

## İNSANİ KRİZ VE SAVAŞ ZAMANLARINDA FOTOĞRAF

### PHOTOGRAPHY AT TIMES OF HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND WARS

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### ÖZ

Bulunışundan itibaren geçen iki asra yakın süre içinde fotoğraf zaferler ve sevgi dolu anlar gibi iyi ve güzel anlar kadar kıtlık ve insan hakları ihlalleri gibi kötü ve çirkin anlarında da belgesi olmuştur. Bu haliyle fotoğraf toplumsal belleğin olduğu kadar bireysel belleğin de olayları hatırlama biçiminin ve kamuoyunun şekillenmesinin önemli bir parçası olmuştur. Kelimelerin yetersiz kaldığı ya da kelimelerden özellikle kaçınıldığı insani kriz ve savaş hali gibi durumlarda fotoğraf acı ve ıstırap gibi hissedilemeyen ve soyut kavramları somutlaştırarak bu durumları yaşayan insanların yaşadıklarını aktarıırken resmi politikaları da etkileme gücüne sahiptir. İnsani kriz ve savaş gibi durumlarda aynı zaman da insani değerleri de sorgulatan fotoğraf ne var ki bu durumlarda bazen basında öne çıkma olanağı bulurken bazen de hiç görülme şansı bulamamaktadır. Genel çerçevede fotoğrafın insani kriz ve savaş gibi durumlarda oynadığı role odaklanan bu çalışma daha özelden yakın tarihten önemli simgesel fotoğraflar üzerinden bazı fotoğrafları öne çıkaran ve tanınmasını sağlayan nitelikleri tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Fotoğraf, İnsani Kriz, Savaş, Göstergebilim, Propaganda

### ABSTRACT

Photographs became the documents of good and beautiful moments like victory and affection as well as bad and ugly ones like famines and human rights abuses. As such, photographs are vital components of not only social but also individual memory in remembering the events and shaping the public opinion. In situations like humanitarian crises and wars, where words do not suffice or are especially avoided, photographs have the power to influence official policies while displaying what people in such situations go through by making intangible concepts like pain and suffering tangible. Having people question their values in humanitarian crises and wars, photographs, unfortunately, do not always have the chance to make it to the headlines as some photographs are never seen at all. This study, which more generally focuses on the role that photography plays in humanitarian crises and wars, specifically discusses the characteristics that make some photographs grab the headlines by examining several iconic photographs from the recent past.

**Key Words:** Photography, Humanitarian Crises, War, Semiotics, Propaganda

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 1826, when the first photograph was taken by Nicéphore Niepce in the attic of his cottage in Saint-Loup-de-Varennesat in France, photography has been an effective and affective instrument in documenting social unrests, injustice, war, starvation and abuses of human rights as well as tokens of humanity, fraternity, affection and triumph. In other words, photography has provided a framework to appreciate and recollect the crucial events as they happen since it has the overwhelming power to engrave in our memories how and what we recollect an event. It has the capacity to reflect the visual truth and has had undeniable impacts on the consciousness of societies by forming or influencing public opinion at critical moments like wars or humanitarian crises.

“Words alter, words add, words subtract.” Susan Sontag poignantly acknowledges (2015:2) when she mentions the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 by referring to the careful efforts by the American government not to use the word ‘genocide’. However, with photographs, especially documentary photography, it is much easier to show

the pros and cons of certain official policies by making the intangible or distant issues like famine, injustice, migration or war, shockingly concrete. Consequently, the perspective or the emotions of somebody else who lives on the other side of the planet can be easily communicated and the viewers of photographs is forced to contemplate how their choices affect the life of that somebody else.

Captivating or repelling people, speaking to their imagination and addressing their conscience, photographs convey values, whereby they reveal the unembellished reality as it is. Most notably, humanitarian crises and wars have the highest potential for strikingly poignant photographs with a moral theme, caused by a tragedy which requires a strong reaction. Yet, what is that causes some photographs of humanitarian crises to make it to the headlines while some others are never seen in the clutter of the news? What characteristics does photography acquire at times of crises and wars? What role does it play such times? This article aims to discuss these questions and provide answers through the analysis of some iconic photographs from recent crises and conflicts.

## 2. SEMIOTICS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS AS A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE

The strength of photography lies within its ability to trigger emotions and, in doing so, transform people's views on life as well as the world that they live in. Therefore, being faced with powerful photographs of humanitarian crises, people are usually left with two options: looking the other way or addressing the issue in the photograph. If they choose to engage with the imagery of the photograph, they have no choice but to call into question their principles and sense of responsibility. Within this context, photographs of humanitarian crises possess have the ultimate power to bring forward critical issues.

Being widely accepted forms and documents of reality, photographs compel people to witness and contemplate what is going on around them, as Sontag (2005) rightly argues. The photograph of three-year old Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian child found dead on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey on 2nd September 2015 while fleeing the civil war in Syria, is an appropriate example to this visual power of photographs. It must be noted that at the time of the photograph the war had been going one for more than four years and had already claimed the lives of thousands and displaced millions more, practically rendering them refugees in as well as out of Syria.



Figure 1. Photograph of Aylan Kurdi, (MSNBC, [17.10.2017])

Following the publication of this photo, former French President François Hollande admitted he was shocked by Aylan Kurdi's tragic death and called for more international aid and cooperation (Tharoor, 2017). Similarly, former prime minister of the UK David Cameron said he was very upset by the photograph as a father and pledged to take more responsibility by accepting more Syrian refugees (Dathan, 2017). As Henley et al. (2017) and Slovic et al (2016) demonstrate, there was remarkable surge in the international aid, donations to organizations helping Syrian refugees and commitment to these organizations. European countries like Germany, Austria, Hungary and Macedonia, which were unmoved and disinterested until the publication of Aylan's photograph, were forced to change their policy on refugees and opened their borders to thousands of people gathering outside their borders.

The insufficiency of numbers to communicate what a mass atrocity means and to force action is well-documented. Since 'to see is to believe', this photograph, now an iconic one, was much more effective than an endless list of statistical data on the civil war in Syria, which is why it was on the first pages of important British newspapers, as the figure below shows.



Figure 2. Front pages of the major newspapers on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2015, Tallis, ([17.10.2017])

But, why? Back in 2015 the Internet had countless photographs of children caught in the middle of different wars and various humanitarian crises in the world. Therefore, it seems rather difficult to understand why this photo made it to the headlines over the course of this war, calling for such an extraordinary response, as noted above.

One answer to this can be found in the semiotics of the image. The boy lying face down on the beach, his clothes wet with the salty water, heartbreakingly resembles a child sleeping in his crib. His cute little shoes, which need to be put on by a mother, father or an older sibling as for many children of his age, also add to this bitter image by attesting to the same poignant death that claimed his mother and elder brother. Furthermore, the apparent worry and sadness of the paramilitary official, clearly indicated in the photographs in Figure 2, make it hard to ignore that he held Aylan's body in the same way he would have held his own sleeping son if he wanted to move him to his crib peacefully. In this photograph from one of the worst humanitarian crises that world has seen since the World War II, Aylan, whose face you cannot see completely, seems any other three-year old child who you may easily see playing with his peers in the playground of your neighborhood. This photograph is a strong example of how one photograph of one person can evoke emotions and create a strong public opinion, which is what pages of statistical data cannot do.

Why this photograph grabbed the headlines become even clearer when the following photographs are considered regarding semiotic the context that surrounds them at times of humanitarian crises. However, unlike Aylan's photograph, these photographs might not as easy to look at.



Figure 3. Photograph of Mohammed Shohayet, Mary Scully Reports, ([17.10.2017])

Drowned in the River Naf in December 2016, only fifteen months later than Aylan, as his family was trying to escape the massacre in Myanmar to seek a better and safer life in Bangladesh, this child awfully resembles

Aylan Kurdi in the way he lies on the ground in his wet, meager and dirty clothes. His face also cannot be seen clearly, which makes it easy to project the face of any child you know onto him. Therefore, it is very difficult to distance yourself from this photograph. He does not have any shoes, unlike Aylan, which makes the photograph even sadder, but he, too, could not make it to the end of the journey, which is exactly like Aylan. Semiotically speaking, overall, this photograph is not as 'peaceful' as Aylan's photograph. Although the existence of trauma and pain in a photograph is a meaningful experience for humans, it is also equally quite dangerous and shocking as photographs of such semiotics have both the jeopardy and the strength to lull their viewers into complacency. Besides, viewers may not always be emotionally ready for this experience, which explains why photograph of humanitarian crises like this could not be seen anywhere on the major news channels. As Barthes (1981) frequently stresses a photograph fits in a clearly defined framework of cultural meaning as is its effect. Unless the viewers are ready for the message of the photograph, which answers some sort of need, belief or expectation relevant to the time, the message will fall on deaf ears and will not be appreciated.



Figure 4. An extremely malnourished baby at the Al-Jumhori Hospital in Saada, Yemen, Hicks, ([17.10.2017])

A similarly heart-wrenching photograph is that of a baby from Yemen with a slack diaper, being held in the big hands of a mother, a volunteer or a nurse. However, this baby invokes no ordinary 'baby' appearance with soft pink skin and lovely smiles. Famine, which is the result of the civil war in Yemen, has distorted his body in an appalling manner. His loose skin on is wrinkled; his exhausted eyes are already like those of an old man; his thin legs and arms look very fragile; each of his ribs, under the thinnest layer of skin, is seen with indisputable clarity; he is bald, and his forehead is extremely creased. Mainly, he is concerned, as if he knows his future, if there is one, is bleak. Most of the viewers of this photograph have probably never met a baby like him. Unlike Aylan's or Mohammed's photographs, it is possible to see his face clearly and this situation provides viewer with an outlet to distance themselves from this baby. Such distance reduces the affective influence of this photograph. Overall, this poignant photograph is semiotically and visually hideous and tells of great malice, which helps to explain why it did not get even the fraction of the news coverage that Aylan's photograph got although it was taken in the same month that he died.

When all these three photographs are considered together, Aylan's photograph is not so hard to look at. It is undoubtedly more 'hygienic' than the other two, with no dirt, distortion or a visible indication of agony. He looks as if he was 'untouched' by the trauma that engulfed millions of people. This does not mean that he did not suffer. On the contrary, he died a terrible death as result of a war among much bigger forces than he was. However, viewers, at least, do not see this pain and anguish, which is probably the most important reason why his photograph became the icon of the refugee crisis that sent shockwaves across Europe.

In fact, all of this shows the influence of photography and as Goldberg (1991) eloquently argues, "with their enormous capacity to contain, compress and symbolize events or ideologies, photographs became the signs and signposts of modern society." (Goldberg, 1991: 135). Nevertheless, photographs are vastly dependent on words, context, dissemination and beliefs. In other words, photographs, including but not limited to, of humanitarian crises are only influential and get the chance to be recognized providing that the critical people see it at the right time and the correct political atmosphere exists, as studies in psychology unfortunately indicate that people underrate the pain and misery of others who seem different from them (Forgiarini et al., 2011) and that prejudice about a certain group of people or their history result in a priori assumptions of higher tolerance for pain and suffering about those people (Trawalter et al., 2016). Even the place where the

photographs above were taken adds to this relative lack of empathy towards the photographs of Mohammed Shohayet and the Yemeni baby. Aylan's photograph was taken on a beach in Bodrum, which is already a very popular holiday resort in Turkey and might as well be taken for another beach on American or European coasts by the looks of it. The other two, however, are respectively from a country known for its military rule and widespread human rights abuses and a country already in the grip of sectarian civil war fueled by outside forces. Therefore, viewers certainly need to have appropriate political context for photographs to connect with the viewers' emotions like morality, compassion and to awaken their conscience for action, which also adds to the widespread recognition of Aylan's photograph in the press and brings up another critical characteristic of photography at times of crisis, the right political atmosphere.

### 3. APPROPRIATE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Photography possesses the power to make thoughts and beliefs clearer and fixed, i.e. convert them into readily internalized and profoundly felt icons. However, as Sontag (2005: 12,14) emphatically argues

"A photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude... What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow."

In other words, photographs can only mean anything if they are integrated into a pre-existing political context. Providing this type of context, however, requires a critical number of people, many newscasts, columns of editorial writing, videos, bargaining, shocking accounts of secrets and situations and fundraising. Without the presence of such political context, photographs of humanitarian crises or wars with explicit pain and trauma serves nothing more than to render audience open to distressing incidents disguised as photographs in an extreme world of planned viewing.

One photograph that created and then was affected by the abovementioned political context is Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, the iconic photograph of a Great Depression-era mother who had seven children. Taken in 1936 when the Great Depression of the 1930s was raging, this photograph, it could well be argued, became the canonical image of the suffering and poverty that many Americans went through in one of the most difficult periods in economics history. It drew the public's attention to a serious humanitarian crisis and pushed politicians to react seriously. As Sontag (2005: 13) pointed out, it was a decisive instrument to "help build a moral position" in the face of hard times.

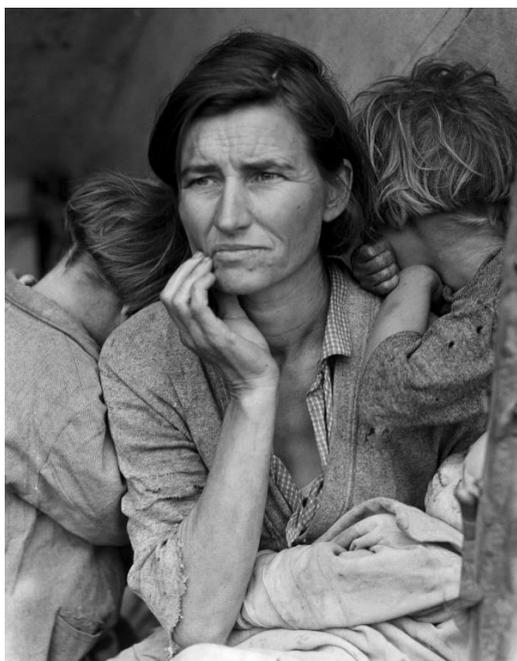


Figure 5. Migrant Mother, (Library of Congress, [23.10.2017])

The strength of this photograph comes from its solid composition, in which the mother, who naturally wants to take good care of her children, is emotionally cut off from them instead even as they hug her, turning their faces away from her instead by the anxiety and poverty that engulfs them in the dire economic conditions of the Depression. Her face reveals her suffering as well as her determination to fight back for her children. The

intensity of this epic composition, according to Goldberg (1991), reflects the concept of the Madonna and Child, the familiarity of which deeply resonates in the Western mind and helps the photograph to be internalized much more easily. Overall, the photograph is the emblem of the notions of family, poverty and determination.

However, the power of the composition, the familiarity of the theme and severe poverty alone do not explain how this photograph came to embody a humanitarian crisis. The Great Depression, in which this photograph was taken, roughly continued a decade, from 1929 to 1939, and it was the worst economic recession in the history of the developed world. Beginning after the crash of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929, coupled with the drought and famine over the next several years, the Great Depression slowed spending and investment, triggering sharp decline in industry and employment as companies made countless workers redundant. At its peak, more than 15 million Americans lost their jobs and nearly 50% of the banks went bankrupt (History.com, 2017). As a result, several government agencies like Farm Security Administration were established to help millions, putting aside the liberal views of non-intervention in the economy in favor of more state-sponsored industrial development, a.k.a. the New Deal. In other words, by the time Lange took the photograph above, the socioeconomic conditions were well in place for Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother to impact through this appropriate political context, in which the US government used the photograph to propagandize the necessity of its New Deal policies by distributing it free of charge all types of media. The press also depicted it as the face of perseverance despite hardships, a characteristic of American people, in line with the priorities of the government.

As can be seen, Migrant Mother is a powerful photograph of a humanitarian crisis that went on for years, which needed a telling face to achieve international and political recognition. In the appropriate political context, Dorothea Lange's photograph became that face of this crisis and merciless poverty as well efforts to stop it.

Another striking photograph that demonstrates that photographs need the correct atmosphere of politics at times of crisis and wars to draw the public's attention is Huynh Cong (Nick) Ut's *Children Fleeing a Napalm Strike*, captured on June 8, 1972 towards the end of the decade-long Vietnam War when a powerful anti-war movement was already widespread among American public.



Figure 6. Children Fleeing a Napalm Strike, (Nick Ut, 1972)

Taken right after the napalm bombs were mistakenly dropped by South Vietnamese planes on the village of Trang Bang to displace Vietcong troops (Goldberg, 1991), Nick Ut's photograph once more records the tragedy and brutality that children endure in any crisis or war by putting a naked girl in the center, who had taken off all her clothes due to the burning napalm. It is one of the most historic images of the Vietnam War, which directly showcases the expansion of pain and suffering following the bombing. The boy on the left is screaming in horror as his mouth distorts downwards, causing him to have a mask-like facial expression. Behind him a younger boy is running, looking back at the fire and smoke, followed by soldiers. On the right-hand side, two barefoot children are running holding hands. However, the most shocking of all is the naked girl in the center of the composition of the photograph. She is crying in pain while running towards the viewer in agony as she is holding out her hands to both sides, a gesture that connects children on both her sides in a circle of anguish. Her nakedness is also another crucial point that attracts the viewer's attention and increases the trauma of the children as well as the distress of the viewer.

For the furious masses that had been protesting the moral and military involvement of the US in the Vietnam War, this photograph of a little girl escaping the napalm became an expressive symbol of the atrocities of the war and strengthened the anti-war movement, altering the progression of the war for both the US and the Vietnamese forces. It was published on various US and international channels and newspapers like CBS, NBC, the Washington Post, the New York Times and London Times (Goldberg, 1991). As with photographs of humanitarian crises or wars that depict humans, especially children, suffering, this photograph is not an 'easy' one to look at, as discussed in relation to semiotics. However, one reason for the widespread coverage of this photograph lies in the horrific scene it depicts, which is a repugnant violation of the belief in children's innocence, a characteristic of being a human. However, the main reason is probably the fact that the public opinion was already weary of the war and the political context in the US became suitable for the public acknowledgement of the power of this photograph when social and cultural factors weighed in. The symbolic meaning of the photograph raising the ethical question of whether the ethnicity of the children would have mattered, coupled with the latent capacity of photographs to transcend their intended audience or context, is, to a great extent, what made the photograph an icon, had the US public opinion turn against the war and the press extensively publish it.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As De Vignemont and Singer (2006) put it, what we call empathy is our capacity to understand and share the emotions and beliefs of other people although we are not in their place and this ability is essential for humans in healthy interpersonal relationships to comprehend others' emotions and behaviors. It is also what photographs from humanitarian crises or wars make people feel when they encounter such images because they often evoke powerful emotions upon interacting with people's understanding of the world. It is the semiotics of such photographs, which includes visual signs like the 'cleanliness' of the subject and internationally accepted motifs like children's innocence or family, and the 'appropriate' political context, which helps to build a moral position and enforce a humanitarian response, that enable them to push through the countless dispatches of news and appear in the headlines. Sadly, wide and fast circulation of the photographs of humanitarian crises and wars often seems possible when these two critical conditions are met.

Yet, photography at times of humanitarian crises and wars rarely direct that moral and emotional power to humanitarian action. Many people filter out the photographs of the trauma and horror, especially if they contain scenes distant from the actual experience of the intended viewer, which unfortunately wears down the photographs' emotional impact. This usually leads to a sense of powerlessness and desperation in the face of the atrocities, aptly named "compassion fatigue" by Company (2012, 3). In other words, people get numb and exhausted by such photographs to the point of desensitization to images of people suffering in what seems like a securely faraway hell and to recurrent pleas for help. Sontag (2005) points out that these photographs continue to possess emotional effect, but the nature of that effect alters. Evoking less empathy but more familiarity with the trauma, photographs of humanitarian crises and wars still make people feel something for the suffering people but not enough. People continue their lives, safely aware of the accelerating pace of such images as well their incremental guilt, if any. However, humans are naturally wired like this. As the flow of photographs from humanitarian crises and wars gets faster, they try to handle their emotional reactions by reducing them to keep their pain and shock at bay. In retrospect, all the outpourings of aid, donations and commitment that followed Aylan Kurdi's death were eventually transitory and cosmetic, as also noted by Slovic et al (2016), aimed at defusing the real problem rather than solving it, which is a critical question regarding of the power of photography at times of crisis.

Sometimes, one or two photographs may have enduring and extensive impact. However, this is rather rare, and it is equally difficult to claim that they have any continuous or retroactive effect. It is not that people do not feel compassion or empathy towards the suffering people. It is just that there are natural limits to these emotions, which must be aroused. Photography provides that window of opportunity for people to evoke those emotions at times of humanitarian crises and wars as well as the awareness that such events *are* taking place. As such, it helps to draw attention to a much bigger problem which involves many people by narrating their story via the experience of one person.

However, if photography had any functional role to play or influence to exert at times of humanitarian crises or wars, other than to document the misery and evoke powerful yet fleeting emotional response, the photographs from the Auschwitz would have prevented the mass killings and human rights abuses in Rwanda, Bosnia, Myanmar or in any other country; the shocking images from the first Gulf War between 1990 and 1991 would have stopped the second one in 2003 or the ones from the Arab Spring in Northern Africa in 2010 would have hindered the current civil war in Syria, which had already seen numerous 'lows' being reached.

The Pope Francis might have given the statue of Aylan Kurdi's tiny body as a gift to the FAO (Winfield, [26.10.2017]) or Finland might have featured him on its national currency (Middle East Monitor, (2017), which turns the photograph into a kitsch instead of commemorating him. It is doubtful that photographs of people suffering in humanitarian crises or wars change anything as they are not solutions for these situations but only reflections of what the camera sees. So, they merely turn into tools for observation.

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