

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

In Search of the Father: The Photography of Bruce Haley

By Adriana Tchalian and Hovig Tchalian



Bruce Haley is an American photographer with interests that span a wide array of subjects. But he often returns to the one that, judging from his work, seems to have captivated his mind, spirit and conscience—the military and political conflicts around the world.

In 1994, Haley traveled to Nagorno-Karabagh during a cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Haley's photographs from the trip masterfully capture Karabagh's desolate landscape—abandoned factories, dilapidated buildings, and run-down neighborhoods, the ravages of years of war and economic decline. But he has also captured the far less visible but equally desolate emotional landscape of its inhabitants.

Much of that emotional desolation centers on the Armenian soldiers fighting in Karabagh. Haley photographs them after a skirmish or between battles, sitting quietly in small, scattered groups, with no genuine leader among them. A telling contrast here is with traditional heroic painting, of, say, the battle of Avarayr. There, we might see the legendary Armenian general, Vartan Mamigonian, striking his familiar heroic pose, clenching his sword across his chest. Or we might see him leading his men to battle, as in the well-known commemorative statue that depicts him alone, allowing us to imagine his men falling in line behind him.

In Haley's photographs, ironically, it is the soldiers who stand alone, and we imagine their leader perhaps somewhere nearby, more noticeable for his absence.

Some of the images portray young soldiers wielding guns, like children who have found their father's rifles and are now preparing to point them at the enemy. The absence of a patriarch is doubly apparent in this case, suggesting as it does the loss of a father on the battlefield as well as at home.

On the home front itself, we encounter further signs of domestic devastation—rebellious kids running wild, out-of-work young men wandering aimlessly in the mid-day sun. Scattered and confused, they have an unruliness about them akin to the waywardness of orphans.

Haley has said that, while in Karabagh, he noticed how much Armenians revered their writers, often displaying their photographs on their walls. It is this absence of a patriarch—of a father figure, if you will, be it a Vartan Mamigonian or a Barouyr Sevag—that Haley captures so effectively.

Haley's photographs recast the Armenian immigrant experience as the loss of home as much as of homeland. In doing so, the images together suggest that, although the outer devastation they capture is clearly the result of warfare both physical and economic, symbolically, it belongs equally to the inner world of a newly emerging diaspora.

Bruce Haley has documented conflicts all over the world including Burma, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and Zaire. His images have appeared in Time, Life, U.S. News and World Report, and The London Sunday Times Magazine, among others. In 1992, he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for helping break the story of the famine in Somalia.

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