

Photography, Humanitarianism, and Empire: A Historical Perspective

Photography has played a significant role in shaping our understanding of human suffering and global inequalities, serving as a tool for both humanitarianism and empire.



Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire (Photography, History: History, Photography) by Jane Lydon

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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From the mid-19th century onwards, photographs of poverty, famine, and conflict have been used to raise awareness and mobilize support for humanitarian causes, but they have also been used to justify imperial expansion and control.

Photography and Humanitarianism

The birth of photography coincided with the rise of humanitarianism, a movement that sought to alleviate human suffering and promote social justice.

Early photographers such as Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis used their cameras to document the appalling living conditions of the urban poor, exposing the realities of child labor, overcrowding, and disease.

Their images were used by reformers and philanthropists to advocate for social change and improve the lives of the marginalized.

During the 20th century, photography continued to play a vital role in humanitarian efforts, particularly in the aftermath of wars and natural disasters.

The iconic images of starving children in Biafra and the aftermath of the Vietnam War brought global attention to the plight of victims of conflict and poverty, and helped galvanize public support for humanitarian aid.

Photography and Empire

While photography has been used to promote humanitarianism, it has also been used to justify and legitimize imperial expansion.

During the 19th century, European photographers accompanied colonial expeditions, producing images that depicted indigenous peoples as exotic and uncivilized, justifying the need for colonial rule.

These images often emphasized the technological and cultural superiority of the colonizers, and were used to create a sense of racial hierarchy.

In the early 20th century, photography played a significant role in the propaganda efforts of the British Empire during World War I.

Official photographers such as John Warwick Brooke produced heroic images of British soldiers and romanticized the horrors of war, glorifying the empire and encouraging public support for the conflict.

Photography and History

The photographs produced during the era of humanitarianism and empire provide a valuable historical record of the social, political, and cultural changes that took place during this time.

They offer insights into the lived experiences of people around the world, and help us to understand the complex relationship between photography, humanitarianism, and empire.

Photography has been a powerful tool for both humanitarianism and empire, shaping our understanding of human suffering and global inequalities.

The images produced during this era provide a valuable historical record, and offer a fascinating insight into the complex relationship between photography, power, and humanity.



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