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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Scientific discipline: History

Title of the doctoral dissertation: The Imperial Russian Army through the lenses of military and wartime photography in 1914-1917. Between propaganda and realism

Doctoral dissertation abstract: The main goal of this doctoral dissertation is to present the efforts, achievements and failures of Russian military and wartime photography between 1914 and 1917. During the Great War, the Russian Empire was forced to mobilize all of its forces to a previously unprecedented scale. This national mobilization required the support of all available propaganda tools, including photojournalism. War correspondents and photographers were sent to the front, and were expected not only to document the Russian war effort, but also put it in a favourable light. The Tsarist propaganda on that field could be divided into several broad categories: the creation of wartime heroes and presenting their stories to society; presenting the Tzar and his family as directly involved into war effort; documenting the war atrocities committed by the Central Powers; and finally - showing the "realistic" face of modern warfare. Because of this, a certain compromise had to be made - the Russian photographers tried to capture the "true" image of war, but within the censorship and propaganda boundaries. That way, the resulting relation was, broadly speaking, "real", yet also severely distorted. Certain topics that could show the negative aspects of the Russian military effort in bad light were either totally omitted or shown in exaggerated, overly optimistic form. The photographers often stick to unwritten rules - for example, presenting the bodies of fallen Russian soldiers was generally prohibited, yet images of killed Germans were fairly common. Great, though ultimately futile, efforts were put into improving the image of Tzar Nicholas, and when he was dethroned, the propaganda struggled to find a new leader figure that would unite the Russian war effort. All in all, up to late 1917 the war was presented in somewhat optimistic colors, regardless of the actual situation on front.



In general, while compared to the efforts of its allies, the Russian military propaganda machinery was not lacking in terms of used tools and techniques, but was certainly behind in several key aspects. First of all, the numbers of official photographers sent to the frontline were always too low for the vast territories of the Eastern Theater of War. Secondly, the Russians failed to utilize all the possibilities offered by the image - their efforts on that field were often either too late, or too small in scale. In many ways, the Russian photojournalism of the Great War could be considered a wasted potential.

Rafał Mieczkowski

doctoral student's signature