CHAPTER 10

IMAGES OF VIOLENCE IN WEHRMACHT SOLDIERS’ PRIVATE PHOTO ALBUMS

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1. PRIVATE WAR ALBUMS

“Our soldiers are keen photographers, they take a lot of pictures,”¹ the owner of a photo lab told one of his female customers in 1941 as he added photographs by the soldier named Georg into a “sample book” (Musterbuch) of frontline images that could be ordered by every member of the company. The subject matter of this sample book was described as “destroyed villages, farmsteads and sub-humans in Poland,” while in France, Georg’s camera had captured images of “ruins and ethnic types.” The image of the enemy was, therefore, not only disseminated by journalistic propaganda in the daily newspapers and magazines; pictures taken by soldiers were also widely used by camera shops and the photographic trade to promote their products. As early as 1933, Joseph Goebbels called upon an “army of millions of amateur photographers”² to educate the nation according to the principles of National Socialist propaganda, and an appeal published in the journal Photofreund at the beginning of the war added force to this demand: “At this time it is the unconditional duty of every soldier to keep his camera in action.”³

The cheap, lightweight cameras made by Agfa, Kodak, or Voigtländer made it easier for recruits to buy and use them. This resulted in vast numbers of private photographs being produced by soldiers during the Second World War quantitatively equal to the millions of images taken
by the Nazi propaganda units. The occupation of foreign countries
was photographed by the participating soldiers on an unprecedented
scale, and these images were then compiled into their own war-themed
albums. This “pictorial script of the German people” (*Bildschrift des
Volkes*), which the Nazis sought to create was also encouraged by
the provision of readymade war albums bearing Third Reich insignia
(for example, the swastika, oak leaves, or the imperial eagle), in which
the blank pages were preceded by portraits of Hitler, Göring, and
other army generals. Similar to soldiers’ private photographs of the
First World War, the most common images in the Second World War
albums are pictures of the invasion of France and the Soviet Union as
well as photographs of individual sectors of the front and scenes from
the German occupation of these countries.

2. **The Visibility of Violence**

What can be termed a “semi-private” photograph—taken by a propa-
ganda unit photographer named Gerhard Gronefeld (Figure 10.1)—
became an iconic image in the context of the exhibition *Vernichtung-
skrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (*The War of Annihila-
tion: Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941 to 1944*), which was presented in
33 towns and cities in Germany and Austria between 1995 and 1999.
The photograph shows an execution in the Serbian town of Pancevo
in April 1941. Executed civilians lie next to the cemetery wall; in front
of them stands an officer from the *Wehrmacht’s Großdeutschland* regi-
ment with his gun pointed at a dying victim. Next to him is an officer
from the Waffen-SS division *Das Reich*, while in the background other
soldiers can be seen looking on. The photograph is from a series of 50
images of the hanging and shooting of Serbian civilians by the *Wehr-
macht* in Pancevo. They were taken on April 22, 1941, by Gronefeld,
a former special correspondent to the OKW propaganda magazine *Signal*. He chose not to submit these photographs to *Signal* however;
instead he kept them at his home in Berlin. It was not until 1963 that
he published some of the images in a book about the Second World
War,* whereby they did not elicit any particular response.

This changed, however, when the photographs were shown in the
exhibition “The War of Annihilation.” The German magazine *Der
Spiegel* used the photograph of the coup de grâce as the basis for a
hand-drawn cover illustration to accompany its leading article about
the crimes of the *Wehrmacht*, which prompted a number of people
to come forward as contemporary witnesses. More and more private
photographs of the executions at the cemetery began appearing from