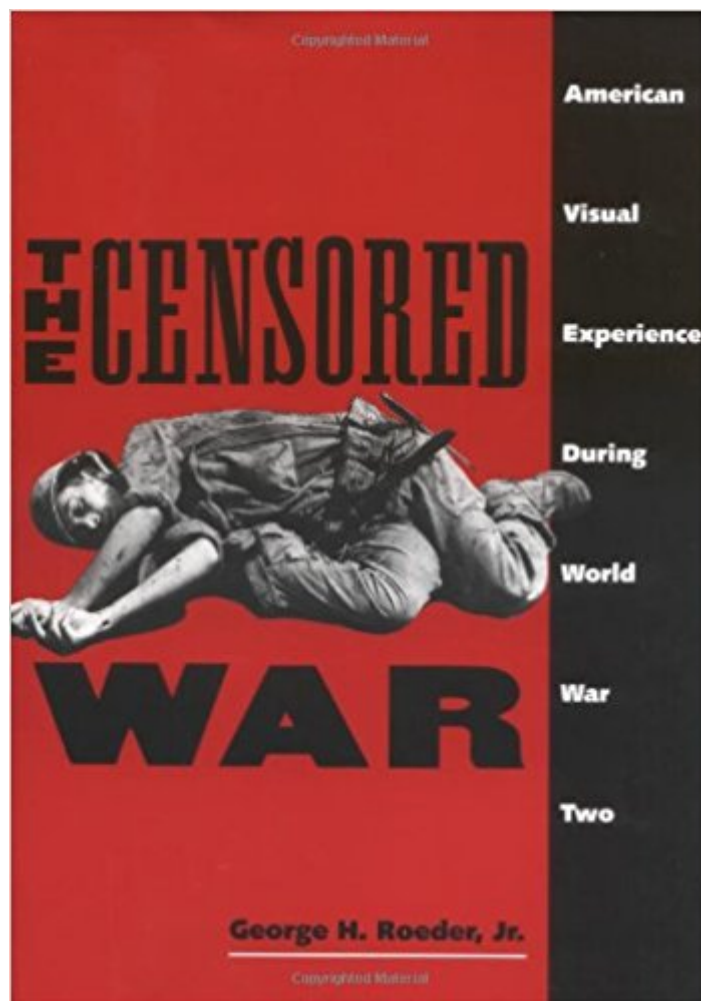


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The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two



Synopsis

Early in World War II censors placed all photographs of dead and badly wounded Americans in a secret Pentagon file known to officials as the Chamber of Horrors. Later, as government leaders became concerned about public complacency brought on by Allied victories, they released some of these photographs of war's brutality. But to the war's end and after, they continued to censor photographs of mutilated or emotionally distressed American soldiers, of racial conflicts at American bases, and other visual evidence of disunity or disorder. In this book George H. Roeder, Jr., tells the intriguing story of how American opinions about World War II were manipulated both by the wartime images that citizens were allowed to see and by the images that were suppressed. His text is amplified by arresting visual essays that include many previously unpublished photographs from the army's censored files. Examining news photographs, movies, newsreels, posters, and advertisements, Roeder explores the different ways that civilian and military leaders used visual imagery to control the nation's perception of the war and to understate the war's complexities. He reveals how image makers tried to give minorities a sense of equal participation in the war while not alarming others who clung to the traditions of separate races, classes, and gender roles. He argues that the most pervasive feature of wartime visual imagery was its polarized depiction of the world as good or bad, and he discusses individuals—Margaret Bourke-White, Bill Mauldin, Elmer Davis, and others—who fought against these limitations. He shows that the polarized ways of viewing encouraged by World War II influenced American responses to political issues for decades to follow, particularly in the simplistic way that the Vietnam War was depicted by both official and antiwar forces.

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Customer Reviews

The U.S. government during World War II was quick to realize the power of visual images and sought ways to control their uses. Roeder (Sch. of the Art Institute of Chicago) explores most aspects of the government's policies on visual images and the consequences of those actions, especially concerning the Vietnam War. One of the strongest aspects of wartime visual imagery, Roeder states, is its "polarized depiction of the world." Four "visual essays" illustrate points made in the text: for example, in the essay entitled "Playing the Death Card," the author discusses how the government censored photographs of the dead, but how this policy changed as World War II dragged on. Images range from hospitalized soldiers in a cheerful group to relatively "mild" pictures of dead Americans on the beach of Buna, in the Pacific. This small but highly recommended book should be in all academic and large public libraries.- Dennis L. Noble, Lewistown P.L., Mont. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

George H. Roeder, Jr., is professor of liberal arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

A deep look into the changing modes of censorship of dead American service members during World War Two. Roeder treats his subject gently yet forcefully, demonstrating media's compliance with government requests to not publish pictures of deceased troops. He weaves a fascinating narrative detailing the arguments in the administration about when, if ever, to allow such images to be viewed by the public and he movingly describes the debate around finally releasing pictures for publication. All in all, a pretty fascinating look at the intersection of media and government during a moment of national crisis/unity. Roeder does republish many of the photos but not in a gratuitous manner. If you have a close friend or family member deployed, you may not want to read this.

great book

Well written scholarly piece. Helped me immensely in building the foundation of my own research paper.

Because of the positive reviews I purchased this book and found it to be interesting and well written. It was easy to understand and exposed issues that I doubt even people who lived through the war years were aware of. This book will stay on my shelf to be re-read.

As we prepare for the possibility of another war with Iraq, I keep reading about how the military manipulated news coverage of the Gulf War (mostly by limiting access to it). Gulf War restrictions on the press are almost always portrayed as the military's (over)reaction to one of the "lessons" it learned from Vietnam ("The Uncensored War," as the title of a book by Daniel Hallin puts it). But in fact, as George Roeder shows in "The Censored War," government (although not necessarily military) control of the visual imagery of war is nothing new. Although "The Censored War" is a bit of a misnomer (the book is more about the actual portrayal of WWII and government attempts to influence its imagery than it is about government denial of access to certain images), Roeder succeeds in demonstrating a thorough-going effort by the government during WWII to control how the war was presented and to emphasize imagery that suited its propaganda purposes. "The Censored War" is divided into four chapters, each followed by a "visual essay" (a collection of photos, ads and other visual material, with captions discussing how the images relate to the themes explored in the text). Only the first chapter is really devoted to subjects and images that were "censored" in the sense that the military withheld them from publication (although that subject arises again in some of the other chapters). The remainder of the book is (largely) devoted to the imagery that *was* made available and what it communicated about American society, the home front, and the motivations behind the war effort. The material I found most interesting concerned the portrayal of race, gender and class differences (or the alleged lack of same) during WWII (with the government trying to say "we're all in this together" to African-Americans, women and the working class without offending the country's racists, men and business/patrician class). In the concluding chapters, Roeder draws attention to the way that WWII polarized our vision, portraying American and Allied troops, civilians, cultures and goals as uniformly good and the Axis' forces as uniformly evil. I think he over-emphasizes the formative role of WWII propaganda in our tendency to see conflict in black-and-white terms -- surely the vilification of the Other goes far back in human history -- but he rightly credits those photographers who attempted to portray the war in more ambiguous terms. He draws interesting parallels between the way propaganda was used in WWII and how it was turned on its head in Vietnam (although I think he goes too far in suggesting that a more honest portrayal of WWII would have made people question our involvement in Vietnam earlier). Roeder believes that image-makers have an important role to play in revealing the truth, and that only when

we know (as much as we can) the full, ambiguous truth can we make good decisions. "Those making, answering, or resisting the call to war would do well to be sure they are as certain of their facts as will be the mourners who greet the returning coffins." (156) We can only hope that the current powers will heed this caution. Roeder's text is well-written and to the point. The selection of images for the "visual essays" is thoughtful, striking and illustrates the themes discussed in the text. The limitation to visual images is a strength in that it allows Roeder to keep a tight focus, but it is a weakness to the extent that it prevents Roeder from giving a full picture of official control over the presentation of the war. Still, this is a very useful and revealing book, recommended to anyone interested in the experience of WWII or in government propaganda efforts.

Roeder offers his reader a concise tour of World War II through the images it generated and how the government manipulated those images. He emphasizes the differences between media coverage of WWII and WWI, and outlines the roles of all the major media titans of the day, including the Office of War Information, FDR, and Hollywood to name a few. How did the government address social issues of the day through the pictures it distributed of WWII? Was the Office of War Information filled with pencil-pushing bureaucrats or socially conscious liberals with an envelope-pushing agenda? Roeder answers these questions and more in a style that is accessible for academics and amateurs alike. Each chapter is followed by a photo essay with censored and uncensored pics with descriptions. The effect... captivating.

This is an extremely insightful book into the propaganda tactics of the Roosevelt administration during the second world war. The Office of War Information takes the spot light as Roeder outlines its influence on posters, publications, and the motion picture industry. This book provides a great basis for studying the shift in public opinion from the end of the world war era into the cold war. Very detailed information conveyed in a chronological and cohesive format. This was assigned reading for History 266 at the University of Michigan.

This was an interesting read if you enjoy the old films like I do. Most of the book doesn't deal with old films, but rather all the aspects of visual censorship - billboards, advertising, etc. It's a quick read, but well worth the effort.

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