

# Photographing the Fourth Army and the Suez Campaign

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## The Cubist War

The nineteenth century transformed the way people saw themselves and others around them. Scientific and technical inventions were reshaping the way people perceived and imagined themselves to be, as well as the way in which they lived their lives. Nationalism, this new phenomenon in world history, was on the rise and with it the sense of belonging to the “imagined community.”<sup>1</sup> Industrialization and urbanization changed the way people related to their environment. Steamships, trains, and eventually cars and planes, dramatically changed the notions of distance and proximity. And photography brought images of far away places, people, and objects, thus changing the way the world was perceived and imagined. In this context, colonization played a pivotal role in how other cultures, especially those of the colonies, were to be presented and represented.

With the rise of the nation state, new ideas about representing the self and the other were constructed. The new national collectivity – also racial, cultural, and social class – included images of the collective tradition, memories, and dominant political order. This of course ushered in a new age of nationalist propaganda as well as the invention of the grand historical narrative. In this context, photography proved to be instrumental and was gaining increased significance for the state.

The total transformation that was taking place at the time also had a massive impact on wars. Thanks to inventions such as the telegraph, photography, and the telephone later on, military commanders no longer needed to be at the head of their forces at the battlefield. The new inventions made the physical distance between the leader and the battlefield irrelevant. New notions of modernity connected with technical, social and visual transformations altered conceptions of

time and space. As Stephen Kern puts it, for “the officers, war time was essentially a sum of discrete, sequential units out of which the scenarios for battle were constructed, while for the soldiers in the trenches it was a seemingly endless flux, a composition in time that had neither a beginning nor an end.”<sup>2</sup> The Great War, according to Kern, was a Cubist war in the way it resembled the artwork of that contemporary movement. Cubism, that revolutionary style in painting, was the first modernist movement in arts in the twentieth century. Its emergence was part and parcel of the ever-changing world at the time influenced by the period’s changes and reflecting them through its focus on perspective, simultaneity, and geometry. The war, in a Cubist twist, could no longer be represented just in terms of one grand narrative, but now was composed of endless details, war plans, leaders, and individual stories of day-to-day life in each and every military installation or front. The war could be now seen as a Cubist vision portrayed from a multiplicity of perspectives at once.

## Photography and War

Photography’s power of representation quickly became significant in the arena of war with the first photographed wars of Crimea and the American Civil War. The many and varied uses of photography in the Great War included surveying the terrain at actual and potential fronts, representing battles or preparations for them, and political propaganda. Photographs of leaders, war heroes, nurses, and military installations on the front were made and often employed in state-sponsored propaganda efforts, such as the poster



WWI poster. Source: *Library of Congress*.



The German Kaiser. Source: *Library of Congress*.

campaign promoting war mobilization.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the posters were intended to recruit volunteer soldiers and nurses for the war effort, while others were intended to garner support for the war in general. In the latter case, photographs of leaders were sometimes used. Carefully planned photographic portraits were produced depicting leading figures as strong, dignified and in command.

The Ottomans also employed photography in propaganda. We find the title of “official photographer” often appended to pictures of leaders, command centers, and army units.<sup>4</sup> Photographers accompanied the military to the various fronts and documented army activities and readiness for battle. The Palestine-Egypt front was one of the photographed fronts. The miserable failure of the Suez campaign in 1915 was perhaps not expected as the preparations for it were photographed in anticipation of a great victory.

### **Jamal Pasha and the Outstanding Failure of the Suez Campaign**

The leader of the failed campaign was none other than Jamal (sometimes written as Djemal, or Cemal) Pasha who was one of the chief figures in the *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* or the Committee of Union and Progress, and remembered in history mostly for his role in the Armenian Genocide. Jamal was born in the Aegean island of Lesbos, known by its Turkish name at the time as *Midilli*, which the Ottoman Empire lost to Greece in 1912 in the first Balkan war. In the army he rose to the rank of major and was appointed inspector of Roumelia Railways. With the takeover of power by the Young Turks in 1913 following the murder of Kamel Mohamad Pasha, the grand vizier, Jamal rose to prominence as one of the “dictatorial triumvirate” that effectively ruled the empire.<sup>5</sup>

Only ten days after the Sultanate entered the War, Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, told Jamal Pasha that the news from Syria points to a general disturbance in the country and great activity on the part of the revolutionary Arabs.<sup>6</sup> Enver instructed Jamal Pasha to take command of the Ottoman Fourth Army, which brought him shortly afterwards to Syria where he soon implemented ruthless policies that would earn him the epithet *al-saffāh*, or the shedder of blood, from his Arab subjects.

The appointment of someone of Jamal’s status to the Syrian front is an indication of the significance of this region in the war efforts of the empire at the time. Oddly, this fact is not reflected in much of the scholarship on the war itself or on Ottoman war efforts. Perhaps the miserable failure of the Suez campaign, launched from southern Palestine, and taking place in a region no longer regarded as significant in the current Turkish nationalist historical narrative, partly explains the lack of scholarly interest in Syria and Palestine under Jamal’s rule.

The photographic record of Jamal Pasha’s visits to Palestine and the Sinai front shows that the pasha appreciated photography and its potential as a propaganda tool. There are more photographs of him in Palestine, as far as I can tell, than in other locations. It is likely, though not certain, that this was a result of his personal ambitions, or a reflection of his role and influence within the centers of power at the time. It is possible that the ways he posed for the cameras indicate how he wanted to be remembered by future generations,

especially if one recalls the tone in which he wrote his own memoirs. What is clear is that he did indeed take himself very seriously and saw himself as an important historical figure. However, what is not possible to discern is the extent to which photographs of him and his activity were employed successfully in any propaganda efforts, at least as far as we could tell.

Jamal Pasha clearly employed or perhaps benefited from the work of photographers attached to certain Ottoman agencies such as the Ottoman Red Crescent Society. A number of photographers active in Palestine at the time claimed to be his official photographers and even used such a designation in advertising their works. In what follows I will examine Jamal Pasha's image in the photography of the renowned Palestinian photographer Khalil Raad, and to a lesser extent in the work of Jerusalem's American Colony Photo Department. The discussion will include issues related to the intended use of photography and its role as a persona creator, touching on the question of the use of pictures in Ottoman propaganda.

The Library of Congress preserves two photographic albums and papers that belonged to John Whiting (1882-1951), a photographer from the American Colony Photo Department in Jerusalem. The first of the two albums is partly devoted to Ottoman military preparations in Palestine for the Suez campaign of 1915. As a photographer at the Colony, it is possible that Whiting took some, if not most, of the photographs in the album. The collection of the other photographer who concerns us, Khalil Raad, is kept at the Institute for Palestine Studies archive in Beirut. Raad was the first Arab – meaning non-Armenian – professional photographer in Palestine. His collection includes a number of images from exactly the same period as Whiting's, and sometimes of the same subjects. In both collections, Jamal Pasha frequently appears. In fact some of the same photographs appear in both collections. Raad seems to have worked for, or been commissioned by, the American Colony, and both the Colony and Raad publicized themselves as the official photographers of Jamal Pasha.

The Whiting album contains 243 photos, a large number of which directly relate to military activities and future battlefield locations. These include pictures of flotillas transporting grain from the eastern to the western shore of the Dead Sea, thereby documenting an activity crucial to the troops during the Great Famine that occurred in the war period as a result of the British naval blockade, the locust invasion of 1915, and the war economy. One picture shows the shutting down of foreign postal services in Jerusalem in the aftermath of the Ottoman government's decision to annul the capitulation agreements that brought those services to the land. Organized more or less chronologically, the album's first photograph, occupying an entire page and dated 3 May 1915, is of Jamal Pasha mounted on a horse at the shore of the Dead Sea. Although the subject appears in no more than a dozen photographs, the entire album seems to follow his itinerary in Jerusalem and southern Palestine. The same is true of the part of the Raad collection devoted to the war. Raad's collection spans a much longer period of time than Whiting's, although it appears that Raad was at hand to photograph Jamal Pasha's visits to the country.

## Portraits of the Butcher

The Raad collection includes a majestic portrait of Jamal that interests me the most. It is the portrait that most closely depicts him in a manner similar to images of world leaders in photographs and paintings. Scrutinizing this portrait of the man who figures in the annals of Arab and Armenian history as the butcher, the viewer could possibly discern dissimilar levels of representation. In the portrait, the subject appears in full military uniform with a medal pinned to his chest. He sits at an angle with his face slightly tilted to face the camera. He is not looking directly into the lens but a little toward what could be the raised hand of Raad, the photographer likely aiming to give the spectator a clear view of the subject's eyes. Roland Barthes once described his reaction when looking at a photograph of Jerome, Napoleon's youngest brother, taken in 1852. Barthes expressed his great amazement at gazing right into "eyes that looked at the Emperor."<sup>77</sup> To the Ottoman population, especially outside of Anatolia, Jamal was an emperor, and there is some evidence that he saw himself as one for all practical purposes. Looking directly into his eyes during his dictatorial stint amounted to a death wish on the part of the insolent viewer. But here we are, a century later and through the magic of photography, able to do it as often as we wish without fear or trembling.

Because of its age, the photograph of Jamal appears as nothing more than a relic from the past. It is just an old photograph produced a century ago using old methods of developing and printing. In that sense, its initial significance relates not to its subject but to its physical existence as an artifact.



Portrait of Jamal Pasha by Khalil Raad. *Source: Institute for Palestine Studies.*



Jamal with his staff by Khalil Raad. *Source: Institute for Palestine Studies.*

It is simply a fairly well made portrait of a middle-aged man. Seen as such, the picture conveys to me as a viewer the human side of its subject. A century-old photograph of a man is a portrait of a person now dead who once posed for the camera with perhaps the hint of a smile. The intervening distance in time and space, how the photo was acquired, the context in which it continues to exist today – as an archival or collectable object – give it a meaning connected not to what or who it depicts, but to its condition as an artifact worthy of study in itself.

A discrepancy exists between what the photograph meant in its time and what it could mean to us today. The subject, if he could stare back at the present-day spectator, would not be able to understand his/her reaction to his image. After all, the picture was important in his day because it was *of him*. But for all the initial indifference of today's spectator to the dictator's power and position, Jamal continues to stare and thus has the power to eventually compel the viewer to acknowledge his presence and return his gaze and look at *his* image. The picture presents its viewer with one simple fact about the subject: that he is there in front of the camera, looking at the lens, and therefore at the viewer as if telling him/her something.

We see a man, in his forties perhaps, with sharp eyes, in a military uniform. Nothing in the picture betrays his future role as the shedder of blood as he is remembered in the annals of history for the execution of Arab nationalists in Beirut and Damascus; nor does anything hint at his role in the Armenian genocide. Perhaps because he had not yet committed either of these atrocities. In its own terms, the picture shows a man with the posture and demeanor of an ordinary person, a fact that does not match his reputation. Is it simply an act of deception on the part of a clever photographer with a gift for humanizing cruel subjects? Or is it a very shrewd politician and cruel man's ability to pose, to act, to project an image that belies his true nature?

One way to attempt answering this question is to invoke Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where he correctly points out that "[d]uring long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence." Our sense of perception, he adds, "is determined not only by nature, but by historical circumstances as well."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, what we have at hand in front of us is not what once was. Rather, it is an image that exists in the here and now, which constitutes, at the same time, a historical testimony of a time long gone, captured thanks to an archaic photographic process. In this sense, what we see in the picture has more to do with our knowledge of the period than with any information it conveys. Our perception of the image before us also contains an element of sad nostalgia, not in relation to the victims of the subject, but in relation to the past he inhabits: his portrait represents a time that he will never be able to relive. Eduardo Cadava has written that in "photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him – it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at."<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder, then, that we should feel a sense of melancholy when gazing at the subject's photograph – but not for his times and his brutality.

In other words, the photograph has that mesmerizing *phantasmic* quality for it possesses what Benjamin called the photographic *aura*. The early camera (Khalil Raad's

in this case) not only captured the image of the man, but also constructs an aura for the photograph it produced. The setting, the colors of the photograph, the subject's garment, and the background are just some of the many elements that create the aura. The picture is not a reproduction of an original art object or artifact; it is the art object or artifact itself. Hence, the creation of the aura is part of the act of taking pictures, particularly studio portraits.

In his later work, Benjamin, in what seems to be a reversal of the position he took in the essay referenced above, attributes to the camera, as the tool used in portrait photography, the power to create "auratic characteristics" that are lacking in paintings.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to painted portraits, it is the subject of the studio portrait that captivates the viewer, not the skill of the producers.<sup>11</sup>

There are other pictures of Jamal Pasha in Raad's collection. In a group photograph taken out-of-doors, instead of in Raad's studio, we see him standing with his staff, in full military uniform and shining boots, in front of what seems to be an official building. The three members of his staff stand a step behind him; their positions immediately convey the hierarchical relationship. While two of the aides appear somewhat at ease, the third has a more rigid stance. Jamal himself has assumed an authoritative pose, left foot confidently forward, with his hands behind his back, causing the viewer to wonder whether he is holding something, perhaps a stick or a whip. His eyes, like those of his subordinates, are focused on the lens, but he projects an authority that seems to extend to the photographer and the camera. Contemplating the pose and the image, I can feel the tension of the moment. The photographer is keen to present the leadership status of the main subject, while the staff is visibly aware of their lower rank and station. The image captures the power relations that Jamal almost certainly wanted conveyed: himself as the focal point of the image, a successful military commander, very much at ease and in control. The photograph represents a stark contrast to his first portrait discussed above. The Pasha's humanity is lost in this pose but his authority prevails. This image is more consistent with his reputation as a butcher and shedder of blood. Surely he must have been satisfied with the photographer's job.

## **Soldiers But No Battles**

Both the Raad collection and Whiting's album contain pictures of soldiers in trenches and in camps in southern Palestine. Some pictures simply show military formations. But others attempt to present what appear to be soldiers in action.

The staged scenes are the ones showing soldiers in trenches. They are of actual soldiers and actual locations from the Suez campaign in 1915. But clearly they are staged battle scenes for the benefit of the photographer's lens. Lined up in trenches on their stomachs and pointing their guns at what seem to be enemy targets, the soldiers appear to be careful not to block each other from the camera's view. They keep low, possibly to suggest that they are trying to avoid enemy fire, but the angle from which the photos were taken suggests that the camera was placed on a higher level, with its operator standing in full



Ottoman troops in formation in southern Palestine, by Khalil Raad. *Source: Institute for Palestine Studies.*

view. If enemy fire were a real concern, then a photographer standing in clear view of the enemy outside the trenches would have been in grave danger. The soldiers are arranged in neat rows, and the fact that they all assume positions that do not block other soldiers is another indication that the pictures were taken with plenty of time to arrange their subjects, and during non-combat moments. The smiling faces or relaxed postures of some of the soldiers also reveal the absence of stress associated with combat.

Still, the careful planning of the images does not deem them fake or unworthy of our consideration. To start with, they are pictures on location and the individuals appearing in them are genuine soldiers who were stationed at the particular photographed places. Their military status is apparent; the weapons they hold are the ones they used in combat; and the trenches were dug up in anticipation of battle.

## **Reality of War Outside the Frame**

Whiting's photographs are arranged in an album, so are chronologically organized and appear to follow a narrative. This is not the case with the Raad images, as they exist today as negatives in an archive. Thus, despite the similarities between individual images – and in some cases identical images appearing in both collections, which raises questions about



Ottoman troops near Gaza in 1915, from the Whiting Albums. *Source: Library of Congress.*

authorship – we cannot affirm that a similar historical narrative informs both. However, the fact that both collections seem to have been produced in the same historical context supports the view of a shared narrative. In both collections images of leaders seem to dominate, with Jamal Pasha being the most photographed. Other leaders include War Minister Enver Pasha, General Friedrich Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein, a German who was assigned to the Ottoman army just prior to the war, Ali Roshen Bey, commander of Jerusalem, the Young Jamal Pasha, and others. What is clear in the photographs is that the Ottomans clearly saw the Sinai campaign as a crucial part of their war effort and that photography was creating an image of what they thought would be a great victory. We do not see in either collection any indications of how terrible things were for soldiers or civilians, nor do we see the grave social effects of the forced Ottoman conscription in the region that was known as *seferberlik*. The images present what appears to be a highly organized Ottoman force, the fourth army in this case, jubilant leaders and soldiers, ready and effective medical staff, and a welcoming population celebrating the march of the troops.

The collective memory of the war period in the Syrian region in general tells us of the horrors of the period. These include: the great famine caused by the British naval blockade and economic devastation, itself the result of the heavy taxation, forced conscriptions, imprisonment, hangings of “deserters” and Arab nationalists, and other

brutal measures inflicted by Jamal Pasha upon the population. To these must be added the terrible spectacle of the desperate Armenian refugees fleeing their homes and flocking into the region. Memoirs and diaries written at the time suggest a very different image of the general picture, as well as of the troops as they marched towards Sinai, than the ones in the photographs we have. In an entry in his journal on Sunday, 27 September 1914, the Jerusalemite educator Khalil Sakakini did not celebrate the Ottoman march on Suez, contrary to the image we get from the photographs:

We heard today that the army units currently present in Jerusalem will march in the morning to the south. No one has any doubt that the war is coming. People in Jerusalem are worried, and see nothing but dark days to come. Tomorrow the soldiers will walk on their feet under the hot sun, carrying heavy burdens on their backs, crossing great distances with no shade, or water to drink. They will cross the desert and will suffer from heat and hunger before they reach the Egyptian borders where they will face the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

The account of musician Wasif Jawhariyyeh corroborates the sentiment expressed by Sakakini regarding the arrival of the war to Jerusalem in 1914 when he writes that “food prices dramatically rose due to the army’s tyranny and despotism. They [the soldiers] confiscated foodstuffs stored in foreign establishments.”<sup>13</sup> A few months later, another Jerusalemite, private Ihsan Turjman, described the mood in the city regarding the Suez campaign. Writing in his diary on Sunday 28 March 1915, close to two months after the start of the campaign, Ihsan reports a conversation he had with friends that day:

... our conversation revolved around this miserable war and how long it is likely to continue, as well as the fate of the state. We more or less agreed that the days of the state are numbered and its dismemberment is imminent.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear from the three accounts that a sense of doom was in the air even before the Suez campaign started. But the photographs of Raad and Whiting failed completely in reflecting such a sense. While it is a given that individual photographs capture their subjects at specific times when the photographer happens to be there, it is the album as a whole that is the most intriguing. For it is what frames, reorganizes, and reorders things, thus creating the storyline and the narrative. While the individual photographs could be ordered in various ways to form endless possible narratives, the album in hand offers only few plausible interpretations. Individual photos, once distributed, sold or archived, have lives of their own regardless of the photographer’s initial intentions. The album was organized and ordered in a particular fashion by someone other than Whiting himself, as it was a gift to him, and the individual photographs had been assigned captions, with dates when those were known.

Thus the incontrovertibility of the photographs can be easily challenged, perhaps contrary to beliefs common at the time of the war. The memorizing gaze of the camera clearly was selective, to say the least. The work of the two “official” photographers, Raad

and Whiting, left the reality of the period, as seen and felt by the population of Palestine, completely out of the frame and thus out of the pictorial record. If the war was indeed a Cubist one, then this particular angle of vision on the east Mediterranean fails us, as spectators, for it constructs for us an aura of victory and prosperity. If the photographic intention was propagandistic, then one wonders to what extent were such photographs available to the general public? If they were, then it is possible that they were used as tools of publicity. However, we have no evidence that the photographs in question or others like them were made public at the time, hence it is unlikely that they were actually circulated much in the public domain. This in turn deems the images less significant as effectually propagandistic at least as far as the Ottoman public was concerned. The possibility remains that the photographs might have had an indoctrinatory effect limited to elites and leaders in Istanbul. Still, they are images of great importance to historians today, for they show the mindset of the Young Turks at the time and can be very helpful in studying the war period visually via its landscape and its failures.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2006).
- 2 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Space and Time, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 290.
- 3 The Library of Congress has a large collection of WWI posters, though mostly from the United States, in which it is clear that photographs were often used in posters. The collection is available online at: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/>
- 4 Both Khalil Raad and the American Colony photographers in Jerusalem (including John D. Whiting) claimed to be the official photographers of Jamal Pasha, and John Whiting claimed to be the official photographer of the Ottoman Red Crescent.
- 5 For an account by Jamal Pasha himself of the murder of the Prime Minister, see *Muthakarāt Jamal Pasha* (Memoirs of Jamal Pasha [in Arabic]), book 1, ed. Muhammad al-Sai‘di (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013), 49-50.
- 6 Djemal Pasha, *Memoirs of a Turkish Statesman, 1913-1919* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 197-237.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 10.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222.
- 9 Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 11.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 507-530.
- 11 Carolin Duttlinger, “Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography,” *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (Spring 2008), 84-85.
- 12 Khalil Sakakini, *Yawmiyat Khalil al-Sakakini, al:kitab al-thani* (The Dairies of Khalil Sakakini, book two: The Orthodox Renaissance, the Great War, and Exile in Damascus, 1914-1918 [in Arabic]), edited by Akram Musallem (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2004), 103.
- 13 Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar, eds., *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: the Life and Times Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904-1948* (Northampton: Interlink Publishing, 2013), 93.
- 14 Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).