*Das XX. Jahrhundert. Fotografien zur Deutschen Geschichte 1880-1990 aus der Samm-
lung des Deutschen Historischen Museums, Berlin. .*

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From April 1 to June 27, 2004, the German Histor-
ical Museum in Berlin presented a fascinating exhibi-
tion, "Photographs on German History, 1880-1990," in the
newly opened annex designed by I.M. Pei. Historians sel-
dom ask whether visual evidence from the past is a differ-
ent sort of text from the written documents with which
they are so familiar which requires its own specific modes
of analysis and interpretation. Visual materials may,
however, be able to provide forms of historical knowl-
edge simply not to be found in the written documents.
The exhibition at the German Historical Museum created
an important opportunity to explore not only Germany's
twentieth century history but also the history of photog-
raphy and its uses in Germany. Moreover, it drew atten-
tion to some of the peculiar problems we confront in any
attempt to employ photographs as a point of access to
the past. Yet one of the most problematic aspects of this
exhibition was the relationship between the written texts
and the visual images it presented. The curators of this
exhibit clearly felt that these photographs must be em-
bedded in often quite lengthy discussions of the different
periods of German history during which the photographs
were taken. Elementary questions concerning the pho-
tographs, in contrast, frequently remained unanswered:
Who took them, why, and when? Nor did the exhibition
explain that even such basic "facts" about a photograph
from the past are often extremely difficult to establish.
<p> The German Historical Museum possesses an im-
mense number of historical photographs, yet only a few
hundred were presented in this exhibition. The curators
did not explain what principles guided the choices made
about what pictures to exhibit or why certain pictures ac-
companied specific texts. By grouping a series of photos
together, the exhibition constructed narratives of certain
periods of German history. But why, for example, did

the curators choose to juxtapose photos of Jewish ghet-
tos created by the Nazis with other photos of German
refugees fleeing the advancing Red Army at the end of
the war and pictures of the devastating results of Allied
bombing of German cities? <p> In some rooms, pho-
tographs that had circulated widely in the public sphere
were hung on the walls. In the middle of the floor, sep-
arate cabinets presented often very interesting pictures
or albums produced by amateur photographers for their
own private use. These exhibits of "private photographs"
seemed like islands located offshore from the continents
of public and professional photography–but it was not
clear whether this physical arrangement was supposed to
be meaningful. Did the curators want to say something
about the relationship between public, official or profes-
sional photographs and the pictures taken privately by
ordinary Germans? We know that private photographs
generally document events (such as births, marriages, va-
cations, and family reunions) that are important in the
history of individual families, but these private pictures
seldom have much to say about the grand narratives
of national history. Yet some private photographs do
give us a quite different perspective on German history.
Think, for example, of the photos of atrocities on the East-
ern Front taken by ordinary German soldiers that are the
focus of the traveling "Crimes of the Wehrmacht" exhibit.
Many of those pictures had been hidden away for years
in attics or desk drawers. When the Wehrmacht exhibit
made them public, such private photographs generated
a massive controversy about the extent to which ordi-
nary German soldiers had not only witnessed but also ac-
tively participated in mass murder on the Eastern Front.
<p> The promise but at the same time the frustration of
a photo is that it appears to contain a richness of meaning
which, however, often remains beyond our grasp. Yet the

exhibit did not pay much attention to this central problem of meaning. Historians of photography tell us that it is important to know what the photograper decided to leave out of a picture, as well as to include, and also to ask what different versions of the same picture have circulated in public since the original was taken. The same photograph can be edited in different ways to convey different messages. A famous photograph of Jews being rounded up by the SS at the end of the 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising has, for example, appeared repeatedly in history textbooks and illustrated magazines. But sometimes it is cropped to focus attention on a young Jewish boy in the center foreground, sometimes it includes the woman on the left who is looking at him and is probably his mother, and sometimes it includes the SS man in the upper right-hand background. Each version encourages us to see the same historical event in somewhat different ways. The exhibition at the German Historical Museum seldom addressed this type of issue. <p> We often engage aesthetically or emotionally with photographs in ways that we do not with documents or with objects and artifacts. Can this process of engagement lead us to read into photographs meanings that are not supported by the pictures themselves? And will it ever be possible to know how our understanding of these photographs compares to the way Germans (and others) in the past saw the photos and the events or individuals they depict? Attempting to answer these questions would require a detailed and sustained discussion of the production, circulation and consumption of photographic images in Germany's twentieth century. Although the first two essays in the exhibition catalog attempted to address these problems,[1] they were not a central concern of the exhibition itself. <p> The captions attached to each picture told visitors what the picture was about but generally did not explore or even pose questions that the picture itself may have prompted. For example: the caption that accompanies the picture of a female "Ostarbeiter" (which also appears on p. 145 of the catalog) makes no attempt to explain why this young woman, forcibly deported from her homeland by the Nazis to slave for the German war effort, is smiling. I also found it hard to look at the picture of young <cite>Trümmerfrauen</cite> (p. 177 of the catalog) cheerfully clearing up the bomb damage in Berlin in summer 1948 without asking whether many of them had been raped and brutalized by occupying Red Army soldiers just three years earlier. And, although the discussion of Kaiser Wilhelm II mentions his insecurities as well as his tendency to overestimate his own capacities, it does not link this characterization to a picture of the emperor in military uniform holding a sword. Yet

pictures like this one were part of a carefully scripted attempt to market a certain image of the Kaiser to the German public. Wilhelm II was well aware of the possibilities of photography and made every effort to control the ways in which his image was made available. <p> The history of photography and the historical uses of photography received the most direct attention when photography was clearly being exploited for propagandistic purposes–as in the Nazi era. The curators of the exhibition did not, however, seem to think it was important to discuss how photography functioned in other periods of German history when it was not so obviously harnessed to ideological aims. Why, for example, have certain photographs become "icons" (like the well-known photo of Willy Brandt falling to his knees at the memorial to the Warsaw ghetto uprising, reproduced on p. 232 in the catalog)? Have some photographic images not only reflected a certain period of German history but actually influenced that history? It is, for example, possible to see the fall of the Berlin Wall as a media driven historical event, pushed forward by the rapid circulation of images, especially on TV. East Berliners would not have gathered in such large numbers at the Wall on the night of November 9-10, 1989, had they not seen West German TV news reports that the border was open. The large crowds drawn by these TV images to the Wall in turn pressured the East German regime to open it up. <p> Most visitors to this exhibition probably did not care about these questions. Many undoubtedly saw these photographs as simply another, albeit aesthetically or emotionally compelling, way to "connect" with the German past. Certain pictures triggered personal memories. When a German woman leading a small group of students through the exhibition came to the photographs of atrocities committed by the German army in the occupied Soviet Union she remembered how her father had described his war to her when she was young: "All he ever talked about," she told the students, "was the wonderful comradeship during the war." Many of the comments in the visitors' book had little to say about the photographs themselves beyond the fact that they were "powerful images" that visitors would not soon forget. Others were, however, more attentive to the narrative that the pictures constructed. One visitor complained that pictures of hostages hanged by the Germans or of piles of eyeglasses in the liberated concentration camps only reinforced German guilt feelings– "was it not time," this person asked, "to construct a different consciousness?" In contrast, another visitor insisted that the pictures in this exhibition offered an image of "a Germany free of Jews–just as Hitler wanted it." These comments suggest that visitors could have been encour-

aged to think critically about the particular choice and arrangement of photographs displayed in the exhibition and to ask whether other pictures might not have constructed different stories of the German past. This exhibition would have been more compelling, overall, if it had made a greater effort to consider what historical photographs can and cannot tell us about the German past.

<p> Note <p> [1]. <cite>Das XX. Jahrhundert. Fotografien zur Deutschen Geschichte aus der Sammlung des Deutschen Historischen Museums</cite>. Edited by Dieter Vorsteher und Maike Steinkamp on behalf of the German Historical Museum in Berlin (Heidelberg: Edition Braus im Wachter Verlag, 2004). <p>

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