



IMAGES OF THE HOLOCAUST BETWEEN ACCUSATION AND POST-TRAUMATIC RECOVERY

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Abstract

Starting from the notorious premise that an image tells us more than a thousand words, a photographic synthesis or a history of photographs recording the Jewish tragedy between 1933 and 1945, becomes extremely efficient, both in terms of approach and argumentation. Throughout the historical stages, from the first instances of racial discrimination to the famous final solution, the genocide, photographic testimonials survived, as taken either by the Nazi propaganda or, clandestinely, by the victims themselves, on the one hand and, on the other hand, owed to journalism coverage. Judiciary, these images become evidence both for the prosecution and the defence, but moreover for the realm of the mind and conscience they are key documents for the post-traumatic management of history, respectively for the possible comprehension of an otherwise hard (if at all) comprehensible phenomenon.

Key Words: Holocaust, Jewish, Jews, Tragedy, World War, Nazi, Ghetto, Images, Photography, Trauma, History

The campaign for the annihilation of Jews in Europe, between 1933 and 1945 had several stages. Firstly, Jews were identified, numbered, catalogued,¹ eliminated from social life and subjected to discrimination, stripped of their possessions, both mobile and immobile, then they were sent to concentration camps or ghettos; in the end, it was the genocide. At every stage, the camera was there, as a witness for either the defence or more than often, the prosecution.

1. Propaganda poster (naziposters.com)

In 1930 this photo was largely used in racial scientific manuals aimed at differentiating Jews from Arians. Hitler's coming to power in January 1933 was followed by a series of anti-Semite measures: the vandalizing of Jewish properties, economic boycotts, discriminating legislation, as well as all that followed on a much larger scale after the *Kristallnacht* on 9-10 November 1938. These actions were largely documented especially by journalists in the regime's media. The point of view of the victims was, for obvious reasons, rarely presented. Despite all this, some professional Jewish photographers, such as Avraam Pisarek for instance, continued to work clandestinely and to record the persecution within his community. Images captured by foreigners are rare, although there were some under-cover stories reported and occasionally published. The Contemporary Documentation Jewish Center (CDJC) in Paris actually holds the album of a Dutch amateur photographer who travelled to Germany on



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his motorcycle, from Bentheim to Berlin, systematically documenting the anti-Semite posters of the Nazi propaganda.



2. Dachau – Friedrich Bauer

Aside from these discriminatory measures, as of 1933, a policy for the incarceration of the regime's adversaries began, thus eliminating many of them as common criminal "elements", getting rid of political enemies (communists), gays, Jehovah's witnesses, Jews and Gypsies. Up until the war, the concentration camps were presented as testing grounds for new correctional methods and reeducation through labor (Dachau). Far from being secret, these camps actually played a central role in the regime's propaganda. As such, in between 1933 and 1938 Friedrich Bauer reported extensively on the Dachau camps in the Nazi press.

3. Buchenwald – Georg Angeli

Aside from this external iconography there was also a certain activity of photographic documentation (more or less clandestine) from within the more significant camps, each of them having a special image laboratory: identity photos, documentation of current works, visits of Nazi officials and various medical experiments. The beginning of the war did not affect the *status quo* in one bit, perhaps except for the fact that external propaganda ceased. It was no longer a matter of promoting the reeducation of prisoners but a question of hiding their (ultimately forced and slave-like) participation in the war effort. The otherwise scarce media coverage of these issues inside the camps emphasized the productive potential of the prisoners and they were basically aimed at Nazi ranking officials and German industrialists interested in cheap labour force. Despite all this, several clandestine photos were taken by the prisoners, which later became evidence pieces in the Nuremberg trial and elements in the documentation of the Holocaust – Georg Angeli in Buchenwald, Rudolf Cisar in Dachau and others.

4. The Warsaw Ghetto – Joe Heydecker

The war allowed yet another form of concentration, namely ghettoization. Decided on during the Poland invasion, the creation of ghettos began in the winter of 1939-1940. This phenomenon benefited from a substantial photographic coverage from the part of the propaganda photographers,

such as Cusian and Grimm in Warsaw or Hensel and Vandrey in Lublin. Many of their photos presenting the inhabitants of the ghettos as only slightly dirty, sick, withdrawn even, were published in the central media, such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* for instance. Quite differently, the secretly captured photos in the Warsaw ghetto, by Joe Heydecker,² a simple assistant in the service of the propaganda, show the terrible conditions in the ghetto. Similarly enlightening and at the same time terrifying photos were taken by Jewish photographers such as Mendel Grossman, a prisoner from Łódź. Particularly distinctive are the colour Agfa photos of the Łódź ghetto, captured in 1940-1941 by a Nazi administrator named Walter Genewein. In the same vein the 54 triumphant photos included in the report of general Stroop regarding the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943³ are worth mentioning.

5. The Warsaw Ghetto – The Stroop Report

After the invasion of Russia in 1941, the number of Jews under German control grew tremendously. The policy of concentration became unable to be implemented on such a large scale, so a policy of extermination began. During the *Blitzkrieg* towards the East, the Wehrmacht carried out or tolerated a great number of atrocities, but the “main” genocide belonged to a special SS unit (Einsatzgruppen) that was given the mission to execute communist public servants (politicians, commissioners) and Jews.



6. Einsatzgruppen – memorialdelashoah.org

Despite the severe interdictions, many amateur photographers managed to capture images of such executions. Some SS soldiers would pose proudly with the bodies of those they had executed. The matter of the “final solution” for the Jews – systematic extermination – was launched/approved at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. As of March, the Jews from occupied Europe faced deportations in the concentration camps from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka. Since the “final solution” was supposed to be a secret, these deportations were rarely photographed.

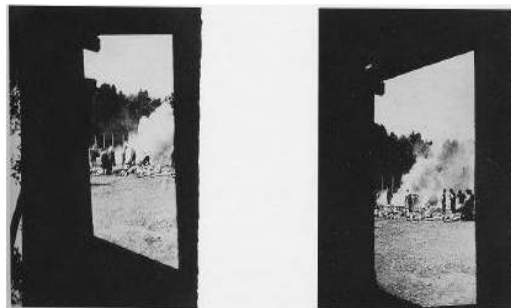




7. Jews deported from Siedlce to Treblinka – Hubert Pfoch, 22 August 1942

Despite all this, several clandestine images exist, such as those captured by Austrian soldier Hubert Pfoch, of a transport meant to reach Treblinka, or such as the official images of the Würzburg Police. The interdiction to take photographs was extremely strict in the concentration camps themselves, only a few images surviving in time of what happened there, such as those taken in Auschwitz in 1944 of a Hungarian Jewish transport. The photos, probably taken by SS soldiers, show the arrival of the trains, the triage of detainees (to the right meant death, to the left meant live), as well as the sanitization and sorting of luggage. In fact, everything is presented in these photos except the actual killings.

Obviously many other photos were taken (witnesses from Auschwitz have spoken of photographs being taken of the gassing process) but they were all destroyed before the concentration camp was liberated. The only images that refer directly to the extermination process were taken in secret by Polish dissidents in Auschwitz, in the summer of 1944. They show a group of women that had been forced to strip naked before being thrown into the gas chambers and the activity of the incineration crew.



8. Incinerations at Auschwitz, unknown author



9. Aerial photo of Auschwitz, 25 August 1944, the 60 Aerial Recognition Squad, British Army – yadvashem.org

At the end of 1944 several American aerial recognition missions render photos of Auschwitz. In the photographs, the barracks of the detainees, the convoys and even the gas chambers were perfectly visible. However, the military analysts of these images were less interested in those details and more concerned with the military importance of an industrial complex in the immediate vicinity of the barracks.

10. Survivors in Buchenwald, Margaret Bourke-White, April 1945

For the Allies, the photographic documentation of the concentration and extermination camps began with their liberation – Auschwitz in January 1945 and as of April, all the rest. While the Russians spoke nothing of the atrocities they had discovered, British and American authorities decided to release the images and the stories to the press. We can speak of three types of photographers involved: photo reporters such as Margaret Bourke-White, Lee Miller and George Rodger; military photographers; and regular soldiers.

The terrible images taken were disseminated on a large scale by the press in the following months. By facilitating this, the British and American strategists were hoping both to validate the war they were involved in, as far as the public was concerned, as if this were necessary, and to prepare the upcoming communication strategies, in the brink of the Cold War. The freeing of the oppressed had already become a political matter.



11. Survivors in Bergen-Belsen, 20 April 1945, George Rodger, liceoberchet.it

These photographs are unquestionably a stepping stone in the visual history of the 20th century. In 1945, the image industry had come face to face with the death industry. Even if the images show for their most part concentration camps, they have become today what Holocaustologists call *icons of Jewish extermination*. As such, they render colour to our perception and memory of the past.

Images of the Holocaust – photographs capturing the cruel “unstaged reality”,⁴ a reality that existed irrespective of whose lenses it came through – the Nazi propaganda, the detainee that managed to capture a clandestine photo with a camera “recovered” from the luggage of another victim, the professional war photographer or the simple soldier. There is a certain naturalness in these photos (even if a trivializing one) that underlines and emphasizes objectivity – a common trait of all photographs – and the (welcomed) absence of any comments.

Analysing these images, we notice their transparency. With all of them we identify a *connotator*,⁵ as if from before the shutter being set off – we can almost imagine the following frames after the photographer lowered his lenses and life carried on its course. We thus take note of a first connotation – the photo is a



“clean” denotation.⁶ The strong connotations that photographs receive is owed to the methodology chosen in the rendering of the frames from the infinite number of possibilities. Surely each case had its own “arguments” – the mission of the propaganda certainly differed from the motivation of the Allied soldiers, not to mention the anonymous prisoners from Auschwitz that focused on capturing the *essential* – the proof of murder.



12. Einsatzgruppen in action – yadvashem.com

We can speak of a certain rhetoric in the case of some of the photographs (taken by professionals). The close-up, the symmetry, the frontal frame, these are all elements that emphasize (through contextualisation) both the victim and the site of the murder – horizontal frames mostly appear in the photos taken after liberation, perhaps to render an image that fully captures the emotions and the horror.

The anxiety and the unbalance from the age of the boycott and discrimination turn into “shock and awe” at the moment of genocide (after all, we are also faced with an incredible contradiction of the time). Towards the end, focusing on the faces and bodies of two survivor women George Rodger captures both the elation of having survived and (perhaps) the distrust in actual salvation (for some, arrived much too late to matter), both the joy and naturalness of the meal and the fear (still) that the piece of bread might be ripped from your hands. Ultimately the viewers’ incapacity to “decipher” what’s in the background represents the final break with “that world of death” and the triumph of life (with all its ups and downs).

Certainly the message behind these images is different – different for the Holocaust survivor, different for his or her descendant (ultimately still a victim), different for the German soldier enrolled at the time in the Wehrmacht or the SS, different for his or her descendants, different for the members of modern society more or less involved with this particular subject. All this being said, the conclusion to be drawn, in a philosophical register, is that these images have surpassed their brute denotation towards a liberating metaphor – with a significant post-traumatic role of remembrance, explanation and understanding.

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Endnotes

¹ibmandtheholocaust.com.

²See Joe Heydecker, *Un soldat allemande dans le ghetto de Varsovie 1941*.

³holocaustresearchproject.org/nazioccupation/stroop.html.

⁴ Siegfried Krakauer, "Photography," 263.

⁵ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," p.282.

⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Photographic Essay," p.284.