

**In Advance of the Nation: On Photography and the Performative
Fiction of Statehood in *Toy Soldiers*
By Chad Elias**

A photograph entitled “Toy Soldiers. Budraiga No. 01” [see page 18] is composed of what looks like ten soldiers arranged horizontally across a flat and expansive desert landscape. Each man is wearing an identical cap and a standard-issue uniform. Here the camouflage material has a dual function, serving both to level out the physiognomic differences between the soldiers and also to aid their visual assimilation into their surroundings. If the mountains on the distant horizon lend reality to this scene, the standardised poses of the figures might easily lead the casual viewer to mistake these subjects for toy soldiers, an illusion enhanced by the base that appears to support each man. In actuality, the photograph is the product of a collaboration between the artist and the real soldiers from the Polisario Front, a Sahrawi rebel national liberation movement that for close to four decades has been trying to end Moroccan presence in the Western Sahara.

The dispute over this region can be traced back to Spain’s ill-conceived withdrawal from the area in 1975. Relinquishing administrative control to neighbouring Morocco (which had formally claimed the territory since 1957) and Mauritania, the Franco regime ignored the claims of the indigenous Sahrawi people, who had traditionally inhabited the desert flatlands of the Western Sahara. Initially formed to fight the Spanish occupation, the Polisario Front would thereafter engage in a long guerrilla war against their Moroccan colonisers. With backing from Algeria, the Polisario were able to force the withdrawal of Mauritania in 1979. However, these gains were hampered in the mid-eighties with the construction of a heavily mined 1600 mile sand wall by Morocco, effectively dividing Western Sahara in two and largely confining the Polisario to the inland desert. A ceasefire was signed in 1991 under the proviso that a referendum on self-determination would be held the following year. When disputes over voter eligibility emerged, the referendum, scheduled for early 1992, was postponed. Despite a series of UN-sponsored talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front, diplomatic efforts to determine the parameters of the referendum have proven largely unsuccessful, and in 2000 the UN Security Council requested that alternatives solutions be considered, a process that remains at an impasse with no solution for a Sahrawi state in sight.

Today, thousands of Sahrawis find themselves living in limbo in temporary settlements across the border in neighbouring Algeria. According to the UN Refugee Agency, there are now upwards of 160,000 Sahrawi refugees located in five camps near the town of Tindouf.¹ These exiled populations have no access to work and are mainly dependent on humanitarian assistance for food and health supplies. In the wake of the ceasefire, an old military structure has been increasingly supplanted by social and political institutions that appear to pre-figure the existence of a Sahrawi state.² The latest estimates suggest that the Polisario Front now consists of something in the range of 5,000 troops, although that figure could reach as high as 20,000 if a new war were to break out with Morocco. Under the current terms of the ceasefire, the Polisario can only occupy the Liberated Western Sahara, which means giving up access to the civil institutions that exist in the camps.³ However, if they choose to leave the Free Zone, the Polisario soldiers can only exist as refugees, giving up the

¹ This is the estimate given by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in its 2015 country operations profile of Algeria which can be found here: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e485e16.html>

² Here I am drawing on Jacob Mundy’s claim that the Western independence movement offers “a microcosm, a pre-figurative lived model, of what an independent Western Sahara would, and still could, look like.” See Jacob A. Mundy. “Performing the Nation, Pre-Figuring the State: The Western Saharan Refugees, Thirty Years Later.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45. 2 (Jun., 2007): 275-297.

³ This area, which lies to the east of the Moroccan berm and west and north of the borders with Algeria and Mauritania respectively, is separated from the rest of the Western Sahara territory by a 1600 mile-long wall flanked by one of the world’s largest minefields. The Polisario regards the “buffer strip” as only a small part of the entire territory that it was promised under the cease-fire agreement.

legal and political protections that a nation-state customarily confers on its citizens. The Sahrawi thus find themselves caught in a juridical no-mans-land between two conditions of statelessness.

In a published dialogue on refugees and stateless subjects, Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak unpack the dual meaning of the term “state” as a national entity with its legal boundaries and discursive paradigms and the state that describes a person’s mental disposition or state of mind. This duality for Butler in particular marks an internal tension between individual and collective modalities of being. As she puts it, “how do we understand those sets of conditions and dispositions that account for the state we are in (which could, after all, be a state of mind) from the state we are in when and if we hold rights of citizenship?”⁴ More to the point, what would it mean to visualise these two states precisely in their contradictory coexistence?

With this question in mind, we could return to the image with which I started. “Budraiga” and the other works in the book represent an army for a country that does not yet exist. Strictly speaking, these men are not members of a nation-state and do not hold the rights granted to citizens, yet by taking part in an army, they behave as though they are. The collectivity depicted in this image – foregrounded by the seemingly identical uniforms as well as the prescribed postures of the men – suggests a performance of nationhood, as if they are defending a sovereign territory. The use of bases to imply that these are ‘toy’ soldiers only emphasises the point: that the collectivity is staged, and that the act of aggression is a performance of protecting a nation-state in abeyance. The soldiers in “Budraiga” all face in one direction, as though their enemy exists just outside the frame; in reality, because the Polisario can practise military exercises only within the Free Zone, they confront only a phantom enemy, one that is never physically present but continually conjured up. Indeed, Sahrawi identity might be dependent upon an ability to project mentally an image of their Moroccan adversaries. Yet this is not about imagining a community that exists in the mind’s eye alone. For if we are dealing with “imagined” communities, to cite Benedict Anderson’s well-known phrase, then it is necessary to recognise that these communities have been constructed through the lens of photographic imaging and the rituals that it makes available.

Yet to read this image only as a visual representation of the Polisario’s tenuous international status would be limited. First, it belies the significance of a series of individual portraits, each representing one soldier rather than a collective. Each portrait is of one man, centred against a sand-coloured background, wearing the same standard-issue camouflage uniform and hat. The slight variations in the portraits – the men’s facial features and ages, as well as the varying undershirts that they wear under their uniforms – seem to suggest that we can access their personal histories or motivations for being in the army. Some of the men look determined, focused inward [see page 26]; others look weary [see page 87], a reflection of their age as well as the long, drawn-out war with Morocco, now turned into an extended stalemate. Here seems to be Butler’s duality: the mental and emotional states of each man, held in tension with his role within a larger collective manifestation of a nation-state. In every portrait, however, the subject’s eyes are closed; many of the men look downward, and the brims of others’ hats cast their eyes in shadow. Further, the immediately recognisable camouflage uniforms strip the men of their traditional identity and signal their entrance into a global modernity that increasingly tends towards cultural homogenisation. The photographs thus seem at odds with the conventions of portraiture, which would traditionally offer privileged access to individual subjects rather than social types. The images also seem to reject the falsely humanistic aspirations of much photojournalism, which appears to lend a face to suffering and in so doing to depoliticise it. The apparent acknowledgement that we cannot access their mental states raises questions about agency and about the role that these men have in deciding the terms of their participation, either as individuals or as a collective. In yet other full-length *Toy Soldier* portraits, in

⁴ Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Who Sings the Nation State?: Language, Politics, Belonging” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2007, 2.

which individual men are posed holding and/or aiming semi-automatic rifles [see pages 20-21], this question of 'real' versus 'play' armed conflict is even more pronounced, as each soldier is given an involuntary role both within the geo-political situation and through the conceptual art project in which he finds himself a subject.

Secondly, the contradictions about nationhood are not unique to the Sahrawi and their liminal state, as Butler and Anderson both make clear. The final image in the series, "Toy Soldiers. Flag Raising over Western Sahara" [see page 103], invokes what has come to be read as the standardised global iconography of victory in war. The photograph depicts five soldiers at the peak of a small hill, planting the flag of the Polisario; with a view of the setting sun in the distance, we know that while the hill is likely to be within the Free Zone, the men are facing west toward the occupied territory. The photograph seems to be hopeful and anticipative in tone – a possible reason for its positioning as the final image in the series – and yet like the others before it, it calls into question the performativity of the soldiers' actions. A scattering of shells in the foreground, remnants of the sixteen year war with Morocco, can merely hint at the resumption of armed conflict; the five soldiers are the only figures in a landscape entirely emptied of an enemy presence. The bases visible beneath the soldiers' feet yet again suggest that they have been arranged atop the hill, so that the victory is perhaps only an imagined, mentally orchestrated one. The image's staging references Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" (1945), a Pulitzer-Prize winning photograph of five US marines and one Navy corpsman planting an American flag at the top of Mount Suribachi towards the end of World War II. The first question asked of Rosenthal, after the release of the photograph, concerned the scripting of the image; despite the fact that the famous image was not in fact staged, the implication was that such an image would necessarily have been taken with the media in mind.⁵ All of this goes to a larger point: the social efficacy of actions is not rooted in inner belief, but in the degree to which they can be externalised through images like these. More to the point, *Toy Soldiers* reminds us that nationhood is not the result of a set of private beliefs that are simply held by individuals and then actualised through the empty rituals of patriotism. Rather, it is the performative fiction of acting as if you believe or as if you already belong to a country that does not yet exist, which calls the nation into existence, if not in geopolitical terms then as a socio-symbolic reality. For Thorpe, the imaging of the nation-to-come necessarily involves questioning the standardised procedures of photojournalism and the epistemological framework that undergirds it.

In traditional terms, photojournalism purports to capture a reality that exists independently of its representation. In the corporate media structure, the photographer is assigned a position of objectivity and critical distance. However, at the same as it posits a documentary gaze that claims to stand outside of the event that it records, the photojournalist must also declare some kind of proximity to the world that exists in front of his or her camera. This tension is to be found in the flood of images that picture wars, violent conflicts, and humanitarian disasters as they happen. For if the real-time transmission of these images threatens to collapse spatio-temporal boundaries, their discursive framing as "tragedy", "misfortune", or "suffering" often functions to reinforce a hierarchical division between the mute "victims" recorded by the news cameras and the viewers who are asked to feel pity for them. This ideological containment of photography in disaster-prone areas finds its parallel in the practice of embedded journalism. While the embedding of journalists is certainly not new — during the First World War, the British Army employed two official photographers to take images that would counter the propaganda emanating from the German side, and freelancers were banned — what has changed is the degree to which the coverage of war has become a stage-managed event. As Julian Stallabrass explains with reference to the first Iraq War, embedding was conceived as a system "to grant journalists largely uncensored access to military operations while strongly encouraging them to take a positive view of what they saw. Since many

⁵ Robin Kelsey, "Of Fish, Birds, Cats, Mice, Spiders, Flies, Pigs, and Chimpanzees: How Chance Casts the Historic Photograph into Doubt," *History and Theory* 48.4 (December 2009): 63.

journalists were placed in dangerous circumstances under the protection of the troops, and lived with them for extended periods, this usually fostered a strong identification with their new comrades.”⁶ Thus, we have a highly paradoxical situation, in which photographers and television crews are now given unprecedented access to conflict zones but at the price of producing a highly sanitised image of contemporary warfare. The problem today is not that we have become desensitised to images of violence and death but rather that what we see on our screens is increasingly filtered and censored by a media industry that has become assimilated into the military-entertainment complex.

In recent years a number of theorists have challenged the assumption that photojournalistic images can offer direct access to reality.⁷ What is foregrounded in this critical framework is precisely the photographer’s inability to produce anything like a neutral or objective document. Similarly, a number of contemporary artists working in the field of conceptual photography have sought to challenge the false immediacy of photojournalism emphasising not the decisive or authoritative snapshot that comes to define an event but rather the contingency of the photographic act and their failure to gain direct access to the empirical reality.⁸ Thorpe’s own strategy has been to foreground the theatrical dimensions of photography or, more precisely, the overlap between the staging of images and war’s lens-based theatre of operations. Of course, a certain theatricality has always constituted one of war’s most essential components.⁹ Drills, parades, marches are highly choreographed displays of power that are not only designed to intimidate a real or imagined enemy but also to put on show the state’s ability to marshal and discipline the bodies of its citizen-soldiers.

Although we might align Thorpe, to some extent, with the practice of embedded journalism – the project was the result of direct collaboration with a high-ranking military commander of the Polisario, and over the five weeks of shooting, the artist would sometimes camp outside with the soldiers – his strategy in this series is to foreground the theatrical dimensions of photography. That is to say, in *Toy Soldiers*, the act of taking the photograph becomes part of the event itself. The full-length portraits of Polisario soldiers, aiming semi-automatic rifles at an invisible enemy located somewhere outside of the frame, attest to this theatricality. The subjects are centred within the frame, posed against a blank, nearly monochromatic background (sand, the washed out blues and greys of a hazy skyline). Although the locations may be historically significant – and many chosen locations were, according to the artist – the images are purposefully left uncaptioned, and the unknowability of the location turns the setting into what reads as a stage. The soldiers bend forward, draw back, and brace their knees and shoulders against the recoil of the guns: they perform the mechanistic, routinised movements of war. In one photograph, “Toy Soldier No. 61. The Falling Soldier”, the soldier seems suspended, both arms and one leg raised, as though his body is in the process of being thrown backwards from the force of a bullet [see page 75]. While most of the subjects repeat the prescribed actions of aggression, this final portrait stages its effect, a casualty of war. The images here are constructed artefacts, in the physical mannerisms of their actors as well as in the non-specific, globalised camouflage (bought in bulk fabric rolls and made in the refugee camps) and

⁶ Julian Stallabrass, “The Power and Impotence of Images” in *Memory of Fire: Images of War and The War of Images* (Brighton: Photoworks), 2013, 35.

⁷ For an important critique of the documentary claims of photojournalism Thomas Keenan, “Publicity and Indifference (Sarajevo on Television)” *PMLA*, 117.1 (Jan., 2002): 104-116. See also Fred Ritchin, *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary and the Citizen*. New York: Aperture, 2013.

⁸ One example of this is the series of photographs entitled *Waiting for Tear Gas* taken by the American photographer Allan Sekula over four days during protests against the World Trade Organization held in Seattle, Washington, in Nov.-Dec. 1999. In a supporting text Sekula explains how he rejected the photojournalistic strategy of attempting to photograph a single moment which would encapsulate the entire event, and concentrated instead on creating images of ordinary people protesting and awaiting the backlash. See Allan Sekula and John Slyce, “Waiting for the Tear Gas.” *DPICT* (U.K.) 6 (Feb 2001-Mar 2001): 24-27.

⁹ On this theatrical dimension of war see Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

weaponry – in reality, the Polisario soldiers are adept in guerrilla tactics, and so the routine gestures speak more to Western expectations of war than to the local actuality. Yet the fact that these are constructed performances does not mean that they are pure fictions, or simply the product of the artist's imagination. It is rather a question of how these theatrical elements intermingle with the documentary conventions of photography to shape a new political reality.

The images created by Thorpe are completely staged, but they also involve subjects caught in a very real struggle for independence and territorial recognition. While they are of course still constructs, several of the photographs begin to link their imaginative scenarios to the documentary functions of photojournalism. "Toy Soldiers. Mehairesz No. 03" [see page 48], for example, depicts two lines of soldiers converging as they walk through one of the Polisario refugee camps. The sparse signs of life in the camp, including vehicles, rubbish bins, concrete and sheet metal buildings, and a lone person in long red garments, seem to resist the notion of performativity – as though the quotidian existence of the camps could not be the product of an artistic imagination. The image seems to recall photography's claim to an empirical representation of social reality, and yet the suspended march of the 'toy' soldiers into the camp, with their feet still attached to the bases, mingles artifice with authenticity. While the full-length portraits collapse the link between sign and referent – a soldier is no longer a soldier but a toy or an actor – this image reinvents historical signification. We are reminded that the soldiers are soldiers, albeit ones fighting a suspended and seemingly overdetermined conflict, just as we are reminded that they are refugees, forbidden to wage war or carry out training exercises in the territory that they claim as a homeland. "Mehairesz" does not offer the false immediacy and empiricism that embedded journalists sell to the contemporary mediascape, but it does insist that there is a reality underlying the theatricality of the photographic series.

In one image, "Toy Soldiers. Lem Tailene" [see page 15], this reality is an imaginative one – perhaps even an anticipative one. A line of Polisario soldiers, walking in pairs, follows a Toyota truck outfitted with a double-barrelled machine gun. The men wear standard-issue green camouflage, and the truck and the machine gun have been painted in varying shades of green; taken together, they appear to be a verdant streak winding through an otherwise brown, desolate landscape. For anyone familiar with the history of Moroccan colonial domination in the Western Sahara, this image invites comparison to the Green March, a well-publicised event in November 1975 in which King Hassan II sent an astonishing 350,000 unarmed Moroccans into the Western Sahara to claim sovereignty and refute Spanish claims to the territory. The image is not a re-enactment of that event; rather, it is in several significant ways an inversion of it. Instead of Moroccans sent to stake claims to Western Sahara, the line consists of Polisario soldiers marching in perpetuity toward a territory that they have been unable to retake; compared to 350,000 unarmed civilians, this "green march" has around 100 Polisario soldiers, armed and yet immobilised by the bases beneath their feet. The inversions are a damning reminder of the Polisario's impotence in the face of international resolutions – and of the irony attached to the idea of a Polisario "march" – but they also invite us to question the subject position into which these men have been placed (as Sahrawi and as subjects of an artistic project). If the theatricality of the project should be seen as a tool used to highlight the nature of modern conflicts in the region, might it also be used to imagine an alternative to that reality, to empower the Polisario rather than to emphasise the futility of their aims?

I have suggested that Thorpe's work uses strategies of theatricality and staging to give form to experiential and geo-political conditions that are foreclosed in traditional practices of documentary representation. In this way, *Toy Soldiers* offers a critical alternative to mass media reportage, which either fails completely to cover the Western Saharan stalemate or reduces the geo-politics and lived experience of conflict, territorial displacement, and collective exile to an easily consumable repertoire of human-interest stories. It is an alternative that invites viewers to stage a series of

possibilities, not only for the Polisario soldiers and their subject positions, but also for the way we see the Sahrawi as living actors in an international drama.