In 2014, the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM) in Berlin showcased a number of exhibitions either commemorating the beginning of World War I in 1914 or examining the consequences and aftermath of war more generally. Two recent exhibitions, Herlinde Koelbl’s Targets (2014), and Martin Roemers’s Eyes of War (2014), are photography projects informed by interviews with the victims of war and those trained to perform it. Though only overlapping in the museum for a few days, they worked together to introduce viewers to some little-known effects and mechanisms of military violence. Ultimately concerned with the personal histories and contemporary experiences of war and not chiefly critical of the aesthetics or effects of photography as medium, these exhibitions are firmly embedded in the history of war photography and documentary images, and provide examples of the medium’s ability to catalog surface appearances. However, when these photographic images combine with personal narratives and with other images in series form, they probe surfaces and produce striking subjectivities.

Koelbl’s Targets, which traveled afterward to the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, examines the military target, both literally (in the form of objects used for military training) and figuratively (in the form of the faces of soldiers training for military action and acting as “human targets”). As Koelbl put it, this reality leaves its mark on their faces. Or, as one of the quotes on the wall of the exhibition read, “War is the chess game of the politicians and we are the figures.”

Koelbl is famous for her large-scale photography projects, including Kleider Machen Leute (2012), Haare (2007), Starke Frauen (1996), and Jüdische Portraits (1989). The research for Targets took her to nearly thirty countries, where she observed military training, interviewed soldiers and photographed their targets and stage-set cities designed for modern combat training. Spread across several rooms on two levels, the exhibition at the DHM featured numerous images of targets from different countries, dizzying in their variety—some painterly, some showing faceless dummies full of pits and holes left by bullets, some merely blunt plinths. One could not determine context without reading the museum labels. The political, racial, and gender implications of the images chosen in each country are too complex to address here, and the array available in this exhibition also made it impossible to do much more than observe and become overwhelmed. And this is, perhaps, Koelbl’s aim; revealing this largely unknown, cross-national world of targets and the politics, violence, and history they contain is her main intervention with this project.

Along with the target photos, Koelbl included portraits of soldiers, focusing on their faces as they gaze quietly and calmly into her camera. Although identified by country, when printed all in the same size and lined up side by side, these images conveyed a sense of universality, of sameness—similar to the targets, they became an array so slightly varied and yet similar that national differences became secondary, or at least difficult to use for interpretation. The quotes on the walls of the exhibition space were taken from the interviews Koelbl conducted in her travels. They spoke of the realities of training and learning to kill automatically without thinking, the fear of battle, the camaraderie built up within military life, and the foreignness of the “real” world after returning home. One read: “I was in Iraq three times. I can’t sleep without pills anymore.”

A listening station toward the end of the show, with recordings as well as transcripts of Koelbl’s numerous interviews, was particularly gripping, providing interestingly uncurated information about the military experience. For this viewer, the exhibition and Koelbl’s project gained the most depth when experienced in concert with these interviews and with the essays in the exhibition’s catalog. Koelbl’s introduction, “In the Cold Morning Light,” describes the artist’s initial interest in the project, insights gained from her interview subjects, and her thoughts on the effects and horrors of war and the realities of military training throughout the world. Koelbl’s essay is accompanied by contributions from Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams and Arkady Babchenko, a former Russian soldier in Chechnya. By contrast, the film project displayed on four large screens that surrounded the viewer at the exhibition’s end—with scenes from training exercises set to dramatic music and the sound of gunfire—was the least effective element. The targets and portraits, presented in their multitude and variety, were striking enough on their own, and the film, while visually interesting, seemed overwrought beside their cold, silent documentary power.

Throughout the exhibition, the very palpable fear, pain, and sometimes detachment in the soldiers’ statements interfered with the viewer’s ability to superficially react to the images of targets, complicating the production of a collective viewership that merely approves...
or disapproves of war’s cold realities. These soldiers, made both monstrous and human for us by their quoted statements, as well as the images of the targets themselves (largely human shaped and rhyming with and echoing the presence of the soldiers), served as our interlocutors rather than silent objects for us to observe. They had their own sort of subjectivity as stand-ins for the enemy—which, as Koelbl points out, is a moving target as a concept. “Who is the enemy here?” Koelbl writes, “The enemy is always the other one.”

Roemers also works on a large scale in his photography projects, which are often, as he himself puts it, “on the borderline between documentary photography and art photography,” as in his current project, *Metropolis.* The theme of *Eyes of War* was born in 2004 while Roemers was working on another project, *Never-Ending War,* documenting the post–World War II veterans, and interviewed blind British veteran Frederick Lennart Bentley at a commemorative event for D-Day in Normandy. Moved by the face of this man (who was blinded by a German grenade) and his personal history, Roemers was prompted to pursue a larger project of locating people blinded during that war. Most were children at the time, but some were young soldiers. He documented these “casualties,” who had been fired upon or caught in bombing raids; or were shot while playing on the outskirts of battle; or had become victims of ordinance left sleeping for decades, only to explode years later when unearthed. Roemers focused on subjects from England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Russia, with the aim of placing former enemies alongside each other. Bringing these images to the DHM made sense to Roemers because, to him, it is the most important history museum in Germany.

Displayed on columns alongside statements from those pictured, these forty images are dramatically spotlight in the darkened exhibition space, and far larger than life size. The faces are both overpowering and intimate, perhaps more unsettling because they are frontal portraits that make “eye contact” without actually seeing. Cees Nooteboom writes in his essay in the *Eyes of War* exhibition catalog: “All you can do is what the people in the photographs always do: not look, but that is not what you do. You do look, if only because they can no longer do so and, with that ability lost, have laid themselves entirely bare.” One walks through them like a stand of trees, or memorial plinths, and the mood is one of contemplation as viewers pause to read the texts quoted from the subjects. These texts give us their stories, their reasons for injury.

As “war photography,” Roemers’s images pull their punch—ever so slightly—wounds are healed and his subjects, though scarred, are mostly fully intact and nobly depicted. They are survivors, whose stories overwhelmingly speak of strength and adaptation to disability. Some, like Peter Witteveen of the Netherlands, describe the great adventure that the war represented to a boy intending exploration. Some, like Ivan Skorobogatov of the former USSR, admit to having had a largely difficult life without much pleasure or opportunity. To read the words “I’ve had a rotten life” next to his large, unavoidably despair-stricken face is truly affecting. And it is just as uplifting to hear Sieglinde Bartelsen’s anecdote about being called beautiful. There are too many painful and complex, violent and yet remote stories to assimilate in one visit. As with *Targets,* this project must be experienced in concert with the writings and images in the book to be fully appreciated.

It is impossible to avoid the comparison of these living “targets” with those in the Koelbl show—Roemers’s subjects seem to rhyme with Koelbl’s soldier subjects (her human targets), with the effects of war written on their faces. The images are monumental and yet plainly and simply constructed, and the faces have a startling variety of appearances. Injury has changed them into unpredictable facial landscapes that demand close examination.

Though these shows were neighbors at the DHM for mere days, they functioned extremely well as pendant pieces. In *Targets* and *Eyes of War,* enemies appeared alongside each other, bound by their experiences of war’s negative effects. Both projects turn on the idea of the human targets of war and both are catalysts for contemplation of war’s costs, as well as the power of the photograph to document the most blatant tools of violence and its most subtle “effects,” masquerading as ordinary people.

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