Photography as Propaganda: The War Photography of Khalil Raad in the Palestine/Sinai Front During WW1

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The period of the Great War (WW1) witnessed technological advances which revolutionized warfare techniques, and accordingly the global arena was altered. Amongst these innovations, came new photographic technologies that captured the realities of the war. Reviewing the works of the photographer Khalil Raad (1854-1957), Dr. Salim Tamari presents a contextual framework of Raad’s diversified work, focusing on his landscape and portraiture images, the “Biblical Gaze” pertaining to the Holy Land and his experience with war photography under the Ottoman war machine and the British mandate. The development of Raad’s photographic pursuits was surveyed by Tamari to underline his achievements throughout the 80 practicing years.

Khalil Raad recreated the Palestinian pastoral scenery and the dress code of the peasantry to compliment Biblical images of the Holy Land. Families were dressed to mirror the Virgin Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus Christ, reproducing the Biblical past. This reinforced the orientalist vision of Palestine, and although it depicted a framed reality, it contributed to ethnographic findings of peasant life. Raad also dedicated his time to documenting public and everyday life, by capturing the social scene through weddings, baptisms and other related events; one can revisit Palestinian life through his images.

In order to capture the Levant on the eve of modernity, the Ottoman war machine mobilized their subjects’ talents, giving them access to the fronts; writers, photographers and filmmakers were prepared to document the Middle East during the war. Raad was amidst these individuals employed by the empire alongside Jamal Pasha in the Fourth Army. His photographs depicted soldiers, military personnel, and flashes from public ceremonies. Raad captured a controversial image of a soldier being hanged publicly in Jerusalem in 1915, who was believed to be a collaborationist. Such photographs fueled Ottoman preemptive propaganda, warning society against cooperation with the enemy. By propaganda, Tamari refers to the notion of using images to mobilize or deter political action. He also engaged in crystalizing a modernized image of the Ottoman Empire by taking pictures of Christian
officers being buried to highlight tolerance and coexistence among the different groups. Raad assured that the photographs would necessarily portray the technological and organizational superiority of the Ottoman Empire by demonstrating their efficient factories for manufacturing shoes, clothes and other needed products.

In 1917, Raad’s office was raided by British forces and his photographs were confiscated after being accused by the British of collaborating with the Ottomans.Raad’s work under the British Mandate was characterized by the ensuing violence that accompanied the imperial rule over Palestine. His work portrayed British control over the population by presenting images of soldiers in uniform guarding the holy sites of Jerusalem, and the changes brought to the city after it was divided into four quarters. These images shed light on the exclusion of holy places to their respective sectarian groups; this phenomenon did not exist under the Ottoman Empire. His photographic approach towards the British power reflected the suppression of Arab rebellions by hostile British forces throughout the mandate. In 1948, his collection was pillaged for the second time by the Haganah.

Questions were raised surrounding the reasoning behind Raad’s war photography, technique and practice. Raad’s promotion of Ottoman propaganda and critical images against British rule do not necessarily reflect his personal political opinion but it certainly expressed the alternate visions of the Middle East. The hegemonic discourse in Levantine history is guided by the demonization of Ottomans. For this reason, Tamari makes use of the images that Raad took for the Ottoman regime as they challenge the dominant narrative. Regardless of Raad being an opportunist or an Ottomanist, his photographs challenge the overarching metanarrative by representing alternative accounts.