

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Florian Göttke. *Toppled: A Book by Florian Göttke*. Rotterdam: Post Editions, 2010. Illustrations. 166 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-946083016-7.

Reviewed by Susan Keith (Department of Journalism and Media Studies)

Published on Jhistory (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek



Among the most memorable and controversial photographs of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq were those taken as a statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled from its plinth in Baghdad's Firdous Square on April 9, 2003. U.S. news media outlets often displayed tight shots of the activity—which included a soldier placing an American flag over Hussein's face—reinforcing a view that coalition forces were being proclaimed as liberators, despite warnings from some reporters that this interpretation was wrong.[1] Meanwhile, some media outside the United States chose photos with a wider frame that showed a relatively small number of people in the square, some of whom, as National Public Radio reporter Anne Garrels put it, were “‘just sort of standing, hoping for the best ... not joyous.’”[2] Research on the images has shown that they dominated U.S. war coverage on April 9-10, 2003, and that after they were published, coverage of combat declined on U.S. television networks and cable news channels, even though fighting continued.[3]

These familiar images get a fresh treatment by German artist Florian Göttke, who uses the Firdous Square photographs as a starting point for exploring the meaning of attacks on images of a leader during wartime. He reproduces more than 130 images that he collected online, mostly in color, sequencing them chronologically over three chapters to make what feel almost like animations of the toppling and its aftermath. This allows him to simultaneously add his voice to widespread questioning of early news media narratives that implied that bringing down the statue equaled “victory over the evil enemy” and to analyze acts of individual Iraqis taking their frustrations with Hussein out on his statue (p. 31).

The book is based on work that Göttke, an associate

researcher at the Dutch Art Institute in Amsterdam, began in 2005, after searching online for photos to use in making a replica Firdous Square statue for an art installation. He writes: “The images I found were so fascinating that I could not stop searching.... I used different browsers, changed search terms, looking for leads and new websites to browse through. I wanted to find all the statues that existed and learn the fate of each of them” (p. 7).

Over the next few years, Göttke located more than 700 online images of attacked Hussein likenesses, and he includes a broad selection of them in *Toppled*. One of the chief virtues of the book is that it contains photographs of not only the Firdous Square statue but also less well-known Hussein statues in Karbala, Kirkuk, Basra, and elsewhere in Iraq. In addition, the book reproduces news media photographs as well as amateur images of Hussein statues, most taken by soldiers, some of whom attempted to take home pieces of the Iraqi leader's likenesses. Göttke's varied corpus of images shows the statues being expelled from the public sphere; appropriated as souvenirs of war; placed into museums in countries that were Hussein's enemies; and reproduced, for re-toppling, in such cultural products as a video game and model train-size figures. A few images even record the statues being used by Iraq war protestors as the basis for toppled effigies of former U.S. president George W. Bush and former British prime minister Tony Blair.

Göttke situates the statues, which Hussein ordered erected around Iraq during his twenty-four-year presidency, as “part of the symbolic and ritual system that all societies have.” He points out that such displays of a leader's omnipresence are especially important to to-

talitarian regimes, “where the ruling elite needs to exert greater control over the symbolic system” (p. 67). When leaders are overthrown, statues of the former regime become targets of its opponents, allowing even non-soldiers to attack a foe. “Just as the dominant group uses rituals to solidify its order,” Göttke writes, “revolutionary movements also create or reformulate rituals to generate support and build legitimacy ... defacing and destroying symbols of the old order to show that an alternative one is in the realm of the possible” (p. 68).

He cautions, however, that these acts “didn’t invalidate the power of the statues.” Instead, statues that Iraqis probably passed “without showing ... any respect or even noticing” before the invasion were imbued with intense symbolic value when they were taken down and attacked. Göttke writes: “Maybe these kinds of idols will only lose their power when they are denied their symbolic value, not when they are destroyed, but rather transformed and recontextualized... When they are placed in the art museum instead of the military museum, they might actually lose their divisive political impact” (p. 133).

The shortcomings of this book of twenty-five brief chapters stem from its genesis and format. Göttke based the manuscript on a series of lectures that he gave in Europe and Canada, and it retains some of the feel of a persuasive talk, rather than a fully mature scholarly work. For example, there are only sixty-six endnotes, and most of the references are to news media reports or other nonacademic sources. In addition, Göttke concedes that he relied mostly on the Internet as a research tool, letting himself “be guided by the search engines and their somewhat arbitrary way of divulging information” (p. 137), rather than actively seeking firsthand accounts of the events that he writes about.

The book has much less text than one might expect from a scholarly book of 166 pages, but that is understandable, as Göttke’s purpose was to create “in essence a picture book that roughly follows the chronology of the events” (p. 137). Given that, however, it is odd that some of the images are printed with black ink on eight

medium-blue insert pages, which makes them difficult to read. These insert pages, and the book’s overall design, which uses a large, mono-spaced typeface and text placed in short chunks, come across as a game but not entirely successful effort at creating a volume that both makes an argument about a particular group of media texts and functions as a memorable work of print culture.

Nevertheless, *Toppled* is a book that visual historians and scholars interested in war images will want to own, for its broad collection of photographs of a particular facet of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Given the ephemeral nature of online images—especially those created by amateurs—some of these photographs may not be easily available for comparison the next time Western nations wade into a well-photographed war where, inevitably, iconic images play a role.

Notes

[1]. Paul Martin Lester, “Liberation or Occupation: The Editor Decides,” *IPI Global Journalist* (2003): 21; and Peter Maas, “The Toppling: How the Media Inflated a Minor Moment in a Long War,” *New Yorker*, January 10, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/01/10/110110fa_fact_maass.

[2]. Shahira Fahmy and Daekyung Kim, “Picturing the Iraq War: Constructing the Image of War in the British and U.S. Press,” *International Communication Gazette* 70 (2008): 443-462; and Mike Hoyt and John Palattella, eds., *Reporting Iraq: An Oral History of the War by the Journalists Who Covered It* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2007).

[3]. Carol B. Schwalbe, B. William Silcock, and Susan Keith, “Visual Framing of the Early Weeks of the U.S.-Led Invasion of Iraq: Applying the Master War Narrative to Electronic and Print Images,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 3 (2008): 448-465; and Sean Aday, John Cluverius, and Steven Livingston, “As Goes the Statue, So Goes the War: The Emergence of the Victory Frame in Television Coverage of the Iraq War,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49, no. 3 (2005): 314-331.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Susan Keith. Review of Göttke, Florian, *Toppled: A Book by Florian Göttke*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39012>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.