

REVIEW ESSAY

Photographing Sites of Nazi Violence, 1933–1945

David Crew

The University of Texas at Austin
Email: dfcrew@austin.utexas.edu

By far the greatest number of photographs of Nazi sites of violence were taken by the perpetrators. Some Jews did work as official photographers in the ghettos, but during deportations, in the camps and extermination centers, and at the sites of mass shootings, only Gestapo officers, SS men and women, or other authorized personnel were officially permitted to use cameras. In the Mauthausen concentration camp, for example, as Lukas Meissel explains in his contribution to the excellent collection of essays, *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes. Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, “only members of the so-called *Erkennungsdienst* (identification department) were allowed to take photographs.”¹ These photographs “do not reflect the reality of the camp” (45). They seldom confront us directly with Nazi violence. Instead, these pictures offer (false) images of frictionless operations, visual testimony to the efficiency of the perpetrators, usually meant to impress their superiors.

The victims seldom had access to cameras. An official Jewish photographer in a ghetto might take clandestine photographs. A prisoner in a camp could perhaps barter with another inmate for a camera or might even find a camera in the possessions of deportees. Once that prisoner had a camera, taking an illicit photograph inside the camp was extremely dangerous. Even if the prisoner with the camera managed to evade the attention of the SS, he or she still ran the risk of being denounced by another inmate. Unlike the drawings made by prisoners, photographs normally did not show actual acts of violence but rather the physical traces of this violence on the bodies of survivors or, as in the case of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* photographs, the victims just before they were murdered or their corpses after they had been killed. In her chapter in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes*, Andrea Genest investigates the first kind of illicit photograph taken by Joanna Szydłowska, an inmate in Ravensbrück.² The photographer and her three subjects belonged to a group of Poles subjected to so-called medical experiments that were meant to test the effectiveness of sulfonamide against intentionally infected wounds. Szydłowska took photographs of the victims a year after these “experiments” came to an end. Another inmate, the ethnologist Germaine Tillon, kept the roll of film until the end of April 1945, when she was able to smuggle it out of the camp in a tin of dried milk as she was being evacuated by the Swedish Red Cross (93–95).

Some SS crimes were actually staged for the camera by inmates and Allied soldiers after the liberation of the camps in 1945. One of the most brutal punishments meted out to concentration camp prisoners was *Baumhängen*, during which the victim was hung by the arms from a tree without any support for up to three hours. This dislocated the shoulders, causing

¹ Lukas Meissel, ed. “Perpetrator Photography: The Pictures of the *Erkennungsdienst* at Mauthausen Concentration Camp,” in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes. Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, edited by Hildegard Frübis, Clara Oberle, and Agnieszka Pufelska (Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2019), 25.

² Andrea Genest, “Fotografien als Zeugen—Häftlingsfotografien aus dem Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück,” in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes. Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, 92.

intense pain and even unconsciousness. We do have some photographs of *Baumhängen*. Sandra Starke has discovered, however, that these pictures were staged for the camera by US soldiers and inmates after the liberation of the camps. The SS men in the pictures were forced by the American soldiers to participate in these staged photoshoots.³

Flashes of Memory: Fotografie im Holocaust

The *Flashes of Memory* exhibition, which opened in Berlin in March 2023, after its inauguration in Israel in 2018, displays photographs that were taken by three different groups of actors from three different vantage points: that of German perpetrators and “bystanders,” of Jewish victims, and of Allied liberators. Some of these photographs are quite well known and have been made public many times before. James Elkins reminds us, however, that “famous photographs ... are the tiniest minority of all photographs.”⁴ One of the great strengths of the *Flashes of Memory* exhibition and catalog is that it also gives the visitor/viewer access to a large number of these other, lesser-known photographs.⁵

What these photographs can tell us about how Germans, Jews, and other Europeans used photography during the Third Reich may be as important as what we actually see in these pictures. Here are two examples: First, between pages 42 and 45 of the exhibition catalog, we see a photo album of alleged Jewish criminals, men and women accused of a wide range of offenses. The album was compiled by the Nuremberg police and presented to Julius Streicher, *Gauleiter* of the region and editor of the viciously antisemitic newspaper, *Der Stürmer*. This practice of preparing presentation albums for superiors was not unusual. One of the best-known presentation albums is the Stroop Report, a compilation of photographic images that documented the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in the spring of 1943 by SS troopers under the command of Jürgen Stroop. Copies of this album were prepared for Stroop’s superiors and for Heinrich Himmler. When Rudolph Höss was put in charge of the murder of more than 325,000 Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz during the spring and summer of 1944, he ordered that a photo album be made to demonstrate the success of this monstrous project (42). But Nazi leaders were not the only recipients of such presentation albums. A large-format album (it is almost as big as two young boys who are pictured holding a copy) documenting the achievements of the Lodz Ghetto administration was given to Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Jewish Council (130–31).

Second, between pages 58 and 67, we see another example of a disturbing Third Reich photographic practice—Germans sending photographs they had taken to *Der Stürmer*, which the newspaper then edited to construct vicious antisemitic stories. This practice began in the 1930s, when SA men and other Germans took photos of non-Jewish Germans who had flouted boycotts of stores and businesses owned by Jews. Some of these photographers sent their pictures to *Der Stürmer* with a request that the newspaper publish them to shame and intimidate non-Jews who had ignored the boycott. This circulation of images created a new photographic public in the Third Reich, which, as the *Flashes of Memory* catalog shows, some non-Jewish Germans eagerly exploited.

Ghettos

Tanja Kinzel’s imposing book, *Im Fokus der Kamera. Fotografien aus dem Getto Lodz*, constructs detailed analyses of a huge number of photographs taken by a wide range of photographers in this second-largest ghetto in German-occupied Europe.⁶ Photographers with quite

³ Sandra Starke, “‘... davon kann man sich kein Bild machen.’ Entstehen, Funktion und Bedeutung der Baumhängen-Fotos,” in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes. Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, 49.

⁴ James Elkins, *What Photography Is* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 94, 96.

⁵ *Flashes of Memory: Fotografie im Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2023), 215.

⁶ Tanja Kinzel, *Im Fokus der Kamera. Fotografien aus dem Ghetto Lodz* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2021).

different motivations and perspectives were at work in the Lodz Ghetto. Jewish photographers employed by the Jewish Council took officially commissioned but also clandestine photographs. Photographs were also taken by German civilians, police officers, and soldiers who worked in or who visited the ghetto. Sometimes the motives of the Jewish and the German photographers overlapped. Rumkowski and the Jewish Council wanted to use photographs of workers in factories and workshops and of the products they made in an attempt to convince the Germans that Jewish labor was vital to the German war effort. Walter Genewein (1901–1974) was a German civilian employed in the Lodz Ghetto as head of the *Finanzabteilung* (113), which meant, among other things, that he administered the money and valuables that had been stolen from the Jews. Like Rumkowski, Genewein also wanted to present the ghetto as an efficient and productive manufacturing site, essential to the German war effort. But this is where the similarity ends. Whereas Rumkowski claimed that this strategy was the best way to ensure that at least some of the Jews in the ghetto might survive the war, Genewein (and his superior, Hans Biebow) were only interested in continuing to make money and avoiding being sent to fight on the eastern front. Other German civilian observers, such as a police officer named Steiner, the *Volksdeutscher* Alfred Kiss, and an unnamed *Postschutzbeamter*, took photographs of activities in the ghetto that “mainly involved their own field of work ... to highlight the ... achievements” (551). The only woman among these German civilian or military observers, the photojournalist Liselotte Pürper, had no particular connection to Lodz or to the ghetto (452).

Kinzel detects no hint of empathy for their Jewish subjects in the photographs taken by German soldiers or civilians (551). By contrast, Jewish photographers were intent on creating a sympathetic visual document of everyday life in the ghetto, which “showed the extent of the destitution” (315). Two of the Jewish photographers, Henryk Ross and Mendel Grossman, took the not-inconsiderable risk of shooting clandestine photographs of “forbidden scenes.” Ross’s photographs of Jews being deported from the Radegast train station are perhaps the only such pictures taken by a Jewish photographer in any of the regions occupied by the Germans that have survived (559). To get these pictures, Ross had to risk a dangerous “step outside” of the system for which he worked. Yet, at the same time, it was his position of relative privilege within the hierarchy of the ghetto that allowed him to take this step.

Instead of becoming hopelessly entangled in the question of which of these photographs are more authentic and more useful to historians and educators than others, Kinzel argues that these photographs are neither “true nor false—they display specific perceptions of events. In this sense, photographs are *contingent traces of history*” (560, emphasis in the original). She concedes that each of these photographs could be interpreted in quite different ways by different viewers but insists that, in general terms, the significance of these pictures is the role they played (and continue to play) “in the struggle for the interpretation of history” (552).

Kinzel also draws attention to the importance of “all the ... pictures that have not been produced. It is a matter of including ... the absences” (560). One important absence is the photographic perspectives of women in the ghetto. Another is the Germans who were the real power in the ghetto. Whereas Chaim Rumkowski’s picture was everywhere, the Germans were scarcely present visually (313). Physical violence was also seldom shown directly. Nor do these photographs give the viewer a tangible sense of the sounds and smells with which Jews were assailed on a daily basis. However, the authors of *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens. Ein Album aus Auschwitz* have found several visual references to some of these other sensual experiences in certain photographs.⁷ Auschwitz stank. In two photographs of groups of women, three hold their noses, perhaps because they can smell the bodies being burned in a crematorium (152). In another photograph on that same page, which shows women and children in a small stand of trees, a man in the

⁷ Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hörder, and Christoph Kreuztmüller, *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens. Ein Album aus Auschwitz* (Darmstadt: wbg Academic, 2019).

background is urinating against one of the trees. Presumably he was not the only person to have felt the need to do this, so the entire area probably reeked of urine (152).

Concentration Camps: Esterwegen, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald

In her contribution to *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes*, Ute Wrocklage shows that throughout his life, Karl Otto Koch, who became the *Kommandant* of Esterwegen, then Sachsenhausen, and, finally, Buchenwald, assembled numerous photo albums. Some of these were meant to trace his career in the SS, others focused upon his private life. But in Koch's life, "public" and "private" were not easy to disentangle. So, for example, photographs in a "private" album that were taken in 1935 showed Koch, his wife Ilse, and his son Manfred "on vacation" in the Esterwegen concentration camp, which was here described as if it were just another holiday destination. Several photographs showed the large swimming pool for the SS in the camp. One picture focused upon the diving tower.⁸ Koch's official *Dienstalbum* included several photographs of this same swimming pool and diving tower (191), but here they were presented as signs of what he had achieved for his men as *Kommandant* of the camp.

Another album put together for Koch's son Artwin, born in 1938, shows a loving father and son walking in the campgrounds (later also with daughter Gisela, born in 1939) or visiting the camp zoo (197). A page with the inscription "the first snow, Dec. 1940 in Buchenwald" shows Koch in civilian clothes with his wife and two children outside the *Kommandanturgebäude* of the camp (198). Ilse Koch figures prominently in Artwin's album. She presents herself as the model SS wife and mother (199). The photographs in which she appears show her cuddling and kissing her son, looking at him lovingly as he takes his first steps alone, and romping around with him in the grass (198). Even though most of the photographs in Artwin's album were taken on the grounds of Buchenwald, they have very little to do with the realities of the camp. Instead, they perform an obscene travesty of "normal" middle-class family life.

Extermination Centers: The Niemann Photo Collection

As shown in *From "Euthanasia" to Sobibor: An SS Officer's Photo Collection*, Johann Niemann started his working life as a journeyman painter, then became an SA stormtrooper.⁹ After joining an SS Death's Head battalion in 1934 (18), Niemann worked at the Esterwegen and Sachsenhausen concentration camps (3). In November 1939, he was detailed to the T-4 program (45f), first at Grafeneck, then at the Brandenburg and Bernburg killing centers. His job as a "burner" meant that Niemann became an expert in killing large numbers of human beings and getting rid of their corpses: "Along with his SS comrades, Niemann thus belonged to a small group of men who possessed this practical knowledge" (47–48), which they subsequently used to guide the construction of the Belzec killing center (94). During his time at Belzec, Niemann "was involved in the killing of approximately 250,000 Jews" (53). Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor functioned as the epicenters of Operation Reinhard (1941–1943), which murdered 1.7 million Jews. Without the expertise and engagement of men like Niemann, mass murder on this enormous scale would have been impossible.

Niemann was well rewarded for his indispensable contribution to the Nazis' genocidal project. By the time he was killed in a prisoners' revolt on October 14, 1943, he had been promoted to the position of deputy *Kommandant* in the Sobibor extermination camp. Niemann had come a long way from his modest beginnings as a journeyman painter and

⁸ Ute Wrocklage, in *Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes. Beweissicherung und ästhetische Praxis*, 188.

⁹ Martin Cüppers, Anne Lepper, and Jürgen Matthäus, ed., *From "Euthanasia" to Sobibor: An SS Officer's Photo Collection* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

clearly relished his new position: “In the photos that have survived, Niemann presented himself as a dashing German officer. For him, that obviously included good clothes and symbols of power such as a horse, a dog, and gloves” (55). Niemann’s authority and power also brought significant material gains to him and his family. The record of deposits to the savings accounts of Niemann’s wife and of her father clearly shows that his family, like those of so many other SS men involved in the genocide, had enriched itself considerably in the “gigantic campaign of plunder” that accompanied Operation Reinhard (87).

Throughout his career, Niemann had photographs taken of himself and the locations where he worked. What makes *From “Euthanasia” to Sobibor* so powerful is the juxtaposition of these photographs with detailed histories of Niemann’s crimes. Niemann’s photos were taken at exactly the same sites of violence where hundreds of thousands of victims were murdered, yet his pictures and his crimes seem to belong to totally different universes. In the photographs from Grafeneck, for example, “Niemann and his coperpetrators Gottfried Schwarz and Siegfried Graetschus pose in the snow in front of the castle ... The images bear witness to the effort to document the SS men’s ‘normal life’ beyond the daily routine of murder” (47). Another photograph “even shows Niemann’s wife, Henriette, among the T4 perpetrators at Bernburg. She apparently came on a visit from Völlen, almost 250 miles (400 km) away, and thus was amazingly close to a scene of the ‘euthanasia’ crimes” (49). In his collection, Niemann’s Jewish and other victims “appear ... only as silhouettes in the background of a small number of photos. Apparently, Niemann did not wish to possess any visual evidence of his crimes” (1). Yet hints of these crimes can nonetheless be found in some of these pictures. For example, one photograph shows Niemann with other SS officers outside the staff club at Sobibor, along with two kitchen workers and a Customs Border Guards official. On the table, we can see valuable crystal glasses that were probably stolen from Jews murdered in the camp (162).

Auschwitz

Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens reminds us that one reason Auschwitz has become such a widespread symbol of the Holocaust is that we have more photographs of this one camp than of all the other major extermination centers taken together: Belzec, Chelmno, Lublin, Maly Trostinets, Sobibor, and Treblinka (10). In the spring and summer of 1944, the *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, Rudolph Höss, oversaw the mass murder of more than 325,000 Hungarian Jews who had been deported to the camp. Höss commissioned SS camp photographers to take pictures of this operation. When one of these photographers, Bernhard Walter, the head of the *SS-Erkennungsdienst* in Auschwitz, fled westward a few days before the Red Army liberated the camp on January 27, 1945, he took with him his own private copy of these photographs, now assembled in what has come to be known as the Lili Jacob Auschwitz Album.¹⁰ By February 1945, Walter had managed to reach the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp in Nordhausen. Two months later, shortly before the US Army reached the southern Harz region, Walter fled again, but this time he left the album containing 197 photographs in one of the barracks where Lili Jacob, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary, accidentally found it. She recognized some of her murdered relatives in these photographs. The album was subsequently used as evidence in several trials of Nazi war criminals. During the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963–1965), Walter initially denied that he had taken any of these pictures but then recanted. Lili Jacob acted as a witness at the trial. In 1980, the French lawyer and historian Serge Klarsfeld visited Lili Jacob in Miami and convinced her to donate the photo collection to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The album has become one of the most important visual documents of the Nazi genocide.

¹⁰ Christoph Kreutzmüller, “Das Auschwitz-Album der SS,” *Der Spiegel*, January 26, 2020 (<https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/das-auschwitz-album-der-ss-a-b0719bf9-a8ad-4758-af5f-a17b9526d6f5>).

Several of the photographs from this album are very well known. They have been reproduced many times in publications, displayed in museum exhibits, or posted online. In his review of the book *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens*, Sven Felix Kellerhof remarks, however, “It is remarkable that so much detailed information can still be won from pictures that have been known for so long.”¹¹ Franz Sz. Horvath attributes the reclamation of this new knowledge to the authors’ exhaustive investigation of “almost every single photo with regard to peculiarities, connections with other photos pasted on to other pages, and details that superficial observation would normally miss.” As a result, the book offers “an analysis ... which, because of its richness of detail ... intensity, and empathy, is ... unprecedented in the relevant literature.”¹²

Photographs taken by the perpetrators in Auschwitz were produced without the consent of the victims. Sometimes the subjects of these pictures did not even know that they were being photographed. Certain scenes were clearly staged by the photographers. Some survivors even remember being told to smile for the camera. However, a few victims did push back against being treated as objects. In the four photographs that immediately precede the title page of *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens*, four young women can be seen sticking their tongues out at the SS photographer who is taking their pictures. Sometimes, women who were being photographed covered their faces with their hand or a piece of cloth. In another photograph, a young woman in a larger group of women turned her back to the camera. We do not know what the consequences of these small acts of refusal might have been for these individuals. It is quite possible that the photographer did not even notice what these young women were doing until he looked more closely at the developed film, by which time the person in the picture might already have been murdered.

Conclusion

Overall, at least six important observations emerge from the books under review here: (1) Whether the subject was Jews in ghettos or in the camps, the SS and other Nazi authorities tried to use photography to show themselves and their superiors that they had achieved a frictionless efficiency in their operations. (2) Although the SS and other Germans photographed and even filmed mass shootings, their pictures of the camps and ghettos seldom show us the ubiquitous violence to which Jews and other victims were subjected.¹³ (3) When Jews appeared in SS photographs, they were normally not presented as individuals but as a mass or as (usually male) stereotypes. The SS saw its victims as objects, like the material things these victims had bought with them to the camps. Both victims and their possessions were to be sorted into what was useful and what should be discarded. Photographs were used to show how efficiently this job was being done. (4) Photographs of the victims were taken without the consent of the photographed. Yet, even in Auschwitz, at least a few victims did push back by, for example, sticking out their tongues at the SS man photographing them or by turning their backs to the SS cameraman. (5) In the ghettos, it was possible for some Jewish photographers to take clandestine photographs that attempted to subvert the official SS images. This was much more difficult in Auschwitz and appears to have been simply impossible in the extermination centers such as Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, where most victims were murdered right away.

¹¹ Sven Felix Kellerhof, “Was die Fotos der SS über das KZ Auschwitz-Birkenau verraten,” *Die Welt*, December 19, 2019 (<https://www.welt.de/geschichte/zweiter-weltkrieg/article204445224/Holocaust-Album-Was-die-Fotos-der-SS-ueber-Auschwitz-verraten.html>).

¹² Franz Sz. Horváth, “Die Shoa neu sehen,” *literaturkritik.de*, June 23, 2020 (<https://literaturkritik.de/ioanid-iasi-pogrom-juni-juli-1941-hoerdler-kreutzmueller-bruttmann-fotografische-inszenierung-verbrechens-shoa-neu-sehen,26860.html>).

¹³ See, for example, Valerie Hébert, ed., *Framing the Holocaust: Photographs of a Mass Shooting in Latvia, 1941* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2023).

And: (6) Only one of the books under review here (*Fotografien aus den Lagern des NS-Regimes*) seriously attempts to address an extremely important set of questions raised by these photographs, namely how they have been used and what meanings they have been given since 1945. Tanya Kinzel describes these images as “secret photographic messages [Kassiber] from another world” (560). What these messages from the past mean depends heavily upon what we think these pictures can tell us in our present. But expectations change over time and with the new knowledge we gain from other sources. What we think we can know from these photographs also depends heavily on how they are curated in an exhibition, in a book, or online and what other images, texts, or oral histories they are brought in contact with. In the *Flashes of Memory* exhibition, for example, we can see a video of Henryk Ross (obviously not available in the printed catalog), showing how he took clandestine photos in the Lodz Ghetto. Triumphantly, he pulls the camera out from under his coat, pretends to take a photograph, then quickly returns it to the cover of his coat. What does this performance mean? Can it help us to understand what he felt at the time he actually took these pictures? Or is it more important because it shows us how he came to see his photos decades later? Questions like these can only be answered by digging deeper into the photographic “afterlife” of the Holocaust since 1945.

David Crew is Distinguished Teaching Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin. His most recent book is *Bodies and Ruins. Imagining the Bombing of Germany 1945 to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017). His research interests include the history of photography in Germany’s twentieth century.