

# War Pictures for Peace: Ernst Friedrich's *War Against War*

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## Biography

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## Abstract

Ernest Friedrich's *War Against War*, first published in 1924 and widely distributed by the International Syndicalist Federation, is a textual and graphic narrative of the Great War in which he seeks to demonstrate the utter absurdity of the willing involvement by members of the proletariat in what was essentially a class war. The paper explores the ways in which Friedrich's work was made possible by that of previous generations of artists and photographers and the aspects of his work, which are, in turn, used by succeeding generations in the creation of anti-war propaganda.

## Resumé

*War Against War* d'Ernest Friedrich, publié en 1924, qui fit l'objet d'une large diffusion par la Fédération Syndicale Internationale, est un récit illustre de la Grande Guerre par lequel il a cherché à démontrer la complète absurdité de l'engagement volontaire du prolétariat dans ce qui était une guerre de classe. Cet article cherche à présenter la genèse de l'œuvre de Friedrich à partir des œuvres d'artistes et de photographes précurseurs, ainsi que les aspects de son œuvre qui ont été à leur tour repris des œuvres de propagande anti-guerre plus récentes.

## Keywords

Ernest Friedrich, *War Against War* (1924), Otto Dix, *Der Krieg* (1924), Internationales Antikriegs Museum, Conscientious objectors, Pacifism, Jacques Callot, Roger Fenton, Felice Beato, Mathew Brady, Francisco Goya, T.A. Innes, Ivor Castle, *Covenants With Death* (1934), Susan Sontag, John Heartfield.

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*To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us  
anything about how to extract people from that hell...*  
Susan Sontag (2003, 102)

**E**rnst Friedrich's *War Against War*, is a photo-book and manifesto first published in Germany in 1924 in the context of a wide political, literary and graphic re-examination of the Great War that ranged in perspectives from the militaristic patriotism adopted by Ernst Junger in his *In Stahlgewittern* (1920) to Otto Dix's anti-war etchings of the *Der Krieg* series (1924). *War Against War*, at the heart of which are 183 photographs taken for the most part by Central Powers soldiers and sympathisers on the Western and Eastern Fronts, lies at the pacifist end of the spectrum. As described by Susan Sontag, it:

... starts with pictures of toy soldiers, toy cannons ... and concludes with pictures taken in military cemeteries. Between the toys and the graves, the reader has an excruciating tour of four years of ruin, slaughter and degradation: pages of wrecked and plundered churches and castles, obliterated villages, ravaged forests, torpedoed passenger steamers, shattered vehicles, hanged conscientious objectors, half-naked prostitutes in military brothels, soldiers in death agonies after a poison gas attack ... dead soldiers belonging to the various armies putrefying in heaps on fields, on roads and in the front-line trenches ... soldiers with huge facial wounds." (2003, 13).

Friedrich, a conscientious objector during the Great War and a militant in a number of post-war revolutionary groups before coming to his final anarcho-syndicalist position, created his book using images from the collections of the future Internationales Antikriegs Museum which he would open in Berlin in 1925. It was initially published in German, French, English and Dutch and distributed by the International Syndicalist Federation, which added texts in Hungarian and Swedish to certain editions. By 1930 the ISF had distributed 50,000 copies of the text which had gone through eleven printings and been translated into 50 languages. The book was banned and the Museum closed by the National Socialist regime in 1933. *War Against War* has been republished, most recently in an American edition in 1987. The Internationales Antikriegs Museum reopened in 1982.

Certainly there had been graphic accounts of conflict before *War Against War*; Jacques Callot's series of *Les Grandes misères de la guerre* and Goya's *Disasters of War*, of course, and, with the coming of photography and the possibilities offered by the cheap and extensive reproduction and distribution of images, series of pictures such as those taken by Roger Fenton in the Crimea, Felice Beato in post-Mutiny India and Mathew Brady and his operators during the Civil War. Approaches to the theme vary. Callot and Goya drew the brutalities of war and their effects on victims and perpetrators. Fenton photographed soldiers, camps and landscapes after battle. Beato revisited Mutiny sites with a view to making a pictorial memorial itinerary of the campaign for British veterans. Brady's teams photographed every aspect of the war including corpse-strewn battlefields and military burial parties.

In making *War Against War*, consciously or not, Friedrich borrowed from his predecessors' strategies and resources. From Callot and Goya, comes the idea of producing narrative through the sequencing of images that are captioned and/or

commented upon in an accompanying text. For their part, the nineteenth century war photographers and their Great War successors provide and confirm the idea that war is a fitting photographic subject—especially as the camera, theoretically mechanical and thus entirely free from subjectivity, is the only certain purveyor of truth.

The pictures in this book from page 53 to the end show records obtained by the inexorable, incorruptible photographic lens,  
Of the trenches and the mass graves, of “military lies” and the “field of honour”  
And of other “idylls” of the “Great Epoch”.  
And not one single man of any country whatsoever can arise and bear witness against these photographs, that they are untrue and do not correspond to realities.  
And no one comes and says  
“Oh how frightful that such pictures should be shown!”  
But he says rather: “At last the mask has been torn away from this “Field of Honour”, from this lie of an “heroic death”, and from all the other beautiful phrases from this international swindle the mask has at last, yea at last, been torn away!!”  
Show these pictures to all men who can still think!” (Friedrich 22)

Friedrich’s defence of the “truth” of photography is perhaps perplexing in that *War Against War* seeks, in fact, to discredit a number of images by juxtaposing them with others, said to be “truer”, but supplied by exactly the same official and unofficial photographic sources! In any event, “truth”, to misquote Mae West, has nothing to do with any photography, especially that of war. Although attitudes varied from state to state, most of the published pictures of the Great War, certainly on the Western Front, were essentially official. Apart from those taken by army engineers for purely military purposes, they were taken by Official War Photographers and they were, obviously, taken to favour the photographer’s own side! Private photography was forbidden in British army, tolerated de facto in the French army where “*poilus*” could even win the *Le Miroir* weekly prize for the best front-line photograph. Censorship of the official photographs operated in the sense that some were held from publication as being too shocking or damaging to morale. Inadmissible pictures included those of own-side corpses or badly wounded, serious own-side destruction and so on, similar images of the dead enemy being, within the limits of the visually acceptable, entirely admissible. Official photographs were used by all the belligerents in the construction of a narrative of the War produced for civilians, allies and neutrals. Vast quantities of photographs were sold as postcards and prints, shown in exhibitions and printed in newspapers, magazines and part-work encyclopedias of the War. The importance of photographic evidence was such that, especially in the early part of the war when such material was scarce, the same image could find itself performing an identical propaganda function in the illustrated press of both sides! The illustrated magazines, “quality” or otherwise, were widely sold. Editorial policy was to saturate the pages with thematically organized visual information. This could be laid out within an article or on a single or double-page spread according to primarily aesthetic considerations with photographic information of equal or almost equal value presented in frames of different shapes and slightly different size. The images could also, if required, be presented absolutely sequentially in point-by-point demonstrations of operations such as firing a mortar for example. The photographs published in “illustration” pages rather than as

accompaniments to an article, were always coupled with at least a title, at most a brief explanatory text. These practices were international and systematic. It is probably fair to say that by 1918 the majority of people who had been involved, as soldiers or civilians, in the War on the Western Front would have been thoroughly used to reading and understanding the photographic narrative of the War and, perhaps, would have come to feel that this sort of practice provided the best interpretative tool for the subject.

Friedrich's strategy was to copy the tactics used by the Great War publishers to promote their national version of the conflict and adapt them to an anti-war, pacifist position. He selected contemporary photographs, organized them thematically and, like the "official" publishers added titles and commentary. *War Against War's* originality lies in the inclusion of official German battlefield material, which was not intended for publication, of photographs from the Balkan and Eastern Fronts and of 29 full-face close-ups of severely disfigured soldiers acquired from hospital files.

The photographs are preceded by an opening statement, *To Human Beings in All Lands*, in which Friedrich analyses war as a product of the class struggle. He observes that wars are fought in the interests of capital, by the poor, for the rich, and that the poor agree to fight because they are conditioned from childhood to believe the lies of patriotic discourse. Children are exposed to this discourse about the importance of the nation and nationality, the idea of the Fatherland, from a very early age. If all the mothers in the world were to block this propaganda then the physical and moral destruction of proletarian soldiers and civilians and, indeed, the destruction of individual freedom by capitalist warmongers would cease. The only way to stop war is to recognize its fundamental political *raison d'être* and to declare war against war.

The war against war signifies  
The war of the victimised against the profiteers!  
The war of the deceived against the deceivers!  
The war of the oppressed against the oppressors!  
The war of the tortured against the torturers!  
The war of the hungry against the well-fed (Friedrich 22).

The practical organization of the war against war is simple.

Let the general strike be the first weapon!  
The men will refuse service!  
True heroism lies not in murder,  
But in the refusal to commit murder.  
(...)  
I WILL NOT!  
Stronger than all violence, than the sabre, than the rifle, is our spirit,  
is our will!  
Repeat these three words, "I will not!"  
Give content to these words and all wars in future will be impossible.  
What then will all Capital of the whole world,  
What will all the kings and presidents do,  
When the entire people in all lands arise with the cry:  
WE WILL NOT!" (26)

The ideological cause of war established and the manner of ending it exposed, Friedrich opens his photographic demonstration of the inadequacy of the "deceivers"

narrative of the Great War set against the experience of the “deceived”. This is not a history of the War. Instead groups of photographs are organized around a series of themes that are not necessarily chronologically connected. The purpose of the montage is to accumulate and repeat images of the catastrophic effects of war on groups of soldiers, groups of civilians, individuals, landscape and property. “This is photography as shock therapy.” (Sontag 13) The “deceiver’s” narrative is recalled only briefly in fifteen photographs that serve as introductions to series of previously unpublished photographs. Thus an official photograph taken behind the lines of “the German Crown Prince (with his greyhounds) who cultivated the expression “Keep hammering at it” (Friedrich 76), is followed by nineteen battlefield scenes showing the consequences of such “hammering”! This sequence is followed in turn by another official photograph of officers taking tea on the terrace of a chateau and captioned “The position will be held...”(94). On the opposite page is the first of fifteen photographs of corpses captioned “...to the last man”.

Although there are very few previously published pictures, *War Against War* is full of the invisible presence of the official photographic account of the Great War. Friedrich’s choices (much like those of Otto Dix) reverse the themes familiar to readers of the European illustrated press of 1914-18. The clean, well-equipped soldiers parading in smart uniforms of the papers are replaced by images of naked, blown-up or gassed corpses in mass graves. Pictures of ruins no longer indicate conquest through superior fire-power but destruction, hunger, homelessness, poverty and death. Civilians no longer provide the cheerful forces, which man the Home Front, but are victims of an occupying power or caught between fighting armies. The soldier himself is no longer a decent, honourable man, defending his country and perhaps a hero, but anonymous cannon fodder or, according to circumstances, an executioner, torturer and rapist. Similarly, the press images of the cheerful, grinning wounded, clean white bandages to the head or limbs, give way to images of life-changing disfigurement.

Curiously perhaps, in a photo-book, Friedrich’s text plays a major role in the work. Each photograph is accompanied by a short text that may be descriptive (“Human remains in a battered armoured car” 87) or didactic (“To protect the wounded against the blazing sun, wet cloths were placed on their heads” 145) but that are most frequently ironic. Callot and Goya used the technique, of course, Callot accompanying his engravings with the ironically descriptive poems of the abbé de Marolles, Goya giving titles to each picture in the *Disasters of War* series. Like Goya, Friedrich groups images by theme and reinforces the connections between them with captions. Goya’s rape sequence connected by the titles “They don’t want to”, “nor do these either” and “nor these” comes to mind and compares with Friedrich’s mass graves sequence “The fallen heroes are thrown down the slope into the mass grave (the blood and dirt stains are clearly visible on the lime tubs)”, “The same mass grave showing a view of the “heroes” thrown in (some of these men have been robbed of their clothing” and “A close view of the foremost corpse in the mass grave” (Lafonte Ferrari 1961, 124-126, plates 9, 10, 11, and Friedrich 126-128). In shorter sequences Friedrich brings together two images with a sequential caption. For example, a photograph of a smiling German infantryman with the caption “Papa as ‘hero’ in the enemy’s country. (Picture for the illustrated Family Journal)”, is juxtaposed with a photograph of a German medical orderly covering a corpse and the caption “How Papa was found two days later (Picture not published in the Family Journal)” (Friedrich 70-71). Similarly two photographs of Havrincourt Castle, one of a splendid chateau, the other of a pile of rubble are printed together with the captions “Before use” and “After use” (190-91). Like Goya’s, the majority of Friedrich’s captions are

ironic. Goya, for example, captions an engraving of an execution “He deserves it”, Friedrich the corpse of an infantryman, “Merely a dead soldier” (Lafunte Ferrari 137, plate 29 and Friedrich 108).<sup>1</sup> However, the language of the *War Against War* captions, unlike those of the *Disasters*, is unhesitatingly political. Friedrich’s ironic oppositions are filled with references to establishment figures such as His Majesty the Kaiser, the Crown Prince, Hindenberg, King George of England, all of whom prosper while “proletarians” die and are disfigured. Institutional language, whether military or political, is systematically contradicted by the image. Thus “The constructive work of capitalism” is associated with a photograph of a ruined church, “Army report: all is quiet” captions a dead soldier and “There is no sweeter death in the world than to die fighting the enemy... (Old soldiers’ song)” accompanies rotting, open-mouthed corpses in a sea of mud (Friedrich 199, 86, 123).

Friedrich is direct and his choices of language and image and his organization of the material are often crude. But he is, as it were, preaching to the converted of the International Syndicalist Federation and, in the light of the number of editions and translations managed by the organization, *War Against War* enjoyed a considerable internal success. Whether the “assault by images” (Sontag 104), and the accompanying texts had any effect on a more general public is impossible to demonstrate. The same can be said of the 1934 publication *Covenants With Death* by the writer T.A. Innes and the former Canadian Official War Photographer Ivor Castle. This was a more circumscribed operation of peace promotion through shock photographs and text. Published by *The Daily Express* in the context of Lord Beaverbrook’s campaign for non-intervention by Britain in the increasingly complex affairs of continental Europe. The book was aimed at a national audience and was less an argument for world peace than a demonstration of the wisdom of avoiding a repetition of the consequences of over-involvement in foreign affairs! *Covenants With Death* is a photographic counter-history of the Great War in which Innes and Castle use the same textual and graphic rhetorical devices as Friedrich (sequencing, opposition, irony) and, indeed, some of the *War Against War* photographs.<sup>2</sup>

It is not clear, in any case, that photographs, however good, however well arranged and commented upon, have it in them to be irenic. They can of course be used both to support and question official rhetoric but a surfeit of “shock” pictures inevitably lead to questions about the truth of the images themselves (are they, as the picture is generally supposed to suggest, an exact, objective, mechanical representation of a “real” place or situation?) and, of course, to what charities refer to as “compassion fatigue”. Friedrich’s contemporary, John Heartfield, recognized the limits of conventional photographs but recognized the extraordinary persuasive power of photography in the face of new political situations when he adopted photomontage as a propaganda tool. In any event, as Susan Sontag observes, to designate a hell is not necessarily to equip observers with the means of avoiding the flames. *War Against War* does provide means, but only for a particular audience that is already convinced of the political cause and effect arguments supplied by Friedrich to explain the origins of war and the means to end it. It seems unlikely that the chaotic, rhetorical passion of the text would convert an uncommitted reader to his theses and photographs alone are certainly not enough. The avalanche of war photography publications in the second half of the twentieth century—a period of uninterrupted conflict in the world—is surely evidence enough that appalling images cannot change the course of history.

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<sup>1</sup> Title/caption irony is not uncommon in war work. The English artist, Paul Nash, one of the best known of the British Official War Artists called his largest battlefield picture *The Menin Road*—the point being, of course, that nothing that can be called a road is visible in the butchered landscape—and a painting of a blood-red sun rising over the ruins of No Man's Land, *We Are Making A New World*. His contemporary, C.W.R. Nevinson made a (censored) painting of a British corpse and, borrowing a phrase from Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, called it *Paths of Glory*. Friedrich, like Nevinson, also quotes models of European civilization—Schiller, the Bible—in his titles to counterpoint the absolute lack of civilization demonstrated in the images.

<sup>2</sup> Despite the similarities in technique, Innes and Castle's book is, unlike Friedrich's, a commercial operation as well as Beaverbrook propaganda. It uses, for example, the resources of the sensational press to exploit the voyeuristic appeal of atrocity

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photographs from the Eastern front. These are in a final fourteen-page booklet, bound into the text but sealed to protect the sensitive – and, presumably, to add a commercially attractive *frisson* to the publication!