

Harriet Scharnberg, Die »Judenfrage« im Bild. Der Antisemitismus in nationalsozialistischen Fotoreportagen, Hamburg (Hamburger Edition) 2018, 443 S., 95 Abb. (Studien zur Gewaltgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts), ISBN 978-3-86854-325-4, EUR 28,00.

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Steven Luckert, Washington, DC

Images have long informed the ways in which we view the Third Reich, World War II, and the Holocaust¹. Indeed, our collective memories of these events have been powerfully shaped by photographs and film taken by international photojournalists, Nazi propagandists, Allied cameramen and -women as well as by Jewish photographers in the ghettos of German-occupied eastern Europe. Although this wealth of visual material has been packaged and re-packaged in countless popular histories, it has only been in recent decades that scholars have begun to critically examine this photography. Some have shed light on individual photos or photographers, while others have focused on the private photography of »ordinary« Germans, and still others on Allied photography of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps².

Interpreting photos, however, is a notoriously difficult task, since it often depends on discovering the whos, whens, whats, whys, and hows behind the image. Without this proper contextualization,

¹ The views expressed in this review are those of the author's and do not reflect those of any other party.

² Among these recent works are Wendy Lower, *The Ravine. A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed*, Boston 2021; David Shneer, *Grief. The Biography of a Holocaust Photograph*, New York 2020; and his earlier work, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*, New Brunswick 2011; Winfried Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte kurz belichtet. Photoreportagen von Gerhard Gronefeld 1937–1965*, Berlin 1991; Rudolf Herz, *Hoffmann & Hitler. Fotografie als Medium des Führer-Mythos*, Munich 1994; Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hördler, Christoph Kreuzmüller, *Die fotografische Inszenierung des Verbrechens. Ein Album aus Auschwitz*, Darmstadt 2019; Jan Tomasz Gross with Irina Grudzińska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, New York 2012; Nadine Fresco, *On the Death of Jews. Photographs and History*, trans. by Sarah Clift, Published in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2021; Vivian Uria, *Flashes of Memory: Photography During the Holocaust*, Jerusalem 2018; Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the Evidence*, London 2004 (reprinted 2020); Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung. Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945*, Berlin 1998 (Schriftenreihe des Fritz-Bauer-Instituts, 14); Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget. Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*, Chicago 1998.



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analysis can often result in misinterpretation or outrageous speculation. Determining the motivation behind a particular image or whether it represents a particular »gaze« is fraught with challenges.

Harriet Scharnberg well understands these problems. In her masterful study, »Die ›Judenfrage‹ im Bild: Der Antisemitismus in nationalsozialistischen Fotoreportagen«, she rightly points out that photographs lend themselves to a variety of different interpretations and that to understand the meaning of an image, particularly one that appeared in print, the scholar needs to delve into the sources that document the creative and publishing processes involved. Understanding these processes is an integral part of her study, which examines how Nazi propagandists disseminated antisemitic imagery through popular illustrated weeklies, like the »Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung« (BIZ), to millions of Germans.

To set the proper historical context, Scharnberg provides readers with a very useful introduction to the Nazi regime's regulation of the press. She discusses the impact of legislation that ultimately deprived hundreds of press photographers of their income and profession and forced many of them, especially Jews, to emigrate. The »aryanization« of Jewish-owned press enterprises, like the Ullstein publishing house, which issued the BIZ, one of Europe's most popular illustrated weeklies, transformed these enterprises into Nazi propaganda tools. For those journalists and press photographers who were permitted to work, a combination of terror and legislation acted like the proverbial »sword of Damocles« over their heads, compelling them to self-censor or risk losing their jobs or serving time in a concentration camp for »weakening the power of the German Reich«. To be sure, there was no shortage of those who agreed with the policies of the Nazi state and eagerly used their cameras or pens to promote the regime's goals.

Even foreign news agencies, such as the Associated Press (AP), were not exempt from the new regulations and were forced to comply with its racial policies by dismissing Jewish photographers and staff. In some cases, the German affiliates of international press organizations closed up shop or were acquired by German firms. This is, of course, a topic that Scharnberg knows very well since she first exposed the complicated relationship between the AP and the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in a pioneering article in 2016³. Not surprisingly, her research generated a great deal of publicity, ultimately forcing the Associated Press to issue its own report and open up some of its

³ See Scharnberg's article on the AP's role: Das A und P der Propaganda. Associated Press und die nationalsozialistische Bildpublizistik, in: Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History, Online-Ausgabe, 13 (2016), H. 1., Druckausgabe S. 11-37, DOI: [10.14765/zzf.dok-1413](https://doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok-1413).



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archival holdings⁴. In »Die ›Judenfrage‹ im Bild«, she builds upon this work as well as her even earlier research detailing how Nazi photo propaganda represented German and Jewish labor⁵.

In her analysis of antisemitism in press photos she draws on a number of important sources, including the BIZand »Das Schwarze Korps«, the SS newspaper. Scharnberg shows how published photographs promoted negative stereotypes of Jews, particularly those in eastern Europe, that stigmatized them as racially alien, lazy, dirty, criminal, and antagonistic to the German Reich. This was clearly exemplified in German press images of Jewish ghettos in German-occupied Poland. While some of these Nazi tropes are well known to scholars, Scharnberg goes a step further. She shows how the Reich's illustrated press transformed the »ghetto« from a »Jewish slum« into the prototype of a »Jewish state«, by using photographs taken by Wehrmacht Propaganda Companies, which had been specifically selected and captioned for propagandistic purposes. By presenting the ghettos as examples of »Jewish self-government«, the press conveyed the false impression that Jews themselves, not the German administration, were responsible for the horrific conditions there. Presented in this way, the ghetto stood as the complete antithesis of the Nazi mythical vision of a German *Volksgemeinschaft*, in which all »national comrades« buried their religious, regional, and class differences for the benefit of the greater good. Nazi propagandists commonly visually contrasted and juxtaposed Germans and Jews to racialize both, but it was always to the detriment of the latter.

As she did in her earlier work on the representation of German and Jewish work, Scharnberg cites some interesting, and short-lived, photographic anomalies in the German press that tended to contradict or offset the more prevalent negative images of Jews as work shy or as haggling merchants. In fall 1934, the Nazi newspaper, »Der Angriff« published a series of articles by an SS Middle East expert, Leopold von Mildenstein, entitled, »Ein Nazi fährt nach Palästina«, which showed »positive« images of Jews at work on *kibbutzim*. Combined with photographs taken by a local Jewish photographer, the text aimed to foster support for Jewish emigration from Germany to Palestine as a solution to the »Jewish Question«. Likewise, the German press later published photographs of Jews in ghetto workshops, which, like those taken in Palestine, seemed to highlight the transformative power of labor. Ultimately, negative portrayals of Jews trumped all others.

The disappearance from public view of positive images of Jews was part and parcel of Nazi propaganda strategy during the

⁴ See the Associated Press's response and report: <https://www.ap.org/ap-in-the-news/2017/ap-releases-in-depth-review-of-its-coverage-of-nazi-germany>.

⁵ See her piece, Arbeit und Gemeinschaft. Darstellungen ›deutscher‹ und ›jüdischer‹ Arbeit in der NS-Bildpropaganda, in: Marc Buggeln, Michael Wildt (ed.), Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus, Munich 2014, p. 164–186.

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Third Reich. As Scharnberg aptly suggests it was not just what was shown in illustrated newspapers that is important, but what wasn't shown. During the height of the Holocaust it was taboo for the German press to write or publish photos about the implementation of the »Final Solution of the Jewish Question« in the occupied East. Mass murder was to be kept secret from the German population and the world. The German press still actively promoted antisemitism, regularly denouncing »World Jewry« for causing the war and plotting to destroy western civilization. At the same time, Nazi propagandists also warned Germans not to believe »atrocious propaganda« which were invented and spread by »international Jewry« and the Allies.

One difficult challenge that all scholars of Nazi propaganda face is how to evaluate public reception to a particular campaign or message. German illustrated weeklies reached a huge audience, particularly during the war years, yet we know relatively little about how »ordinary« Germans reacted to the antisemitic imagery. Did readers just glance at the photo of Jews? Did they also read the captions? Or did they skip over these sections for more escapist or sensational articles? Not all antisemitic propaganda proved successful. To cite just one example, the pseudo-documentary film, »Der ewige Jude« (1940), was heavily trumpeted by Goebbels, but fared poorly with German audiences. In contrast, the equally antisemitic costume drama, »Jud Süß« (1940), proved to be a box office hit. Heavy handed narration with German propaganda footage of Polish Jews lacked the appeal of a feature film filled with the country's leading actors and actresses. Since the staged Nazi propaganda »documentaries« on the Warsaw and Theresienstadt ghettos were never shown to the general public, one can only speculate on how audiences would have reacted to them.

All this being said, Harriet Scharnberg's monograph makes an important contribution to the fields of Holocaust studies and modern mass communications. Her emphasis on historical context serves as an important reminder not only to historians, but to museum curators as well. Germans in the 1930s and 1940s perceived these antisemitic images very differently from audiences today. Understanding the ways in which ordinary Germans read these photographs helps us better assess Nazi propaganda. One hopes that Scharnberg will continue to publish more thought-provoking research on the power of images.



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