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Citation for final published version:

Allbeson, Tom and Gorrara, Claire 2022. Visual histories of postwar reconstruction: special issue introduction. *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 15 (2) , pp. 125-132. 10.1080/17526272.2022.2065121

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2022.2065121>

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Visual Histories of Postwar Reconstruction, c.1944-50

Special Issue Introduction

Tom Allbeson & Claire Gorrara

ABSTRACT:

This special issue interrogates the role photography played in shaping diverse reconstruction projects around the globe in the immediate postwar years from the mid-forties onwards. The collected articles address varied contexts and topics such as demobilization in the USSR, home-building in Australia, efforts to reassert imperial rule in Burma (now Myanmar), attempts to rehabilitate child Holocaust survivors in Britain, and understandings of DP (displaced persons) camps in the French occupation zone of postwar Germany. Interrogating a range of case studies from daily newspapers and popular photo-magazines to propaganda pamphlets and institutional photo-albums, the contributors demonstrate how photographic cultures informed important debates about the legacies of the recent past and the plans for building a future post-conflict. This introduction provides an evaluation of the multi-dimensional meanings of 'postwar' and 'reconstruction' in the wake of the Second World War and considers ways in which the preceding experience of global conflict – and the public information campaigns it entailed – underpinned the work of political institutions and civic organizations across nations and geopolitical circumstances in war's aftermath. We emphasize the centrality of photography to public debates about postwar reconstruction across different formats of mass communication including not only newspapers and magazines, but also humanitarian initiatives and state-sponsored publicity campaigns. Delineating key issues and questions pertinent to the special issue, we highlight contributors' different approaches and propose a shared research framework – a critical visual history of

postwar reconstruction that explores how photographic representation shaped public debate and decision-making in the past, and continues to inform cultural memories in the present.

In 1947, the newly established United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published the first of two volumes of *The Book of Needs*. This aimed to deliver a comprehensive account of ‘post-war educational and cultural losses and needs’ (UNESCO 1947) in fifteen countries across 112 pages, from Austria to Yugoslavia via Greece, Iran, China and Burma. The frontispiece photograph depicted two children, apparently walking to school through a shanty town in an unnamed war-damaged town. This emblematic photograph intimated the difficult road along which the next generation were having to travel in the wake of the destructive conflict that ended two years earlier. Other photographs used to illustrate the volume projected now familiar scenes of children amid the ruins, as well as humanitarian professionals working in institutional settings where a peaceful future was supposedly being rebuilt. UNESCO’s *Book of Needs* thus visualized the post-conflict work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in raising awareness and funds for the complex challenges of reconstruction in the areas of education, science, healthcare and culture. The pervasive imagery of recovery and rebuilding left its trace in the language used to characterize UNESCO’s survey:

[T]he first attempt to set forth *a picture of losses*, achievement and needs in countries still lying in *the shadow of the ruin of war* will reach a wide public. The reconstruction of educational, scientific and cultural life in these war-devastated countries makes a worldwide call for help which cannot be ignored by anyone who cares for the preservation of real values in tomorrow's generations (UNESCO 1947; emphasis added).

In similar vein, the frontispiece photograph for the second volume of UNESCO's *Book of Needs* showed a young girl looking up and to her right, as if to some foreseen amelioration in her circumstances, while the caption asserted, 'new generations [...] look to us' (UNESCO 1949). Such rhetoric is representative of widespread future-focused thinking intertwined with the visual culture of war's aftermath in the late 1940s – a humanitarian gaze and photojournalistic coverage were inextricably enmeshed with one another. To reconstruct, rebuild and reimagine a future beyond such devastation required empathy and understanding and photography, a purportedly 'universal language', was mobilized as a powerful tool for mediating this challenge in the charged aftermath of the conflict.¹

Contributors to this special issue approach the postwar moment as a culture of aftermath catalyzing formative notions of 'coming after' and 'looking forward'. As applied to the years after 1945, the 'post' prefix of the label 'postwar' should not simply be taken as referring to the uneasy peace between enemies and allies that transpired. It alludes also to the social, political and cultural reverberations of both the First World War and the Great Depression that continued to be felt after the Second World War and which shaped the contours of post-conflict recovery. Tony Judt characterized 'the post-war condition' common to many European countries after 1945 as 'the desire for stability and security, the expectation of renewal, the absence of traditional right-wing alternatives, and the expectations vested in the state' (Judt, 2007: 81). In this period therefore, 'reconstruction' referred not merely to rebuilding destroyed cities, but also to remaking political cultures, re-engineering damaged economies, re-engaging social and professional networks, and crucially rebuilding devastated lives. As Lagrou (2000), Mazower (2011) and others have argued, reconstruction was a psychological undertaking, as much as a logistical and architectural one. It was not simply

about streets and homes, but about recasting the social, cultural, educational and political fabric of nations and international relations. There was thus a marked ‘self-consciousness’ (Mazower, 2011: 25) to reconstruction efforts bound up with perceptions of the interwar situation, the wartime experience and the postwar challenges.

This self-conscious approach to ‘postwar reconstruction’ was anchored in and reflected through images. As Grant and Jordanova assert, ‘All histories are potentially visual histories’ (Grant and Jordanova, 2020: 1). This is peculiarly accurate for the period of postwar reconstruction after 1945.. The Allied propaganda effort of the Second World War had precipitated a re-conception of the role of ‘mass communications’ in mediating between governments and their audiences (see Eliot & Wiggam, 2020). The increased emphasis on strategic communications through newspapers, magazines, radio, film and photography was heightened in the postwar years, with the threat of an escalating Cold War and the violent conflicts of decolonization. From the photo-library of the French Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme and the pamphlets of the Central Office of Information (successor to the British Ministry of Information), to the public relations work of the Presse und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung (the Press and Information Office of the Federal Republic of Germany) and UNESCO’s own Department of Mass Communications, a range of national and supranational agencies expended considerable energies on communicating key messages to target audiences large and small, near and far. Almost inevitably, therefore, postwar reconstruction was a visual project, both exhibited by postwar states and NGOs and consumed by postwar citizens through collective acts of spectatorship. Thus, in addressing the postwar years (as Chouliariaki diagnoses for the contemporary moment), ‘aesthetic spectacle, private emotion and public action’ should be considered ‘constitutive elements’ of

that social and cultural history; these phenomena being ‘always already articulated with one another in situated practices’ (Chouliaraki, 2013: 12).

While postwar cinema, radio and other media have all received detailed critical treatment in this manner, the use of photography in national and transnational efforts to address postwar audiences and challenges has received less scholarly attention as the historiography of the reconstruction era has developed over the last decade. For instance, one of five sections in the edited volume, *Histories of the Aftermath* (2010), is devoted to film with the introduction proclaiming, ‘Never before or after did movies assume such a central status for the production of meaning as during the first two postwar decades’ (Biess and Moeller, 2010: 6). The same could be claimed for photography, but the essays comprising this collection do not address the medium in any systematic way. Similarly, Anne Applebaum’s *Iron Curtain* (2013) provides an expert account of the erosion of civil society and the establishment of totalitarianism in Hungary, Poland and East Germany between 1944 and 1956, addressing key cultural dimensions of the assault on Eastern European societies (including communist education, propaganda and socialist realism), but offers little engagement with photography. Taking her title from Churchill’s verbal image, Applebaum considers music, literature, urban planning, theatre and painting alongside political, economic and military machinations. An entire chapter focuses on radio which Appelbaum asserts was ‘the most important mass medium’ in Eastern Europe at this moment. Yet, the illustrations in the centre pages of the book suggest it was not, ‘the only one which could reach a broad audience’ (Applebaum, 2013: 469-470). From the cult of individual leaders to the image of collective efforts in the construction of new towns, photography was also an important aspect of the totalitarian experience.² Some of the most vital research on postwar reconstruction resulted from the Balzan project – a series of four workshops and a conference that took place at Birkbeck

College between October 2005 and June 2008. However, when used, photographs were most often employed as illustrations in the resulting publications. The field-defining edited volume for *Past & Present* (Mazower et al., 2011) used a map of postwar Europe and four sparsely captioned photographs of children and ruin buildings by John Vachon as emblematic illustrations, standing apart from the historical analyses of the articles that followed.

Yet it is difficult to avoid the importance of visual imagery in shaping central ideas in the period of postwar reconstruction. Repeated emphasis has been placed, for example, on the importance of ‘planning’ as a key tenet of postwar rhetoric. This was an agenda powerfully advanced through both verbal and visual rhetoric alike. Similarly, when Mazower highlights the ‘significance of the New Deal in postwar visions’ for reconstruction (Reinisch, 2006: 303-4), it begs the question of the role of postwar visions of salient Farm Security Agency and even pre-war coverage in *Life* (est. 1936). A notable exception to historians’ little use of photography in this period is Paul Betts’ *Ruins and Renewal* (2021), examining how the idea of ‘European civilisation’ was politically and culturally resurrected after 1945, re-emerging as ‘a potent metaphor to ascribe positive meaning to material and moral reconstruction after the war’ (Betts, 2021: 3). Indeed, Betts examines the work of Vachon, a former FSA photographer who worked for its successor organisation, the Office of War Information, during the conflict and for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in Poland in its aftermath. Betts reveals how Vachon’s ‘bleak pictures of devastated Warsaw’ were mobilized to elicit ‘sympathy and compassion’ and advance the case for UNRRA in the face of political opposition through pamphlets such as *Fifty Facts about UNRRA* (Betts 2021: 57-58). As Betts demonstrates through consideration of other case studies – such as Victor Gollancz’s campaigning Left Book Club volume, *In Darkest*

Germany (1946) – photography was instrumentalized towards diverse ideological ends and integral to the formation of postwar ideas and ideals (Betts, 2021, 112-120).

While photography's myriad roles in postwar reconstruction debates have yet to be comprehensively mapped, important research (including Betts' example) has led the way toward achieving this collective aim. One pioneering volume was Dagmar Barnouw's study of how photography in Germany in 1945 was used to mediate the relationship between occupiers and occupied in the newly defeated nation (Barnouw, 1997). More recently, Julia Adeney Thomas (2009) has explored potential and conflicting approaches to historic photographs through examining work by photographer Hayashi Tadahiko in postwar Japan. Andreas Zervigón, looking again at postwar Germany, diagnosed an eschewal of innovation and a preference for 'intentionally conventional pictures' in the years after 1945 as an active turning away from both Weimar invention and Nazi propaganda. For him postwar German photography was 'instrumentalized for the restoration of normative vision after the great traumatic disorientation of the thirties and early forties' (Zervigón 2012: 113).³ Catherine Clark (2016) addressed photographically illustrated volumes depicting post-liberation Paris between August 1944 and the end of 1946 and how they exemplify a 'self-conscious performance of revolution' for the camera.. The deployment of photography in public information campaigns by international agencies integral to postwar planning – including UNRRA (Salvatici 2015) and the World Health Organisation (Rodogno & David, 2015) – has also begun to be interrogated.⁴

Such studies, however, remain the exception rather than the rule in the historiography of the postwar moment. In this special issue, we bring together new work with the ambition of catalyzing further inquiry. The research framework for this special issue proposes a critical

visual history of postwar reconstruction. It aims to contribute to the historiography of postwar reconstruction not by considering standout iconic images, influential individuals, or the success of a specific publication. Instead, this special issue addresses the social, political and cultural salience of photographic practice in this period. We aim, in other words, ‘to see more clearly how images have acted on the world and shaped our past and our sense of it’ (Bleichmar and Schwartz, 2019). A critical visual history approach prioritizes consideration of the societal context in which photographs are circulated and the cultural labour photography achieved by means of its circulation and recirculation.⁵ Of necessity, this is an interdisciplinary endeavour, drawing on intellectual and cultural histories, as well as the history of commercial businesses and political organizations, and questions of race, gender and representation. Such a critical visual history evaluates both ways of visually representing topics of public concern and the role played by such representations in shaping publics, the public sphere and public debate. Within such a research agenda, as one of the editors recently noted, ‘photography can be conceptualized not just as a historical source or a historical subject but also as a historical problem’ – the problem of tracking and interpreting how the ‘mediated public visibility of the world near and far became a central part of the means of conceptualising past, present and future’ over the course of the twentieth century (Allbeson, 2020: 240-241).

This suite of five articles examines the widely deployed and influential medium of photography to understand how communities and cultures represented and interpreted the multifaceted challenge of reconstruction in post-war Europe. Together, the articles in this special issue analyze photographic cultures and publications to offer important national and transnational perspectives on reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War, positing photographs as ‘contact zones’ in societies undergoing the turmoil of transition from

war to peace. By adopting a range of perspectives – drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, gender studies, histories of anthropology, as well as material and visual cultures – contributors interrogate the photographic representations of combatants, perpetrators and survivors, as well as the publications in which these images appeared. These articles exemplify interdisciplinary approaches to photography as a privileged mid-twentieth-century form for examining cultures of war and reconstruction, understood in their social, political and emotional dimensions. The role of images as intermediaries, shaping attitudes, mentalities or sensibilities, is scrutinized in ways that have only rarely engaged historians of this period. In these articles, the authors reflect on the emotional, physical and psychological rehabilitation of child Holocaust survivors as depicted in photographic material recording their progress and integration into British society; the photographed return of Soviet army combatants and the afterlives of such images into twenty-first century Russia; the uses of photography in the urbanization and modernization of postwar Australia as a spur for reimagining the nation-state; the use of photography to see, document and interpret displaced persons (DP) camps in the French zone of postwar occupied Germany; and finally, the ways in which colonialism and an ‘empire consciousness’ were woven through narratives of war’s end and the reassertion of British power in postwar popular photo-magazines.⁶ We are still in the shadow of the Second World War and a critical visual history of the period of postwar reconstruction has the potential to help us better understand that moment and our own.

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¹ On UNESCO's use of photography as a 'universal language', see Allbeson (2015a).

² Several dozen photographs of parades, speeches, ceremonies and reconstruction projects are reproduced in the paperback edition of Applebaum's book in three sections, subtitled and captioned to tie in with various chapters. Acknowledgments credit the photobanks of German, Polish and Hungarian press agencies. It seems likely that these photographs were originally produced and circulated by state-sponsored media outlets before being acquired by the likes of Polska Agencja Prasowa.

³ Ruin imagery of the reconstruction era is a particular focus of photography-conscious historical research. For instance, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann – looking at Berlin as 'contact

zone between victors and vanquished' (Hoffmann, 2018: 141) – considers triumphalist, elegiac and ethnographic modes of photographing postwar German ruins. For two parallel studies of the postwar afterlives of iconic war photographs, see Hoelscher (2012) on Richard Peter's photograph of a statue on the Dresden townhall and Allbeson (2015) regarding Herbert Mason's photograph of St Pauls during the Blitz.

⁴ An interesting parallel to this work on public information campaigns in the early Cold War is a study of Ernst Haas' contribution to the propaganda effort epitomized by the US-sponsored photo-magazine, *Heute*, edited by Warren Trabant for Austrian and German audiences (Krammer and Szeless 2018).

⁵ See Gorrara's research on the contexts of Liberation France and the circulation of immediate postwar photographic imagery produced by British Army photographers and the American foreign correspondent, Lee Miller (2016; 2018).

⁶ This special issue resulted from a symposium, 'Photography and the Languages of Reconstruction after the Second World War, 1944-49', organized on 12 April 2019 at Cardiff University and supported by the Learned Society of Wales and the Institute of Modern Languages Research, London. We gratefully acknowledge their support.