CHAPTER TEN

INFORMATION, CENSORSHIP OR PROPAGANDA?
THE ILLUSTRATED FRENCH PRESS IN THE
FIRST WORLD WAR*

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The French illustrated press was quick to recognize that the thousands of personal photographs taken by those involved in the war could be used to satisfy the public appetite for information about the conflict. On Sunday, 16 August 1914, the following announcement appeared in one illustrated paper: ‘Le Miroir is willing to pay any price for interesting photographs relating to the war.’

Photography was ideally suited to convey different aspects of life at the front to those living safely back at home. Although the actual reality of the war experience was impossible to communicate, the French illustrated press developed ways of conveying aspects of the daily routine of the front, thus linking the home front with its soldiers.

Among the tens of thousands of images published between August 1914 and November 1918 in L’Illustration and Le Miroir, three themes emerge: death, the battlefield and combat. Each of these themes is closely related to the question of extreme violence. In fact, these illustrated newspapers were often unexpectedly candid in their choice of photographs, which frequently represented very harsh aspects of the conflict and were sometimes almost indecently gruesome. By investigating how images were censored, it is possible to explain the publication of such material. This chapter will therefore compare different photograph collections in order to enhance our understanding of photographic propaganda during the Great War.

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1 French text in the original quotation: ‘Le Miroir paie n’importe quel prix les documents photographiques relatifs à la guerre, présentant un intérêt particulier.’ See: L’Illustration, 15 August 1914, p. 122; see also the call for photographs issued in Le Pays de France, 15 April 1915.

2 Extreme experiences are often incommunicable using images; see Dagen (2002) on the work of art, or Didi-Huberman’s study (2003) on photography.
By their very nature, the two French fortnightly illustrated newspapers discussed here, *L’Illustration* and *Le Miroir*, were in the business of conveying the most dramatic aspects of the news, and during the war they focused particularly on representations of death. This allowed the reader to get close to the very essence of the war. The newspapers portrayed death in two different, yet concomitant, ways. *L’Illustration* adopted a kind of educational approach towards photographic images of death, for reasons of prudence, as well as because of problems in obtaining such material. Its photographic coverage was at first markedly restrained. Although the edition of 22 August 1914 did show a crude image of dead horses abandoned upon a road, it was not until 26 September 1914 that the newspaper published its first pictures of human corpses—enemy bodies of course. The photograph depicted the dead men at a distance, as shapeless forms, whose faces cannot be seen. ³ Such images recurred regularly over the following months: during the fourteen weeks that followed between September and December 1914, fourteen photographs were published which depicted German corpses. During the same period, the idea of the death of French soldiers was represented symbolically: on twelve occasions it was conveyed through photographs of tombs or funerals. Together, these photographs provided the readership of *L’Illustration* with an average of over one and a half images per week which had death as their theme, thereby rapidly consolidating the idea in the public mind that war kills, albeit that it principally kills the enemy.

However, once this idea was well established, at the start of 1915 the newspaper began to include images of the corpses of French soldiers, its ‘own’ side. The first photograph of a dead French soldier showed the silhouetted body of a *zouave*, a soldier from the French colonies, abandoned after a victorious attack. ⁴ This was followed in February 1915 by a photograph of two dead legs, attributed to a French corpse. Finally, eight months after the start of the war, a French corpse was shown in full in the edition of 13 March 1915. The image was graphic: even the face was shown, something which until this point had been

³ *L’Illustration*, 26 September 1914, p. 220.
⁴ *L’Illustration*, 16 January 1915, p. 56.