

DOCUMENTS ABOUT WORLD WAR I

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In 1984 the PHOTO and SOUNDARCHIV of the museum in Graz / Styria organised an exhibition about the FIRST WORLD WAR, and therefore our collection of documentation material about this event is comparatively extensive. Though the collection is restricted to material from the region of Styria only, we have got an insight of the way of WAR-DOKUMENTATION at this time. I have brought some catalogues of this exhibition with me, in case that somebody should be interested in this.

The First World War started in Austria. The assassination of the successor to the Austrian throne, archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, in Sarajevo on the 28th of June 1914, was only the immediate occasion for the outbreak of the war. The real cause was the inability of the Austrian monarchy to solve their internal problems with the different nationalities, which were part of it. The war seemed to be the best way to the ruling class to keep the power in their hands. Not only the emperor, Franz Josef 1st of Austria died during the war; after the war the monarchy was also dead and fell into pieces: Bohemia, Hungary and the southern balcanic countries got their independence. But ten million human beings had lost their lives in this big massacre.

In the view of the photo or filmhistorian the 1st World War marked a step in the development of the medium, not only with regard to the technical progress but also with regard to the popularising effect: the quantitative multiplication in using the photographic medium suddenly increased.

New claims demanded a solution in technical areas and the industry had to fulfill them. For example, the flying photographers had to get a special camera with a founded column, so that the heavy wind could no longer crush the bellows of the camera. A copy-apparatus with electric light was developed, which got power from a little dynamo that the photographer took with him in his luggage.

But not only new tools were developed, there were also many inventions made on the field of chemistry and in the darkroom-area and new, more sensitive papers, came on the market. If we look once more at the flying photographers, which had an important function in watching the battle-front, we find out, that it was the result of many inventions together, which made them able to produce a lot of copies in a relatively short time, so that they could continuously deliver new pictures of the enemy's military

movements. And sometimes they had to work under circumstances which are really hardly to imagine: for example in the morasses of Russia.

The multiplication-effect of using the photographic medium for documenting however, came first from the non-professional working photographers during the war. Nearly every officer took a camera along with him in his luggage. The BOX-CAMERA of John Eastman, New York, which he already had developed in 1884, was very suitable. The camera was expected not to be too big and not too heavy and it had to be serviceable without a tripod. Sometimes this camera was also used by the 'regimental-photographers', but most of them used a camera with a tripod.

A main purpose of the official documentaries in the 1st World War was the presentation of the new WAR-MATERIAL: Cannons, machine guns, gunpyramids, armoured vehicles of every kind, flying machines a.s.o. were used to show their capacity and power. On the other side, pictures of destroyed enemy war materials also served to show superiority. The 1st World War was the first in which the WAR-MACHINE annihilated everything like an earth-quake in battles, and the pictures of battered weapons and devastated towns or whole landscapes in foreign countries were used as a symbol of the victorious activities. Another task of the pictorial documentation at this time was to inform the people at home about the 'every-day-life' of the soldiers in order to motivate them and give them a possibility to identify themselves with this event.

The photos taken by regimental-photographers showed the whole expedition: the departure of the soldiers from the railway station, the soldiers marching, in the staging areas behind the frontline, working in or outside of their accommodations or building them up, keeping guard in the trenches or moving to another place, making a mealstop on the way or celebration festivals like Christmas. Also the lives of prisoners were documented: they could be seen when they were marching or living in a prisoner-camp. All these photographic documents of 'every day life' at the front had the character of illustrations and would be used, - after the war - as a collective memory of a heroic period in the projected and then realised 'regimental-histories'.

The content of the private pictures of the amateur-photographers is not very different from this kind of documentation; only the 'genre-character' in these pictures is more intensive and sometimes the technical quality of the copies is rather bad. In these documentations we have found nearly everything from the birthday celebration to patchwork on the clothes or on the boots. These pictures were not only a 'sign of life' for the family at home, they also helped the soldiers to feel at home in a strange, dangerous surrounding. Thus, war is seen mainly from a positive side: as an experience of community and fellowship, not only between men, but also with animals, as well as

an event of unknown countries, landscapes, folks and their cultures, peculiarities and customs. The 'portrait' as a rule was mainly a sign of life, stereotypes were usual. A view of the man in uniform in a foreign country, the officer on the saddle-horse, soldiers and officers between comrades in or outside of the lodging, or the whole company in open air.

If we consider the documentary material from the 1st World War, we find at first sight, probably surprisingly only a few pictures, which deal with the dead. Photos of dead soldiers are nearly absent in this war, in which so many people lost their lives. Without any very strict censorship, which tolerated only the HEROIC DEATH in the own ranks, and dead enemies as a subject of triumph in the war-propaganda, there was still a TABU, which originated at the beginning of WAR-PHOTOGRAPHY in the middle of the last century. If pictures of dead soldiers were taken - and we found some in private documentations -, the camera did not look them into the face, as a rule, even if they were enemies. In our collection there are only some pictures of funerals, of soldier cemeteries, two battle-fields with dead soldiers before the funeral and one picture of an executed spy. It is not much, if we consider, that the main purpose of this event had been to kill men and to die for the fatherland.

There is no big difference between film and photodocumentation in this time. The film camera in the first World War was only used in connection with official war reporting, which made the pictures for the weekly documentary cinemaprogramme, where propaganda was the central purpose. The war report in the cinema was censored and there was only one film production company in Vienna, which was authorised by the Emperor. The content of this reports coincide with the subjects of photographic propaganda, for instance the documentation of war material.

In our archiv there is no document of this kind, but we have got a film, which shows another side of the war. It deals with the organization behind the front. A PRISONER-CAMP, which was built up in south-eastern Styria, in Mühldorf, near a little provincial town, called FELDBACH, is the object of this documentation, which shows the efficiency and the productivity in connection with the war behind the front. This film was produced for the building-commission of the forces from the SASCHA-filmproduction-company in Vienna in 1915. This company was founded by the Bohemian earl ALEXANDER KOLOWRAT in 1910 as the second film-company not only in Vienna, but in the whole Austrian monarchy. This film is a very early example of a documentary and it is built up in a narrative manner, similar to the picture reports in form of photographic encyclopaedias of the end of the century. The first part of the film shows the camp and the 'every-day-life' of the Russian prisoners, then some types of prisoners, and there are also shown two Italian soldiers. In 1916 the prisoner camp

was transformed. A military hospital was established behind the camp and the inhabitants of the camp now not only had to work to cover the requirements of the camp, but also in the production of war material, like tents or wheelbarrows. The end of the film shows a hospital for convalescence for officers in a castle in the surrounding of the little town Feldbach.

I found this film-document more than twenty years ago under the roof of the town hall in Feldbach. The copy was in a very bad physical constitution and I brought it to the 'Austrian Film-Archiv' in Vienna Laxenburg, where it got restored in a very toilsome action. The original 35 mm nitrate film-copy has remained there, for this material is highly inflammable and had been conserved under special archive-conditions, which we don't have in our institute.