H-France Review Vol. 21 (July 2021), No. 109

Daniel Foliard, *Combattre, punir, photographier: Empires coloniaux, 1890–1914*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2020. 455 pp. Bibliography. €23.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2348059636; €15.99 (eb). ISBN 9-78-2348059643.

Review by Will Fysh, University of Warwick.

Combattre, punir, photographier is a superb study of British and French colonial photography and violence at the height of imperial expansion in Africa and Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on an impressive range of official and private archives and museum holdings across France, Britain, South Africa, Morocco, and beyond, Foliard reveals how shifting photographic practices in the colonies shaped differing thresholds of so-called just violence and established important tropes of conflict photography before the First World War.

The book focuses on three groups of images: photographs of the so-called *petites guerres* on colonial frontiers, as well as campaigns on the margins of informal empire, such as the Boxer Rebellion in China, photographs of the suffering and physical constraints inflicted as part of ongoing, post-conquest acts of colonial repression, and other conflict photography that intersected with visual developments in the European colonial confrontations, such as the Russo-Japanese and Balkans Wars. Throughout *Combattre, punir, photographier*, "images are understood…not as proofs but as a process" (p. 12). Deeply attentive to historical contingencies, Foliard builds on Deborah Poole's useful model of "visual economy" to understand the history of photography in its material, as well as representational circulations.[1] This approach enriches the book's exploration of the different viewerships, contexts of reception, and technological innovations that changed the meanings of colonial photographs and the possibilities of their production.

The nine chapters chart *une histoire croisée* of British and French colonial conflict photography--not a rigid comparison, Foliard emphasizes, but a consideration of interrelations and networks that evolved together. Chapter one explores the mechanisms of repulsion and erasure in the photography of colonial violence, introducing major themes of the book such as the relationship between the singular image and the image series, the gaps in the archives of histories of violence, and how photography made different kinds of violence visible. Chapter two looks at photographic equipment as a physical form of invasion and control in spaces of colonial expansion, and at how subjects could sometimes undermine or redirect the dominance of the colonial camera, even in defeat. Chapters three and four trace the history of camera operators and their techniques as they developed during colonial expansion and related situations, showing how people and practices crossed professional and geographical borders, creating new visual rhetorics of violence. Chapter

five explores the different regimes of visibility of colonial photography, highlighting the unstable production and distribution frameworks through which images were circulated, filtered or hidden. Chapter six extends that analysis of instability, examining how photography escaped its designated frames of authorship, control and audience, and how photographic manipulations and reframings influenced the meanings of violence. Chapters seven and eight zoom in specifically on the body in conflict. Chapter seven illustrates how images of enemy bodies, both dead and alive, became understood as messages. Chapter eight offers the verso to the trophy image of the enemy, showing how the bodies of comrades were photographed, commemorated and instrumentalized in the colonies and in Europe. Finally, chapter nine shifts the focus to metropolitan reception and how political and journalistic culture could facilitate or prevent reflections on images of violence in the years before 1914.

The *histoire croisée* approach to French and British ideas and practices of colonial violence and order, following Martin Thomas and others, is an especially rich one for the study of colonial photography.[2] To be sure, the images themselves offer ways of analyzing similarities and differences between British and French experiences. But the approach also helps make sense of the trajectories of the photographers involved, whose careers criss-crossed different colonial and non-colonial settings, as well as the changes in photographic practice, from the systematization of photo production in British India in the wake of the 1857 Rebellion, for example, through the early professionalization of French military photography in Tonkin in the 1880s, to Gallieni's vision in 1890s Madagascar for a total picture of conquest and aftermath.

Despite the difficulties of working with colonial photographic production and circulation histories that are often fragmentary if not irrecoverable, *Combattre, punir, photographier* makes a number of compelling arguments about the relationship between photography and colonial violence, and the centrality of the colonial sphere to the broader history of photography. The book charts two distinct periods in the expansion of colonial photography in the decades before the First World War. The first, between 1890 and 1899, involved the blurring of old boundaries. Here Foliard stresses the "porosity" of roles--someone behind the camera could be a doctor, officer and topographer all at same time--as well as the "porosity" of empires as media and camera operators reflected and built on others' practices (pp. 147-155). The second period, from 1900 to 1914, saw the fixing of three new norms: the emergence of war photographic reportage as a distinct enterprise, the invention through photography of the victim of modern mass violence, and the separation of military photography from older forms of writing, topography and sketching. These shifts, Foliard explains, were fueled by a major expansion of colonial photography towards the end of the nineteenth century. The global reach and overlapping conquest and so-called pacification campaigns of the new imperialism, technical advances that democratized photography, and changes in press culture and printing techniques reflecting increasing demands for realist representations of events, all contributed to a new expectation that the camera could and should go anywhere and everywhere.

Photography went global, but Foliard reminds us that colonial settings nurtured specific forms of photography and violence. The book helps us think through the relationship between colony, metropole, and globe by showing how an emphatically public visibility of violence, and a relative lack of formalized controls over photographic production, made colonial environments laboratories for new visual rhetorics of violence. One of the key factors that marked the new visualization of violence in the colonial sphere was a widespread strategy of photography as humiliation and pedagogical punishment. Colonial dynamics of conflicts deemed irregular--

bolstered by racism, ideas of colonial mentalities in frontier states of exception, expectations of native violence, and the criminalization of resistance--shaped particular photographic responses to conquest, defeat and ongoing pacification. For colonial authorities to translate violence into order, violence, like justice, had to be shown to be done.

A key strength of *Combattre, punir, photographier* is its attention to the variety of experiences within the umbrella term, "colonial," which in turn helps us understand the shifts in reception that determined when and how images of colonial violence were deemed acceptable or outrageous, and by whom (pp. 43-48). Foliard cuts between a wide array of colonial situations, from the French conflict with the Toucouleurs in Soudan and the British repression of *dacoïts* in Burma, to French pacification campaigns in Madagascar, Tonkin, and Morocco, the British South Africa Company's settler violence in Mashonaland and Matabeleland, and the inter-colonial Boer War. The variety of colonial examples in front of the lens is matched by a multiplicity of photographic practices. Foliard eschews simplistic invocations of the image, the photographer, or the viewer. Throughout the book, the photograph as object is treated with impressive nuance, following the specific construction of albums, the inclusion of photographs in family correspondence, postcards and their written notes, variations in printing technique, and practices of modification and manipulation from recontextualization and redistribution to engraving and retouching. The photographers themselves, Foliard emphasizes, took on hybridized roles in the period, crossing divides of amateur and professional, official and commercial, and most interestingly in the case of military operators, doctor and cameraman. Indeed, hybrid photographic forms and operating roles meant that images circulated in multiple orbits, including private albums closely shared with fellow soldiers or with family, organized collections designed for colonial governmental use or for colonial societies in Europe, as well as much wider public distributions in the pages of the metropolitan press.

Foliard's most important interventions are twofold: first, to rethink the early history of the photography of violence from the colonies; and second, to restore the place of important but neglected pre-1914 photographic events in modern histories of war photography, humanitarian photography, and photojournalism. The book foregrounds early, lesser-known examples of war photography practiced *sur le vif*, such as the photographs taken by Charles-Édouard Hocquard as an army doctor assigned to ambulances with the French expeditionary corps in Tonkin in 1883. Likewise, the book lengthens the history of photography's role in sparking metropolitan public furores over colonial violence. Foliard shifts the focus away from the more famous efforts of the Congo Reform Association and photographs by Alice Seely Harris, towards two earlier, foundational episodes that placed photography at the heart of British and French colonial debate. The first was *The Times*' publication of Wallace Hooper's images of the moment of execution of a group of Burmese *dacoïts* in Mandalay in January 1886, and the second was *L'Illustration*'s reproduction of Joannès Barbier's photographs of dead Toucouleur fighters in Soudan in April 1891. Foliard also revises the history of the figure of the unknown soldier, arguing that the commemorative image of anonymous Western death was inaugurated not in the aftermath of the First World War, but at the very beginning of the century by Jan Van Hoepen's "Spions Kop" photograph from the Boer War in 1900 (p. 319). In a wonderful example of the *dérapages*, or slippages, elucidated throughout the book, Foliard traces how the Battle of Spion Kop image shifted its meaning dramatically in circulation. Produced and initially shared as a pro-Boer message of triumph over dead British soldiers, the photograph was subsequently re-appropriated by British viewers as an elegiac memento mori.

In a book that covers so much ground, there is a risk, as Foliard admits, of not doing sufficient justice to all of the historical situations under examination. Overall, the broad scope of *Combattre, punir, photographier* offers a fascinating and much needed re-appraisal of colonial conflict photography writ large. Nevertheless, the conclusion's fascinating sustained reading of the cover image--Raymonde Bonnetain's photograph of her young daughter playing with the skulls of soldiers who fought for Samori Ture in 1890s French West Africa--supports an argument for selecting somewhat fewer episodes and lingering with them a little longer. Likewise, although the *histoire croisée* approach lends the argument an important flexibility as it ranges across colonies in time and space, more in-depth direct comparisons could have proved fruitful. For example, Foliard gives some useful generalized explanations for why mediatized outrage at excesses of colonial violence tended to erupt more in Britain than in France: different military cultures, stronger pacifist and evangelical movements in Britain, and the particular strength of debate between Britain and the United States on issues of photography and violence. However, a more direct and sustained comparison of the Wallace Hooper Affair in Britain and the Barbier Affair in France four years later, for example, might have deepened those generalized explanations.

The question of the particular and the general also arises in the book's treatment of image shock and desensitization. Methodologically, the book is refreshingly sensitive to the ethics of recirculating images of violence. Foliard makes clear from the outset that some particularly disturbing photographs have been left out of the book, especially those that lack archival explanation. And since images do shock, but the intensity, meaning and nature of that shock is historically situated, he stresses the need for the historian to avoid exceptionalizing or fetishizing images. The emphasis on introducing many of the photographs first before showing them, providing further contextualization in separate italicised notes, identifying victims where possible, and pointing to other imperial contexts (e.g. Japanese and Ottoman) to mitigate eurocentrism, helps to arrest the flow of violent images that might otherwise be disarmingly swift. Slowing the images down also avoids artificially naturalizing the selection and arrangement of photographs. Indeed, to denaturalize the serial progressions of images of violence is to make time for the *punctum* in the colonial *studium* (as Barthes might have put it) to become visible again, not just as moments of literal wounding, but occasionally as instances of symbolic puncture, where flashes of resistance or chaos break through the archives of order.

Given the extensive methodological attention to resisting desensitization, however, it is striking that the historical development of desensitization to images of colonial violence, as distinct from toleration and normalization, is only fleetingly explored at the end of the book. We are told that the question of desensitization was debated among writers and journalists in the years prior to the First World War, but it would be fascinating to know more about the specific place of colonial violence in its genealogy. Did images of colonial violence contribute to desensitization due to a metropolitan inability to grieve the lives of racialized, criminalized others? Or did the imagery of colonial violence mitigate against desensitization, either through (relatively) rare outrage at colonial abuses or through the elegiac circulation of what Foliard in chapter eight calls "paper cemeteries"--the photographs of comrades' bodies abandoned without due ritual far from home? In its valuable attention to materiality, circulation and reception, the book occasionally misses out on aspects of the phenomenology of violence in colonial photography.[3]

Combattre, punir, photographier adds crucial historical range to the existing excellent work of scholars of the intersections of colonial violence and photography such as Zahid Chaudhary and

Christina Twomey, and joins a wave of significant new scholarship, including Lorena Rizzo's study of police and prison photography in colonial southern Africa, and Matthew Stanard's reappraisal of the visual culture of the Congo Free State.[4] There are, of course, important avenues for further research, not least the imagery of "ordinary violence,"[5] and sexual violence, as well as more specific gender analyses of colonial photography. However, in its exceptional scope, nuance, and sophisticated linking of histories of photography and violence, this book is a landmark publication in the field and must surely be the go-to for a comprehensive study of early colonial conflict photography. Given its obvious relevance for Anglophone readers, we can only hope it will also appear in English translation very soon.

NOTES

[1] Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[2] Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[3] As brilliantly explored by Zahid Chaudhary, for example, in *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[4] Ibid.; Christina Twomey, "Framing Atrocity: Photography and Humanitarianism," *History of Photography* 36/3 (2012): 255-264; Lorena Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and Matthew Stanard, "Competing Visions: The Visual Culture of the Congo Free State and Fin de Siècle Europe," *Historical Reflections* 46/3 (2020): 101-121.

[5] Sylvie Thénault, *Violence ordinaire dans l'Algérie coloniale* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 2012).

Will Fysh
University of Warwick
Will.Fysh@warwick.ac.uk

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172