

Who Wants to Go to a Hot War Zone? The Relationship between War and Tourism

Written by Mark Piekarz

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MARK PIEKARZ, MAR 11 2014

It may seem incongruous to associate a hot or active war zone with notions of tourism and holidays. For many, such an association should be regarded as morally repugnant, serving only to trivialize the human tragedy of war and distract from the horrors of conflicts. Periodic news stories of people travelling to war zones tend to emphasize its singularity or fringe aspects, presenting it merely as a voyeuristic or thrill-seeking activity of dubious moral worth. This instinct of suspicion about the motives and concerns about morality, whilst understandable, can be misjudged on a number of levels. The first is that one can make a distinction between war and conflict zones which are still active, or recently ended, as opposed to those that have gone cold and are more easily integrated into a tourism infrastructure of attractions. The second is that concerns over morality may be based on a simplistic assumption of tourism as something just done during leisure time for fun or distraction. The final point relates to the historical association of travel and war, which demonstrates that it is not necessarily an aberration or a product of modernity. Each of these issues will be explained in greater depth in order to illustrate the breadth of hot war tourism.

What Does 'Hot' Mean?

Attaching the terms 'hot' and 'cold' to a battle site, or a place where an act of violence or atrocity has taken place, can be used to convey three key elements: the dangers it presents, the rawness of the visual aesthetic and its ability to initiate hot cognition or dissonance. In relation to the dangers, an active conflict zone would obviously be very hot, with the perils steadily diminishing once the conflict is over. It should however be recognized that the embers of danger from unexploded ordnance can glow for decades after the war, such as in France and Belgium where each year live shells are still ploughed up a hundred years after World War I began, in what is often dubbed the 'iron harvest'.

The second dimension in which to consider the term 'hot' relates to the rawness of what can be seen by people visiting the sites. The more the aftermath of battle is viewed in its unadulterated state, such as looking at destroyed buildings and dead bodies, the 'hotter' the site can be considered. Whilst the passage of time is important in reducing the heat, it is not sufficient in and of itself; acts of intervention and management, such as burying the bodies, returning the land to its former uses, or even commodifying the locations into visitor attractions, can be of more importance in reducing how visually hot the landscape is.

There are, for example, detailed accounts of travelers visiting the battlefields of the First World War in Palestine who could still see numerous unburied bodies many years after the war had ended (Lloyd 1998: 96). Early visitors to the battlefields of the same war in Northern France, too, were greeted by a hot, visceral landscape of death and destruction, with dangers posed not only by unexploded munitions, but also by roving gangs of deserters who continued to roam the sites even though the war was over (Lloyd 1998: 102). In this sense, then, the battlefields could be regarded as still very hot years after the war, because of the rawness of what could still be seen as well as the dangers they could still present.

The third point about the term 'hot' adapts Uzzell's work on hot interpretation (1988), which relates to the capacity of the site to arouse and provoke intense emotional experiences, ranging from anger, sadness, disgust, empathy and

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even (although Uzzell does not go this far) excitement and thrill-seeking (in line with Winston Churchill's quip that 'nothing beats the thrill of being shot at') (Pelton et al, 1998). In this sense, both what one can see and what dangers one may be exposed to can play important roles in initiating hot cognition, which may be appropriate in relation to delivering educational messages which have impact as well as to the more morally questionable aspect of using travel to war zones for excitement.

Applying these notions of 'hot' and 'cold' to places of conflict helps illustrate the continuum or lifecycle that the conflict sites move through, which is dependent on acts of intervention as well as the power of time to heal environments. This dissipation of heat affects both how the sites are used and the moral sensitivity of using them as visitor attractions. While some may argue that such a commodification process only serves to trivialize what took place, there remains an obvious difference between people visiting sites which have become cold (or at least colder), like the many battlefield attractions in Northern France dating to both world wars, compared to people with the desire to see more immediate consequences of battle, such as those who travelled out from Kuwait to look at lines of burnt-out tanks and the charred remains of soldiers at the end of the First Gulf War.

How War Tourism Differs From Dark Tourism

Hot war tourism is intimately related to 'thano' or 'dark' tourism: travel to places that have witnessed death, violence and destruction, which can include battlefields, places of murder and sites of atrocities. There are however some aspects to hot war tourism that distinguish it from dark tourism, such as the possibility for using it for thrill-seeking, or, more importantly, its relationship to business tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recorded that in 2012, tourism went over the one billion mark, of which 52% was for leisure and recreation, 27% was done for visiting friends, family, health and pilgrimages and 14% was for business or professional purposes (UNWTO 2013). It is this 14% that is of interest, because part of this sector can relate to what Paris describes as the 'peacekeeping industry' (2004:1).

The increase in internal armed conflicts ensuing from the dramatic political changes of the 1990s meant that this industry saw meteoric expansion in this decade. The result was that there was a growth not only in the deployment of peacekeeping troops, but also in the need to rebuild failed states. This involved the deployment of a wide array of workers, such as lawyers helping to draft constitutions, officials monitoring elections, aid workers and charities giving relief, commercial organizations with contracts for infrastructure projects, diplomats and trainers for local military, police and government staff. These people travel out to environments that could still be considered hot, but also help lay down the foundations for the development of a tourism infrastructure which in many cases would eventually cater for more mainstream recreational tourism.

War Tourism – A Historical Perspective

A historical perspective of the phenomenon of war tourism can reveal some more surprises and insights. For example, the archives at Thomas Cook – one of the world's oldest travel companies, established in Britain in 1841 – divulge numerous examples of how recently ended wars have proved a very popular basis for holiday packages, ranging from the American and Spanish civil wars to the Boer War and, amongst their largest and most profitable tours, the First World War. These packages were at their most popular whilst there was a rawness to what could be witnessed, declining in popularity as the battlefields became colder. In one revealing letter to the staff magazine, Cook, travelling out to Paris as soon as the Franco-Prussian War was over in 1871, noted how the City of Paris was quickly being repaired, writing that those who are 'anxious to gratify a morbid curiosity should go at once' because soon 'nothing will be left to be seen in the street except the frightful ruins in the modern Pompeii.' (Cook 1871).

Typology of Travellers

This historical analysis, along with the broader definition of tourism and the use of the concept of hot, means that one can identify a range of groups who travel to hot war zones, who vary in their motivation and the morality of such travel. These can be summarised as:

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- The Duty/Working Traveller: This includes people who go to war-torn areas to contribute to aid programmes, the peacekeeping industry or to seek commercial opportunities and contracts, particularly in infrastructure rebuilding projects;
- The Remembrance/Pilgrim Traveller: A great deal of Northern France and Belgium's tourism industry was established to cater to veterans and the families of those who died in battle during the two world wars;
- The Rubbernecker: These are the people who wish to see the consequences of war directly while the conflict zones are still hot; they are largely motivated by morbid curiosity;
- The Cocktail Traveller: These are tourists not interested in the war directly, but who consider the element of danger or the opportunity to see the aftermath of a battle as adding to the general experience; and
- The Innocents: This category takes into account those tourists who inadvertently get caught up in war or insurgent activity whilst travelling.

The final point to note is that the boundaries between travel, tourism and war can sometimes become blurred. For example, an additional category can be developed – that of the fighting volunteer, referring to those who travel to fight in a war which is not strictly theirs. The Spanish Civil War of 1936 is a well-known example of this, but parallels can also be made for people travelling to fight in more recent conflicts, such as those in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and currently Syria. Furthermore, as Sontag (2004) observes, those involved directly in war and conflict can sometimes adopt behavioural patterns more like a tourist. Combatants taking photographs of war is not a new phenomenon, but the rising ease with which an image can be captured has led to a swell of unsettling images, where people want to appear in a photograph showing an act of violence while treating it as just another tourist landmark through which they can remember the moment.

Conclusion

This brief article illustrates that there is in fact a long history of people travelling to hot war zones, for a variety of motives, with perhaps the high point being at the end of the First World War. What it also shows is how conflict zones can go through a lifecycle, which can end up with them becoming commodified for the purpose of education, remembrance or simply an economic resource to be tapped into. Yet one should guard against treating them as just another exploitable money-maker: there are important questions of ethics and morality which must always be wrestled with, but which are more nuanced than they appear at first glance, being affected both by the factors which dissipate the heat of the location as well as by the actual motivators for travelling there.

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About the author:

Dr Mark Piekarz has taught for many years in the fields of adventure, tourism and sport management, presently working at the University of Worcester. The catalyst for conducting research on battlefields and hot war tourism arose from a variety of travel experiences, particularly those that occurred in countries recovering from war, or periods of political instability. The ideas and theories formulated from these initial experiences have been explored in a variety of papers and a doctoral thesis in political risk management. In relation to war and tourism, he has written the chapters “It’s Just a Bloody Field! Approaches, Opportunities and Dilemmas of Interpreting English Battlefields” and “Hot War Tourism: The Ultimate Adventure Holiday?” in “Battlefield Tourism: History, Place and Interpretation,” edited by Chris Ryan.