Images of the Holocaust

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ABSTRACT

Until the 1980s, footage and photographs of the persecution and genocide of Jews were used in books, films, and exhibitions without their creators being aware of the origin or context of their recording. In recent decades, historians have worked to document them more rigorously. During the same period, debates surrounding the "images of the Holocaust" emerged in the wake of Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*. They focused on the extermination of Jews in death camps in Poland, which were governed by a policy of secrecy. While we are not aware of any photographs or footage showing mass murder in gas chambers, images attest to the stages of persecution, deportation, and annihilation of Jews. This text will follow the key moments between the years 1933 and 1945.

1. Westerbork transit camp. Boarding and departure of a convoy of Jews and Gypsies leaving the internment camp for Auschwitz on May 19, 1944 (the identity of the young girl in the scarf was discovered in the 1990s; her name was Anna Maria Settela Steinbach, a young Sinti girl who was murdered a few weeks later at Auschwitz-Birkenau).

2. "Auschwitz Album": one of 197 pictures taken in the spring of 1944, during the arrival of convoys of Hungarian Jews at Birkenau.

3. One of the four photographs secretly taken in Birkenau in August 1944 by the Greek Jew Alberto Errera, a member of the *Sonderkommando* assigned to gas chamber-crematorium V.

4. Images from Majdanek concentration camp taken in July 1944 by two teams of cameramen under the direction of Roman Karmen and the Polish Jewish director Aleksander Ford.

For nearly forty years, footage and photographs of the persecution and genocide of Jews were used to illustrate articles, conceive exhibitions, and make films with no concern for the origin of the images, the context of their recording, or the viewpoint they convey. From the 1980s onward, historians have gradually pieced together this fragmented corpus, documented it, and shed light on its meaning.

During the same period, debates regarding "Holocaust images" occurred in the wake of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, with a focus on the extermination of Jews in the death camps of Poland, which was governed by a policy of secrecy and invisibility. We do not know of any photographs or footage depicting the mass murder of Jewish victims in the gas chambers of death camps. The destruction of Europe's Jews can thus appear as a blind spot, justifying its qualification as "an event without an image."

However, this way of grasping the "Holocaust" does not consider the final stage of a broader process, one whose chronological and spatial scope it shrinks considerably. In fact, there is no shortage of images to document the persecution of Jews in Hitler's Germany, ghettoization in Eastern Europe, roundups and deportations, and pogroms and execution by firing squad on Soviet territory. In addition to these images taken by the persecutors—and more rarely by their victims—there is a considerable body of photographs and footage shot when the extermination camps of Poland were discovered.

The perspective of persecutors and victims

Beginning in 1933, photographers and cameramen captured the early stages of Jewish persecution: store boycotts, Kristallnacht, the torching of synagogues, book burnings, and humiliation of all kinds.

There were more images when Poland joined the war and was subsequently invaded, attesting to the policy of ghettoization in particular. In 1940, Goebbels sent cameramen to the ghettoes of Poland for propaganda purposes. This footage, which was primarily shot in Lodz, was edited by Fritz Hippler in the documentary *Der Ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew,* 1940). The ways in which the cameramen filmed reflects their desire to distort reality—in order to conform to anti-Semitic stereotypes—with the film cynically presenting the consequences of ghettoization as proof of the ontological degeneration of the "Jewish race." In the spring of 1942, a more ambitious shoot was organized in the Warsaw ghetto. It led to actual dramatizations for which internees were enlisted by force, powerless extras in a fiction seeking to discredit them by presenting the misery and death of the ghetto as a consequence of the exploitation of Jews by Jews.

In the Soviet territories that were invaded and later occupied, soldiers of the Wehrmacht and members of *Einsatzgruppen* took "souvenir photographs" of their crimes, despite a formal ban on doing so issued by the German general staff. Filmed sequences are even more rare. In July 1941, a sergeant of the Kriegsmarine, Reinhard Wiener, shot a nearly two-minute footage with his non-professional 8mm camera, showing the execution of a group of Jews from Liepāja, Latvia (Latvia).

Equally exceptional is the footage shot in the spring of 1944 in the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands, where Jewish internees produced a documentary on the orders of Commandant Gemmeker. While certain sequences bring to mind the propaganda film shot during the same period in Theresienstadt to deceive public opinion regarding the fate of its prisoners, the rushes from Westerbork lift a corner of the veil on the genocide, showing the boarding and departure of a convoy of Jews and Gypsies that left the concentration camp for Auschwitz on May 19, 1944 (see figure 1).

However, there are no footage documenting the arrival in Poland or the extermination process. This lack of images explains the importance granted to two photographic series taken at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which in the summer of 1942 became the central site for the assassination of Europe's Jews.

The first, which is referred to as the Auschwitz Album, consists of 197 pictures taken in the spring of 1944, during the arrival at Birkenau of convoys of Hungarian Jews. Most of the pictures were taken by the SS member Bernhard Walter and his assistant Ernst Hofmann, while others are from a roll of film handed over by the Commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss. This group of photographs, which were intended for the Nazi hierarchy, was divided into sequences that followed the stages of the deportees' arrival at the camp: the opening of wagons on the "ramp" at Birkenau; "selection"; sorting of personal effects, etc. The goal of this report was probably to boast about the efficiency of the destruction machine conceived by Commandant Höss. Nothing is shown regarding the killing process, which remains beyond the frame (fig. 2).

The second group of images, which is equally famous, conveys the gaze of the victims. It consists of four photographs taken secretly at Birkenau in August 1944 by the Greek Jew Alberto Errera, a member of the *Sonderkommando* assigned to the gas chamber/crematorium V. These images approach the dark center of the extermination, the "blind spot" of the gas chamber: they nevertheless only show the "before" (naked women in the Birkenau woods) and the "after" (corpses on the ground about to be burned in pits) (fig. 3).

The perspective of the liberators

Numerous views of death camps were captured in the aftermath by Russian cameramen. This effort to document via images, which began in liberated Soviet territories, continued in Poland at the Majdanek and Auschwitz concentration camps discovered by the Soviets, who devoted two documentaries to them.

The footage of Majdanek was shot in July 1944 by two teams of cameramen under the supervision of Roman Karmen and the Polish Jewish filmmaker Aleksander Ford. Their shots reveal the industrial nature of this "death factory," showing its immense crematoria, containers of Zyklon B, and piles of personal effects belonging to the exterminated Jewish victims (fig. 4).

Then came the photographs and footage taken over the course of a few weeks at Auschwitz, which the Red Army had entered on January 27, 1945. The large gas chambers and crematoria were blown up by the fleeing Nazis, with prisoners being marched along roads toward concentration camps in the West. The cameramen filmed the bodies abandoned in the snow in addition to the unearthing of mass graves, but the vast majority of the genocide's victims disappeared in the smoke of the crematoria without leaving a trace. The Soviet film on Auschwitz sought to conceal the Jewish identity of the victims exterminated in the camp. It therefore struggles to measure the scope of the genocide committed there, which is nevertheless attested to, by metonymy, by the piles of shoes, glasses, and hair stolen from the murdered Jews and Gypsies.

The American and British troops who liberated the concentration camps in the west faced a different reality. In these overpopulated places of detention struck by famine and disease, Anglo-American cameramen were stunned to discover the gaunt survivors and mountains of corpses at Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, and Bergen-Belsen, among others. These images of apocalypse left an indelible mark on their contemporaries. In the 1980s, when the genocide began to dominate the memory of deportation, these images were frequently used, via substitution, to evoke the extermination committed at the death camps in the east. These decontextualized images were tasked with providing an account of an event that remained largely invisible, and exceeded the capacities of the imagination.

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