying to avoid enemy fire, the angle from which the photos were taken suggests that the camera was placed on a higher level, with its operator standing in full view. If enemy fire was a concern, then a photographer standing in clear view of the enemy outside the trenches would have been in grave danger. The soldiers appear ranged in neat rows, and the fact that they all assume positions that do not block other soldiers is another indication that the pictures were taken with plenty of time to arrange their subjects and during non-combat moments. The smiling faces or relaxed postures of some of the soldiers also suggest that the kind of stress associated with combat is actually absent.

Still, the careful planning of the images does not deem them fake or unworthy of our consideration. To start with, they are pictures on location and the individuals appearing in them are genuine soldiers who were stationed at the particular photographed places. Their military status is apparent; the weapons they hold are the ones they used in combat; and the trenches were dug up in anticipation of battle.

The same is true of pictures where medical staff also pose to the camera, or engaged in treating a patient in a Jerusalem hospital or at a field hospital. The lack of overlapping bodies coupled with the stiffness in which they were photographed also suggest staging.

However, other photographs, which show troops in military formations or marching through Jerusalem or other locations, do not suggest any form of staging beyond the choice of vantage point and timing.

A number of pictures depict leaders and officers during their visits to Palestine or to the front. Photographs of the visit of Enver Pasha to Jerusalem accompanied by Jamal Pasha, or poses by famous doctors (such as Dr. Tawfiq Kanaan), other officers (such as Jamal II), governor Zaki Bey or Nashat Bey, are informative regarding the war efforts as well as significant for portraying eminent individuals at key moments of their careers.

With the exception of a few pictures in which injured soldiers display their wounds to the camera, the core of the collection in the album illustrates great organization and readiness for the war. Going back to the issue of the narrative told by the album, one would find it to be more a piece of visual propaganda than actual coverage of the war and its high cost. The album itself is organized in a “patriotic” fashion that presents a rather heroic narrative. Granted, the photographer’s assignment was to document the work of the Red Crescent Society – perhaps in order to illustrate the significance of their contribution to war efforts. However, the narration itself appears to be more beneficial to the army and the officers in charge than it would be for a relief agency like the Red Crescent.

Was the album produced at the request of Jamal Pasha or one of his top leaders in Jerusalem? The answer is not easily apparent. That certainly is a possibility,



“Nashat Bey, & Red Crescent Staff at the English Hospital, Jerusalem, 1917.” *Source: Library of Congress.*



“Akif Bey, Red Crescent surgeon, and nurses, 1917.” *Source: Library of Congress.*

especially in light of a claim made by a member of the colony's photo department that they were indeed the official photographers of Jamal Pasha.⁵ However, such a claim has not been fully substantiated. Additionally, we have many other photographs of the army and of Jamal Pasha that were taken by other Jerusalem based photographers such as Khalil Raad.⁶

In conclusion, I would like to make two significant points in connection with the photographs themselves, rather than with the album as narrative. The first relates to the fact that war photographs constitute one more arena in which image manipulation was practiced. What we see in the pictures was carefully planned ahead of time for our benefit. Nothing that relates directly to the plight of the soldiers or to actual combat is presented. Rather, photographers created an alternative reality aimed at feeding the viewers an ideologically framed perspective. In other words, what we see does not fully reflect the material conditions that prevailed at the military camps or the battlefield. The second point is that the absence of an "authentic" war experience in the photos does not render them unimportant. On the contrary, being images of actual soldiers, leaders and locations, they enable us to experience the aura of the time period both as reflected in the details of the photos and in the photographic ideological intention behind them. The aura highlights actual people who would eventually engage in warfare and their surroundings. At the same time, it projects the image that, in all likelihood, their leader would have wanted them to offer: that of a group of heroes about to undertake the grand mission of reclaiming Egypt.

Issam Nassar is Associate Professor of History at Illinois State University and co-editor of Jerusalem Quarterly. His most recent publications on photography are Gardens of Sand, edited with Clark Worswick and Patricia Almarcegui (TurnerPhoto: Middle East, October 2010), and I Would Have Smiled: Photographing the Palestinian Refugee Experience, co-edited with Rasha Salti (Jerusalem: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2009).

Endnotes

- 1 It is possible that staged photographs were also used in the Crimean war. However, I am not aware of any studies that point that out.
- 2 Whiting was the son of Americans who moved to Jerusalem to be part of the original group of founders of the Colony. He was born in the city in 1882. The American Colony opened its photography department in 1898 under the directorship of Elijah Meyers, one of its most notable members. Meyers had taken up the practice of photography before the department was founded. The Swede Lars (Lewis) Larson eventually emerged as the lead person in the

department and Whiting, along with others including Eric Matson, was one of its leading photographers. Information on the history of the American Colony and its photo department are available at the website of the Library of Congress at: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/cpllection/matpc/background.html>

- 3 For more information, see the above site as well as: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/acquisitions-adds.html#whiting>
- 4 The album can be accessed online at: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.13709>. All the photographs appearing here are from that

- album and are copyrighted to the library of Congress.
- 5 This appears in the text written by Larson. I was unable to see the original sources for myself or find the correct reference information for it. All I have is a photocopy of a page from Larson's papers sent to me by a colleague.
 - 6 A number of images available at the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut taken by Raad show similar photographs to the ones described above as well as of Jamal Pasha appearing in front of the camera. It is possible that Raad was commissioned by the photo department to produce such pictures on their behalf. Still, this is merely a possibility to which I have no documentation to substantiate.