

Susan Meiselas

'I didn't know, when I went to Kurdistan, that I was going to stay. And that was as true for Nicaragua. That just turns out to be the way I work.'

BY HOLLY METZ

Susan Meiselas is probably best known as the war photographer who recorded the revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador, but she is not a war photographer in the traditional sense. Her predecessors were known to favor front-line assignments. They literally saw action—as if they were combatants in the battles they documented. While Meiselas's photographs have not excluded gun battles, the scope of her coverage has been much broader: She has been witness to countries at war, and to what war means to civilians—with all their differing points of view.

Some photography critics have attributed Meiselas's perspective to her gender; others have pointed out that the lines between civilian and soldier are less finely drawn in the conflicts she depicts. But in more than twenty years of work, Meiselas has sought to place visual documentation in the fullest possible social context. One of her earliest projects was "A Photographic Genealogy—The History of Lando," which chronicled a company-owned South Carolina mill town for a bicentennial exhibition. Her book of photographs and texts, *Carnival Strippers* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), examined the "girl shows" at New England county fairs. The book brought Meiselas's skills to the attention of the prestigious photo agency Magnum Photos.

The complex (and, at the time, unusual) color images Meiselas shipped out of Nicaragua to Magnum appeared in magazines around the world and helped shape the combatants' views of the revolution. Of the more than 5,000 images Meiselas shot during her year in Nicaragua, she chose seventy-two for the book *Nicaragua: June 1978–July 1979* (Pantheon Books, 1981). A decade after the Sandinista triumph, she returned to co-direct the film *Pictures from a Revolution*, in which she sought out the subjects and locales of earlier photographs.

"The role of the photographer," Meiselas has said, "is to document the present in relation to the past." Her most recent project, the just-released book *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (Random House), embodies this view—though it features few of her own photographs.

Meiselas began to research Kurdish history after traveling to northern Iraq in 1991 to photograph "the visible remains" of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign against the Kurds: refugees and mass graves. "These were not the first mass graves I had documented," she writes in the introduction of *Kurdistan*. "This time, however, I was coming in at the end of the story. . . . I felt strange—photographing the present while understanding so little about the past. Now I realize that the unearthing of these graves led me to years of further digging."

Holly Metz is a writer in Hoboken, New Jersey. She wrote "Remembering an Executed Man" in the February issue.

With the support of a MacArthur fellowship, Meiselas spent more than six years gathering documents and photographs that reconstruct a history of the Kurdish homeland, erased from world maps after the First World War. Geographically dispersed, many Kurds now live in countries—such as Turkey—where, under threat of punishment, they cannot claim their culture and language.

In February, I went with a friend to interview Meiselas at her studio, located in the basement of a turn-of-the-century industrial school in the Little Italy section of Manhattan.

Q: It occurs to me that there is a link—though twenty years apart—between "The History of Lando" and *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*.

Susan Meiselas: Yes! It's true that when you do things sometimes, you only see connections looking backwards. "Lando" was a very early project for me, which came out of this other life I had, teaching photography, first in the South Bronx and then in South Carolina and Mississippi.

Lando is a mill town in South Carolina. On one of the weekends when I wasn't teaching, I discovered this town, in which seven generations had lived.

The idea was to do an oral genealogy of the town, and complement it with a photographic genealogy. It was an idea that came to me from being in that place and discovering that what was most interesting about that town was who stayed and who left.

The visualization ended up being a kind of family tree of Lando. It started out with the oldest photographs we could find—of the elders of the town. As the tree developed, you only continued with the people who stayed. So you ended up, in this little town hall, with all the interlinkings of families and stories that were buried, that other people didn't know.

The *Kurdistan* project was also about working with community, uncovering a history.

Q: Those collected images in *Kurdistan* provide a historical foundation, don't they?

Meiselas: Yes, particularly for people who are dispersed and who don't have access to their history, in some cases because of their dislocation. Or because the history is suppressed—offi-



MERYL LEVIN

cially, by the state, such as in Turkey. It's not in the schools; it's not in books.

In some cases, there are very detailed histories that both Westerners and Kurds have written about different periods and different parts of the geography of Kurdistan, but a lot of it is an oral history. A lot of it has been passed on through families who are acutely aware of, and maybe participants in, that history.

Q: In *Kurdistan* you use many images produced by Westerners. The Kurds are being presented by others, outside of their culture. How do you address this? Maybe their presentation isn't even accurate.

Meiselas: Absolutely. In that sense, the Kurds are seen as we have seen them. Today, we're only talking about them in terms of being the victims of Saddam, and they were being used to rev up the American public for the bombing of Baghdad. That's not on their own merits and not taking into consideration what's best for them.

Q: And yet, the book's presentation of parts of Kurdish history through Western eyes is complex because it's clear that Westerners not only introduce their own distortions but have also served as cultural archivists.

Meiselas: This book allows you to deconstruct that process. It's probably harder to read in the visuals, but definitely the language reveals those biases. And at the same time, the Westerners have helped preserve the history, preserve it by bringing it out of the region, by writing, and having the instincts to ask questions that at the time the Kurds themselves were not. That's a big thing that happens when people understand they need to write down their own histories.

Q: How many Kurds live in Europe and the United States?

Meiselas: 18,000 to 20,000 in Sweden; 20,000 in England; 400,000 is the estimate for Germany. There are probably somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 Kurds—who would identify themselves as such—in the States. Those are the rough numbers.

Last year about 4,000 Kurds were brought [into the United

States] from Guam. They were evacuated out of Iraqi Kurdistan as a result of their having been involved in one way or another with either humanitarian work or the Iraqi National Council and the coup attempt against Saddam. When that failed, the U.S. basically went in and pulled people out who had any connection with Westerners. They were potentially in danger.

Q: So part of your project necessarily involved the whole experience of being an exile.

Meiselas: A woman who was just here, Catherine, was describing the first time she went into the apartment of a Kurdish man who teaches at New York University. Ahmed is a linguist who teaches Arabic. She went into Ahmed's apartment and there was a suitcase. She knew it was packed. Somewhere, psychologically, though he's been here more than thirteen years teaching, he still has his bags packed, hoping that somehow the situation will change in his country and he'll go back to Iraqi Kurdistan and teach there.

I've experienced the exile community in a mixed way. There are people who are quite assimilated, who would like to think of themselves as citizens of those countries [where they now live], and there are people who clearly reserve the part of their past to this dream of a place that may or may not ever exist in their lifetime.

To some degree, it's just remembering things that are irreplaceable, that have to do with the cut of a mountain into their valley, or the way in which their mother made bread—things that are unbelievably simple.

Q: Can this book evoke that for exiles?

Meiselas: I don't think the book plays much of a role in remembering traditions. I think those customs are passed on and are still part of family life as best as they can be. I don't think the book is ethnographic in that way. Its role is more remembering what has happened in different periods of history to shape their lives.

There are painful parts of this history that many Kurds would



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Susan Meiselas on assignment in Nicaragua, 1979.

prefer to forget, such as the way they participated in the Armenian massacres at the turn of the century. There are leaders they've heard about but haven't actually seen, and there are images [of them] in the book.

There's a photograph in the book I immediately responded to. It's of two fairly young men, probably in their twenties, one with what looks like a Bible to us but is in fact the Koran, and the other with a pistol. And they're standing perfectly erect, each holding a different object.

The man who sent it to me doesn't remember who gave it to him, doesn't remember who's in it. He doesn't know why he had it—except that he had a pen-pal relationship at a certain point in his life, and he thinks that's how it came to him. I see it as a completely symbolic image of the choice in life.

Q: Did you have an audience in mind when you started this process?

Meiselas: I was thinking about people like myself, who knew so little about the Kurds. But as the book grew, I realized its value to the Kurds themselves. I also started to realize there were people in cultural studies or anthropology or history—who were probably going to find the book more interesting than photographers.

Q: What role has the United States played in the Kurds' effort to achieve independence?

Meiselas: There's a history of Kurds feeling betrayed by the United States. At best, U.S. policy has tended to be confused. On the one hand, the United States has enforced a "no fly zone" in northern Iraq to protect Kurds. On the other hand, it has passed over the Turkish invasions of northern Iraq, which were aimed at Kurdish guerrillas. The United States is not interested in protecting the Kurds as a whole. The bottom line is, when they're convenient for our purposes, we'll protect them, and when they're not, we won't. That's the contradiction of protecting Iraqi Kurds and rebuilding their homes while doing nothing about the burning of nearly all the Kurdish villages in the south-east of Turkey.

These betrayals have been going on for decades. In the early 1970s, the United States gave covert support to the Kurds through the Shah of Iran in their uprising against Iraq. But then in 1975, after Iran negotiated an agreement with Iraq, the

United States suddenly withdrew support for the Kurds and hundreds were killed or forced into exile. At the time, Henry Kissinger said, memorably, that "covert action should not be confused with missionary work." The United States has the same position today.

But it's not just the United States. The Kurds have been the pawns of all the powers around them—their neighbors and the superpowers—for a century. They are constantly being used.

Q: In some ways, it seems like you don't choose to do long-term projects as much as they choose you.

Meiselas: I didn't know, when I went to Kurdistan, that I was going to stay. And that was as true for Nicaragua. That just turns out to be the way I work. You look back and you say, "Of course." But I went to Nicaragua in June of 1978, and the war began in August. I wasn't going into the middle of something. I was going to a place I thought was interesting. It just happened that it exploded within months. And I was grounded enough by then that I felt comfortable about staying.

Q: When you were in Nicaragua, you took pictures that were published almost immediately, seen right away by the rebels, who, I've read, were fortified by those images to continue.

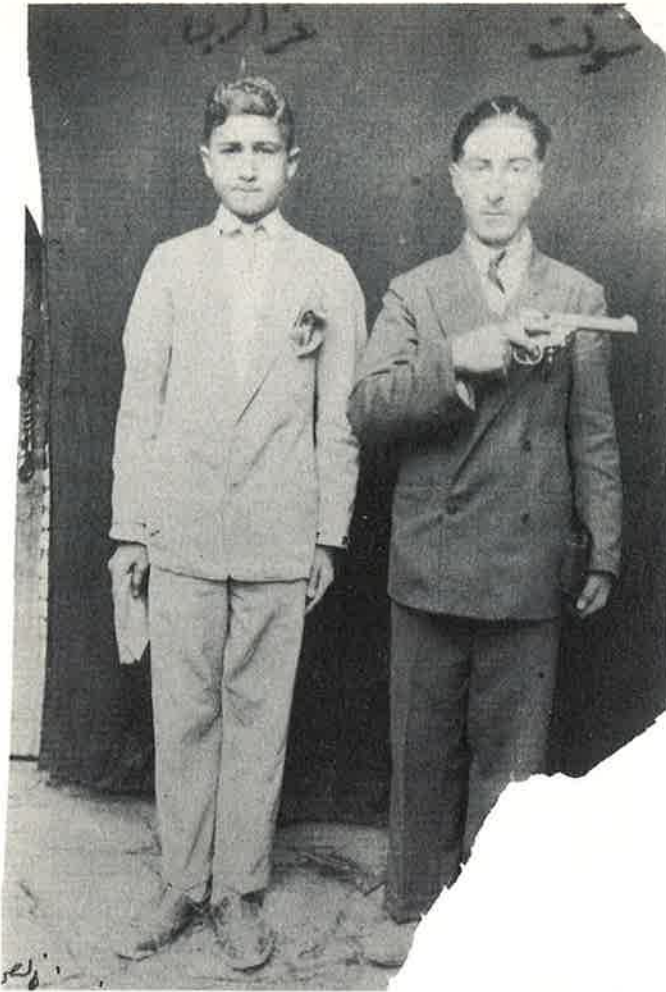
Meiselas: There are lots of ways in which the process of documenting reverberates. Without question the photographs shaped people's perceptions of the Sandinistas. The photographs also shaped their images of themselves.

In Nicaragua, there was also a wonderful reappropriation of images. After the revolution, Sandinistas and various people made stamps and rugs and posters and billboards from the photographs. It wasn't a question of copyright; it was obviously theirs from their point of view. And I felt that was a great place to be, to really have made images they valued, to the point that they wanted to reclaim them.

Q: You were criticized for using color in your war photography in the 1970s. Now color is the norm, even in *The New York Times*. What other changes have you seen as a documentary photographer?

Meiselas: The international news of *Newsweek* and *Time* is limited now, compared to what it was twenty years ago. To me, that's a bigger worry, whether it's in color or black and white—that there are no pages of what's going on in the world.

Q: And what about photographers who want to do long-term documentation?



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Meiselas: Photographers are doing it—Meryl [Meryl Levin, Meiselas's assistant] is doing a long-term project in the South Bronx, about medical care for people in very difficult situations—but nobody wants to publish it. So it's not that photographers aren't committed to the work; it's that magazines aren't interested in representing that kind of work.

Q: I've wondered for a long time about a picture from Nicaragua, a mutilated body left on a ridge. What did it do to you to see this atrocity—and then to take a picture of it?

Meiselas: I often talk about that picture as the central moment to linking and separating. They were living in a history that I had not a clue about. There was nothing in my imagination that would have told me this could happen, that somebody from my family could be taken out in the middle of the night and executed, somewhere not far from my home. That experience di-

vided me and us, as Americans, from the people I was meeting and encountering.

Top left, one of Meiselas's favorite archival photographs, taken from a 1931 postcard. Above, a photo taken in 1987 by the Turkish photographer Ramazan Öztürk in Halabja, where Saddam Hussein had just used chemical weapons against the Kurds. A film crew capturing the same image. At left, Meiselas reviews documents for her book.

vided me and us, as Americans, from the people I was meeting and encountering.

In that one moment, I understood the rage.

On the other hand, I also recognize that it's a picture people find extremely difficult to look at. They're discomforted by the beauty of the landscape; yet I think that's part of its power. It was a moment that people had talked about, but I hadn't ever witnessed. And you know, the witnessing clarifies. The only thing left for me to do was to try and communicate what was happening, why it was happening, as best I could.

Q: So taking that photograph is a way to make the gap visible and to try and bridge it?

Meiselas: To try and bridge that gap. We're not interested in the world. Very few people are. It's painful to be on both sides of that: to see the desperate way that people want us to know about their plight and want us to do something about it, and to be inside the public that is really not thinking too much and doesn't have a desire to know more.

It doesn't have to be about faraway territories such as Kurdistan. With Meryl's work in the South Bronx, we don't want to know about those people either. And they're us, so to speak. Documentarians are struggling with how to keep connecting people to people.

But I don't think an image does it, a piece of work. Maybe a lifetime of work would be an attempt to bridge it. ■