

Photographs as Memory Anchors among Czech Photojournalists Covering the Ukraine War

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Scholarly interest in the psychological and emotional consequences of war reporting has historically lagged behind studies focused on soldiers, victims, and humanitarian workers. Persistent stereotypes portray photojournalists as emotionally resilient observers who can repeatedly witness suffering without being affected (Peterson & Spratt, 2005; Simpson & Coté, 2006). Nevertheless, research increasingly shows that journalists experience substantial emotional strain that often remains unacknowledged due to professional norms and organisational pressures (Dworznic, 2006; Hanusch, 2010). As the research broadened after the recognition of PTSD and the post–Cold War conflicts (Jukes, 2010), questions concerning the vulnerability of photographers resurfaced.

This study brings these debates into conversation with memory studies, which emphasise the dynamic and reconstructive nature of remembering and the protective function of forgetting (Erll & Young, 2011). Photographs play a central role in these processes, as they preserve fragments of the past, shape personal and collective memory, and hold emotional significance (Hirsch, 1997, 2012). For most people, photographs record family moments or intimate relationships (Barthes, 2005; Batchen, 2004). For photojournalists, however, they frequently capture moments of trauma, intensity, and human vulnerability, and thus can carry a persistent emotional charge long after the assignment is complete.

The Ukraine war provides a significant context for examining how photographs mediate memory for photojournalists working for Czech news media outlets or based in the Czech Republic. The conflict's geographical and symbolic proximity to the country—historically framed through narratives of national insecurity, shaped by the historical memory of the failed appeasement embodied in the Munich Treaty—creates a distinct emotional environment in which journalists operate. Despite financial pressures within Czech media organisations (Pospíchal, 2023), many newsrooms continue to send photographers to the field, highlighting the importance of visual reporting.

To explore how images shape memory and emotional experience for photojournalists, this study employs photo-elicitation (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), which was conducted through eight semi-structured interviews in 2024 and 2025. All were undertaken in Czech and subsequently translated into English. Participants were asked to select photographs that remained emotionally significant to them and to reflect on how these images influenced their memories of the war and their perceptions of journalistic work. The research addresses two research questions:

RQ1: How do the photos they take affect how photojournalists remember the events of the Ukraine war?

RQ2: What does their work mean for photojournalists regarding journalistic values?

Across the interviews, participants consistently described photographs as powerful triggers and holders of memory. Images that remained with them emotionally were not always the most violent or dramatic. Instead, many emphasised quieter scenes—brief interactions with civilians, glimpses from moving vehicles, or ordinary landscapes marked by destruction. These images anchored emotional impressions that participants found difficult to express verbally; the photographs preserved a texture of experience that memory alone could not reliably hold.

At the same time, the interviews highlighted the deliberate cultivation of emotional distance. Many photographers framed detachment as essential for coping and fulfilling professional responsibilities. By focusing on narrative coherence, technical quality, and the ethical imperative to represent events accurately, they managed emotional exposure and maintained a workable sense of professional identity in extreme conditions.

Participants also reflected on the shifting meaning of their images over time. As urgent documents of suffering transition into aesthetic or historical artefacts, they become part of broader cultural memory processes. Photographers were acutely aware that their images might one day circulate independently of the emotions tied to their creation, shaping how future audiences remember the war. Several compared this to how contemporary viewers relate in historical depictions of conflict, such as paintings of Napoleonic battles, aesthetic appreciation often supersedes the impact of past suffering.

Beyond their images, participants spoke about the emotional turbulence of returning home. The abrupt transition from the intensity of the field to ordinary domestic life created feelings of disorientation, unease, or guilt—especially when their work led to professional recognition. Organisational support was inconsistent, leading many to rely on informal coping strategies such as humour, withdrawal, physical exertion, or immersion in new assignments. Throughout these processes, photographs remained constant companions, resurfacing memories and emotions in complex, sometimes contradictory ways.

Overall, the findings reveal that Czech photojournalists covering the war in Ukraine navigate a multi-layered emotional landscape in which photographs play a central mediating role. Images act not only as records of events but also as structures through which memories are preserved, organised, and emotionally negotiated. The emotional significance of the work arises not solely from witnessing traumatic scenes but from the ongoing dynamic between professional detachment, personal experience, and the mnemonic power of photographs.

As the first stage of a broader dissertation on the visual representation of the Ukraine war in the Czech media, this study underscores the need for greater attention to the emotional labour of photojournalism. By situating photographs within the framework of memory studies, it demonstrates how images shape both the personal memory of journalists and the collective memory of war. In doing so, the research highlights the enduring role of photographs in carrying, mediating, and transforming the emotional aftermath of conflict, as well as their potential function as placeholders for the future.

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