“What do photographs tell?”: Images from occupied Eastern Europe in 1941-42 in Berlin museum exhibition

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“What do photographs tell? Albert Dieckmann’s Pictures from Occupied Eastern Europe 1941-42” is the title of a small but thoughtful exhibition at Berlin’s Karlshorst Museum, the site of the surrender of Nazi Germany’s military in May 1945. It opened June 22 on the 82nd anniversary of the invasion of the Soviet Union and is on view until December 17.

On display are some 40 colour photographs from a private collection of 380 slides taken by Wehrmacht (German army) doctor Albert Dieckmann during his deployment with the advancing German forces in occupied Belarus, Russia and Poland. His son Wolfgang donated them to the museum in 2007, along with private letters to his mother from the field.

Dieckmann (1896-1982), who came from a family of doctors, had already participated in the First World War as a soldier. In July 1941, he was transferred as a staff officer to the Eastern European territories recently occupied by the Wehrmacht. After his return in mid-1942, he worked as a military doctor until the end of the war, and he continued to practice medicine after the war.

The Radfahr-Wachbataillon 48 (B) (cycling guard battalion), to whose staff Albert Dieckmann was assigned as a physician, was one of the “Korück” units responsible for securing supplies, administering and maintaining order, and guarding and removing prisoners of war behind the front lines of the advancing Wehrmacht. Their duties also included enforcing the Nazi starvation plan under the “General Plan East” [1] and the forced collection of crop yields.

Even the curator of the exhibition, Babette Quinkert, who has long researched the Wehrmacht’s campaign of extermination in the East and organised the 2021 exhibition “Dimensions of a Crime,” was hardly aware of these Wehrmacht units.

Dieckmann was a passionate amateur photographer and had experimented with colour photography early on. Generally, his images, which are amazingly well composed, do not show scenes of oppression, coercion and murder. Without the supplementary quotes, statistics and explanations, prepared with novel graphic elements for the younger generation, one could admire or even enjoy the beauty of some landscape shots, the sensitive portraits and group shots of villagers, or the interesting architectural photos.

In the end, however, the exhibition is troubling, as much for what it doesn’t show. Behind the front of the invading German troops, a murder machine was already raging in the first months of the operation, carried out by special Wehrmacht units in cooperation with SS, SD and Gestapo units. These were responsible for many crimes against the civilian population, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Dieckmann’s attitude to the Nazi terror cannot be deduced directly from his photographs. His son reported that after the war his father did not tell his children about his experiences. War and everything military became absolutely taboo in the family, he said. He found his father to be a serious and rather depressed person who rarely laughed and, above all, never took photographs again.

Even if his photos do not show direct scenes of violence, pictures of destruction, burning buildings and also the degrading treatment of prisoners of war are always to be found. As a doctor, Dieckmann must have experienced many cruel things first hand, things he was not allowed to photograph or report to his wife in his letters.

The latter are soberly written, like his letter of September 20, 1941, in which he actually reports on shootings. The activity of his company, he writes, now often consisted “in tracking down ‘partisans’ in forests and villages. Since the time has expired until which they could turn themselves in with impunity, they are now taken out of hiding places and houses and shot on the spot.”

Of course, there was no such thing as “turning oneself in with impunity.” Moreover, as the accompanying text explains, at the time of the letter there was no partisan structure, which did not emerge until 1942. Rather, the battalion in which Dieckmann served was hunting down scattered Red Army soldiers. Tens of thousands of “dispersed” and “non-local” soldiers who had escaped capture and hidden in the woods or gone into hiding as farm labourers were shot in the late summer and fall of 1941.

Many of the photographs give the illusion of peaceful village life, such as a group of women carrying out harvest duty, photographed near Orscha in August 1941. The exhibition panel exposes the optical illusion: Dieckmann’s battalion was involved in the plunder and security policy. Parts of the battalion took over, as it says, the “patrol and security service during harvest operations.” They controlled the population and searched for suspects. Probably for this reason, the women in Dieckmann’s photo show themselves particularly eager at work. A report records the “results” of one operation: “Arrest and delivery of 84 prisoners (partisans), shooting of a guerrilla.”

With forced labour and the requisitioning of crop yields, Nazi planners wanted to organize supplies for the troops and colonise large parts of Eastern Europe as *Lebensraum im Osten* (living space in the East). Hitler’s “General Plan East” reckoned with more than 30 million deaths from starvation.

In some photos, Dieckmann shows the modern architecture of the Soviet Union in cities like Minsk, which may have surprised many a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi and many soldiers after hearing propaganda day in and day out about the “semi-Asiatic” Soviet Russia that was dominated by “barbarism and stagnation.” This is probably also true for the photographer himself, who in one photo shows very well the contrast between traditional huts and new buildings in Minsk—and thus indirectly the progress made since the 1917 October Revolution.

In another photo, a family in Smolensk looks into the camera, poorly dressed, loaded down with household goods, a huge laundry package and three small children. You can feel their tension, their mistrust. Alongside the photo, one reads Dieckmann's letter to his wife from September 4, 1941: "I was also recently in S. again in some of the few still existing apartments of Russians, in order to get to know how the people live there. All this already makes an impression."

The depiction of the Belarusian family shows the empathy of the photographer. Here one does not see a group of "Slavic subhumans," but a working-class family that has lost its home and stands on the street, laden with rescued belongings, with its children, whom it lovingly holds by the hand, takes in its arms and protects. A working-class family would not look much different after a bombing raid over Berlin or any other European country of the time.

Dieckmann seeks to get close to the civilian population, photographing children, the elderly, women, and showing them as likeable people.

His pictures of prisoners of war are harrowing. As impressively conveyed in the 2021 exhibition "Dimensions of a Crime" [2], the Nazi leadership treated Soviet prisoners of war particularly brutally compared to those of other countries.

Next to an interminably long column of Soviet POWs on the march to a camp, we read the following quote from an intercepted conversation in a British prison camp on August 27-28, 1944.

There, Friedrich Freiherr von Broich, a lieutenant general in the Wehrmacht, said: "Then we marched down the road, there went a column of 6,000 tottering figures, completely emaciated, supporting each other. Every 100 to 200 metres one to three remained lying on the ground. Alongside were cyclists, soldiers of ours, with pistols; anyone who stopped got a shot in the neck and was thrown into the ditch. Every 100 metres that was."

Many tens of thousands of prisoners were murdered in this way. Those who reached the camps had little chance of survival. Of about three million Red Army prisoners taken by the end of 1941, the Wehrmacht allowed more than two million to starve to death by the spring of 1942. By the end of the war, more than three million of a total of about 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war had died.

In the later months of his deployment, Dieckmann's photographs increasingly capture the horrors of the war of extermination. Houses, entire villages burn, clouds of smoke cover the horizon. Returning from his Eastern assignment, Dieckmann also took disturbing pictures of Jewish ghettos in Poland.

In the spring of 1942, the Wehrmacht's Heeresgruppe Mitte (Army Group Center) had begun looting alleged "partisan villages," burning them to the ground, and murdering the inhabitants. By the end of the war, some 500,000 civilians had been killed in this way. The survivors were used locally as forced labourers or deported to the German Reich as "Eastern workers," where they were treated worse than slaves.

The exhibition once more refutes one of the many historical falsehoods: the claims that there was a "clean Wehrmacht" and that war crimes were only committed by the SS, SD and Gestapo.

With this photo exhibition, the Karlshorst Museum continues its ongoing work to keep alive the memory of World War II and the monstrous crimes of German imperialism in the occupied territories of the former Soviet Union and, by extension, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Poland.

The museum, which was built on the site of Nazi Germany's final surrender and contains a magnificent permanent exhibition, has been under great pressure from official politics since the Maidan coup in Kiev in 2014 and especially since the start of the Ukrainian war. Behind the scenes, there are efforts by government circles to end the museum management's cooperation with the Russian Federation, which was established by an agreement binding under international law after German reunification in 1990.

The anniversary of Germany's surrender also would have warranted a major exhibition pillorying Nazi crimes in Eastern Europe. That would likely have provoked angry reactions from Ukrainian nationalists who today celebrate Nazi collaborators like Stepan Bandera as heroes.

Given the ongoing attacks on the museum, the small exhibition now being presented is all the more significant.

At the opening, museum director Jörg Morré said he saw it as his job to keep the museum "on course" and to commemorate the German invasion of the Soviet Union. He did not want to be "talked out of this" with the argument that it was no longer "opportune."

With Dieckmann's images, the museum is pursuing the goal of a "source-critical" assessment of photographs, explained curator Babette Quinkert. This was especially significant today, she remarked at the press presentation. Historian Michael Wildt, a professor at Humboldt University in Berlin until 2022, also addressed this question in his opening lecture. He referred to the example of the Nazis' propagandistic staging through using manipulative images. He cited Leni Riefenstahl's film about the 1936 Olympics, with its beautiful sports shots. Images can be at odds with reality, he said.

The political topicality is obvious, as day after day footage from the Ukraine war zone flickers across television screens, which supposedly "cannot be verified." They are used to support demands for the war against Russia to be escalated. Should such images not also be questioned? Is the highly equipped German army, which is now training on the borders with Russia, not again being prepared for crimes?

Thus, the carefully and objectively presented photographs of Dr. Dieckmann become a warning against a new barbaric war.

Notes

[1] The "General Plan East" was developed before the invasion of the Soviet Union—and during it—at the Berlin Friedrich Wilhelm University (today's Humboldt University), among other places, under the direction of agronomist Konrad Meyer. Meyer was director of the Institute of Agronomy at the university, as well as head of the planning office of the RKF, the "Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums (Reich Commissariat for the Strengthening of the German National Character)." The chief client was Heinrich Himmler, an old SS comrade of Meyer. See also "The Nazi War of Annihilation against the Soviet Union."

[2] The exhibition *Dimensions of a Crime*, first on view at the Karlshorst Museum in 2021, has been very successful as a travelling exhibition, according to curator Babette Quinkert, and is booked out until 2025. It is currently on view in Münster.