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Dissertation Proposal

***How does conflict influence contemporary and documentary
photography?***

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DECLARATION

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Illustration List:

Figure 1. Anon., 1847. *General Wool and staff in the Calle Real*. Saltillo, Mexico. <https://about.jstor.org/blog/seeing-is-believing-early-war-photography/> (Accessed 4th May 2026).

Figure 2. Anon., 1847. *Col. Hamtramck, Virginia Volunteers*. <https://artsandculture.google.com/usergallery/FQIC1fgkmKzYJw> (Accessed 5th May 2026).

Figure 3. Roger Fenton., 1855. *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. Crimea, Russia. <https://about.jstor.org/blog/seeing-is-believing-early-war-photography/> (Accessed 5th May 2026).

Figure 4. Alexander Gardner., 1863. *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*. Gettysburg, USA. <https://about.jstor.org/blog/seeing-is-believing-early-war-photography/> (Accessed 6th May 2026).

Figure 5. Timothy H. O'Sullivan., 1863. *A Harvest of Death*. Gettysburg, USA. <https://about.jstor.org/blog/seeing-is-believing-early-war-photography/> (Accessed 6th May 2026).

Figure 6. Ernest Brooks., 1917. *Five Soldiers Silhouetted at the Battle of Broodseinde*. Ypres, Belgium. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Brooks_\(photographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Brooks_(photographer)) (Accessed 7th May 2026).

Figure 7. Alexander Ermochenko., 2022. *Jubilant Pro-Russian Activists*. Donetsk, Ukraine. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq5g6q5wnz3o> (Accessed 7th May 2026).

Introduction

In my proposal for my dissertation, I will be exploring a subject that has for long been intriguing for me and relevant in the world of photography and journalism. The subject I will be exploring for my proposal and intend to write my dissertation about is *How does conflict influence contemporary and documentary photography*. War / conflict photography is a subgenre of both contemporary and documentary photography that aims to document and spread news and information about conflicts and gather attention surrounding the subject, or it aims to use conflict as a way of portraying contemporary themes and contexts through bodies of work utilising photography. This topic is more relevant than ever with a number of conflicts ongoing around the world and the recent uptake in the coverage of conflicts through a variety of different media sources all utilising photography as one of the means to project the news about said conflicts.

In this proposal I will go over the early history of conflict photography, a number of relevant practitioners, relevant sources / theorists on the subject and how the subject relates to me and or my own works and interests.

Through my dissertation I intend to cover and answer questions regarding the ethics of conflict photography, the influence conflict has on photography, the storied history of conflict photography and how important conflict is to the creative processes of photography and how important conflict is for documentary styles of photography.



Figure 1.

The widely considered first set of war photographs are daguerreotypes taken during the Mexican – American war between 1846 and 1848.

Daguerreotype invented by Louis Daguerre in 1839 is a form of photography that utilises a polished metal plate, usually copper coated with silver, with the image being viewed by reflecting the negative image into a black surface. The Mexican – American war lasting two years and largely caused by the American annexation of Texas in the previous Texas revolution saw after consistent American victories the succession of five hundred thousand square miles of Mexican territory.



Figure 2.

The photos taken by unknown photographers depict specific scenes, sites or act as portraits of notable individuals, due to the limitation of early types of photography including daguerreotypes action, motion and more in-depth photographs were impossible to gather. *Figure 1* depicting a scene of soldiers atop horses in a town and *Figure 2* being a portrait of an American Colonel are some examples of the earliest known war photographs. Part of wider collections both photographs served as a major insight into conflict for the perspective of civilians and served as a major influence on the way photography would be utilised, and conflict photography would look like in the short future.



Figure 3.

A short time after the Mexican – American war, the Crimean war broke out from 1853 – 1856, between a coalition of French, British and Ottoman forces against the Russian Empire. Being one of the most influential and consequential wars in Europe post industrialisation, the Crimean war being caused in part by conflicting goals in the Middle East and specifically the Holy land, saw prolonged battles and sieges. Ending on March 30th, 1856, with the Treaty of Paris, the Russian Empire was forced to surrender land, southern Bessarabia (Located in modern day Moldova) at the mouth of the Danube with the Danube River being opened to trade and shipping for all participating nations.

The photograph by Roger Fenton, is of a scene of a battle and battlefield after its conclusion on the Crimean Peninsula, a road can be seen between two small hills and ditches to either side of it, the road and ditches are littered with cannon balls. The photograph shying away from depicting a live battle or the immediate aftermath of a battle by not showing

casualties, injured or uninjured soldiers but simply portraying the scene with objects that allude to a great battle is widely considered to be staged or at least tampered with. Fenton is believed to have added a portion of the cannon balls and positioned them in a way to produce an interesting and good photograph, while the battle had happened it had happened days before Fenton's arrival at the scene. "We don't why Fenton avoided documenting the grisly scenes he likely encountered, opting instead to allude to them through carefully crafted visual symbolism." (O'Hearn, 2016). Fenton's work whilst being undoubtedly documentary, shows the beginnings of contemporary influence and practice, taking artistic liberties with the scenes he photographs to convey a more powerful, impactful and thought-provoking set of images.

Roger Fenton himself was a greatly successful photographer, thought beforehand he had studied law in London and painting in Paris. Traveling to Russia in the early 1850's, Fenton photographed landmarks in both Kiev and Moscow, this style making up his early photographic work of photographing beautiful landmarks led Fenton to found the Photographic Society, later renamed to the Royal Photographic Society and was appointed the first official photographer for the British museum in 1854. After the outbreak of the Crimean war, Fenton's focus of photography changed from architecture to documenting battle torn landscapes on the peninsula. After the end of the Crimean war, Fenton became a jack of all trades in his photographic career, excelling in a large pool of genres Fenton explored architecture, still life's, landscape, portraiture and more. Fenton's success, influence and inspiration on photography as a medium cannot be understated, "Roger Fenton is a towering figure in the history of photography" (Daniel, 2004). Although Fenton's career was rather short due to circumstances out of his own control, he remains one of the greatest photographers regarded by many individuals and institutions, with his works serving us today as educational, influential and historical materials.



Figure 4.

The American Civil War lasting 4 years between 1861 – 1865 being fought between the Northern American Unionist forces and the Southern American Confederate forces. The civil war caused by major geopolitical, sociological and economic issues and divides in the United States and the attempted seceding of southern states, saw many brutal naval and land battles, horrific scenes of war and left a permanent scar on the United States of America's history and culture, its consequences lasting in the immediate years after the war and still being felt today. "In contrast to the limited documentation of the Crimean war, the American Civil war would become the most photographed war of the 19th century" (O'Hearn, 2016). The war became a highly photographed and documented event, feeding a growing appetite of the public around the world for a systematic documentation of war through photographic images, the images themselves began to evolve from the tamer depictions by Fenton and those from the Mexican – American war, they started to show the immediate after

effects of battles and battlefields, depicting wounded and dead soldiers, war torn landscapes and fortifications.

Alexander Gardner the author behind *Figure 4* was a Scottish – American photographer best known for his extensive body of images surrounding and of the American civil war. *Figure 4* itself is an image of a supposed Confederate sharpshooter laying down injured and or dead between two large rocks and behind a stack of smaller rocks likely acting as his cover. The image however is suspected to be staged by Gardner with small adjustments to the positioning of the body and the rifle. Gardner who utilised troops of photographers and staff to cover a wide portion of the civil war, took his collection of war images and created a commercial album *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War*. Gardner's works came with controversy, mainly due to the staged and exaggerated nature of them despite those practices being common throughout each photographed conflict up to then, "After the war Gardner finally travelled West to his promised land, photographing along the way." (J. Paul Getty Trust, n.d.). Gardner's legacy while mired in some controversy left a large impression and influence on war photography and how it would be displayed to the public through documentary and commercial means.



Figure 5.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan, the author of *Figure 5* was an American photographer who was said to have served and worked alongside the Topographical engineers (A branch of the United States Army.) with O'Sullivan's job being to copy maps and plans, taking photographs in his free time. O'Sullivan also worked with Alexander Gardner as part of Gardner's staff and studio, going on to have his forty-four photographs published in the first civil war photographic collection, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*.

The photograph itself shows the immediate moments after a battle, corpses can be seen from the foreground all the way to the background where they are then joined by a score of standing and horse mounted soldiers, the living and dead soldiers are atop a grass field with no trees in sight of the photograph. Among the dead is plenty of smaller objects littering the battlefield.

There have been a great many practitioners in the field of conflict photography, many who have been able to depict the conflicts in a tasteful and respectful manner and many who have depicted the conflicts with controversy over their methods and works.



Figure 6.

One of the most notable war photographers would be Ernest Brooks, Brooks' most famous photograph depicts a group of silhouetted soldiers walking across a jagged looking silhouetted field, behind them acting as the background a grouping of dark grey, grey and white clouds with sun rays shining through the gaps. The photograph even without context is one of the most powerful and well-known images of war and image in general in Britain. The photograph is of a group of Soldiers from the 8th East Yorkshire Regiment moving toward the front. Brooks left one of the greatest legacies that a photographer could and had great influence on future photographic styles, "He was the first British official war photographer assigned to the Western Front." (Tattersfield, 2020). Brooks' historical significance is well shown by the previous quote, his work and accomplishments are still well known today. Before being reassigned to the Western Front, Brooks worked as a photographer at Gallipoli, being given the rank of second lieutenant upon his reassignment to Flanders, Brooks began to photograph his new

life on the Western Front. The first job assigned to Brooks was to document horses going through treatment at the number 10 Veterinary Hospital at Neufchatel and the number 5 Veterinary Hospital at Abbeville. After this Brooks was assigned to, travelled with and photographed numerous regiments and battalions including the 1st Canadian Division, the Northumberland Fusiliers following an attack at St. Eloi and then a major assignment to the 55th West Lancashire Division. Brooks went through the war taking thousands of photographs, travelling with likely thousands if not tens of thousands of men from different areas of the Western Front, after the war Brooks continued as a Royal Photographer, following members of the Royal family during events, visits and international trips until his controversial dismissal with his OBE and medals being cancelled.



Figure 7.

A notable current day war photographer would be Alexander Ermochenko, having spent over ten years working as a photojournalist in Donetsk “He has often reported in Russian – Controlled territory” (Burke, 2025), Ermochenko’s work as a photojournalist capably depicts both sides of the conflict and all aspects from its effects on fighting forces, civilian bystanders and the environments both inhabit. Ermochenko started as a self-taught photographer through his own admission “Using the internet, I studied the work of classic photographers, like Robert Capa, Don McCullin and James Nachtwey.” (Ermochenko, n.d.) as a Ukraine national, Ermochenko felt he was compelled to apply his trade to the ongoing conflicts within his own home.

The image showing a group of men holding and waving the Russian flag in celebration, whilst fireworks go off above their heads is a powerful showing of an underreported and often unseen side of the Ukraine – Russian conflicts and the local Ukrainian rebel movements. As the Ukraine – Russian war still rages photographers such as Ermochenko who risk their lives daily to bring us images of conflict through both documentary and contemporary means should be put on a pedestal above most other

photographers and photographic practices, their works and influences should be reflected upon in great detail and their legacies should be remembered and honoured through creative processes and works as well as words.

As for the sources of information that I have used during my proposal and intend to use for my dissertation, I have attempted to use valid and credible sources for more in depth information and have used simpler websites such as photographer profile articles and Wikipedia for surface level information such as dates, locations, names of images and events etc. The more valuable sources that I have used include Reuters, the largest multimedia news provider, from which I have found in depth information on photojournalism and its practitioners, conflicts round the world and war photographers. Another is Britannica, the website for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, from this I found historical information and information about specific events such as the conflicts I have talked about in this proposal, Britannica has also provided information on relevant practitioners in the field such as Ernest Brooks. Additionally, I have used assorted websites from institutions and museums to gather research and information, such websites would be the BBC, the biggest news institution in Britain, JSTOR daily, an online publication providing current news and information and the Met Museum's online articles and publications.

The topic of this proposal has been of great interest to me since I started my photography studies in college, some questions and topics that I have read, heard and thought about such as the Ethical implications of photographing conflict and the ways that it can be done ethically, the influence conflict photography has on public discourse and their views, and the influence conflict itself has on creative mediums such as photography, have led me to do great amounts of research into the topic, practitioners, peoples theories and philosophies surrounding the issues and questions. The impact of the chosen topic on my own work and way of working will lead me to exploring more in depth the history, consequences, practitioners, philosophies and influences that conflict has on photography through my dissertation.

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