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Jennifer Evans, Paul Betts, and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, eds. *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History*. Berghahn Books, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Jennifer Evans, Paul Betts, and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, eds. *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History*. Berghahn Books, 2018. xii + 293 pp.

Keywords

Book Review, Photography, Germany

Jennifer Evans, Paul Betts, and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, eds. *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History*. Berghahn Books, 2018. xii + 293 pp.

Jennifer Evans introduces *The Ethics of Seeing* as a volume designed to show historians how to use photographs as more than mere illustrations, i.e., as sources that demand serious analysis and contextualization. This assertion is timely in light of Elliot Gorn's recent book, *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* (2018). Gorn illustrates, at length, historians' naïve use of photos by chronicling how the image of the murdered Till which so many people believed that they had seen right after his murder, indeed which they further claimed had an impact on their sympathy for the civil rights movement in the U.S. South, was largely unknown outside of African American circles for a very long time. This kind of inaccurate memory is one of the issues that Evans's essay collection tries to address. A second set of issues that the volume addresses are the technological possibilities and limitations of photographs, for example, their openness to multiple interpretations. Often, Evans claims, photos' seeming straightforwardness leads historians to facile, problematic analyses. For example, she claims that historians often overlook the fact that some photos are staged. This alone should alert historians to the danger of reading them uncritically. Taken as a whole, *The Ethics of Seeing* is a valuable contribution to German history and to the theory of history. The first half gives readers a series of case studies of, bluntly put, rather typical questions for German historians, which the authors use to explore photography and its ability to provide a new source base. The second half really puts the medium at the center of questions and arguments to shows photographs' indeterminate, open-ended, nature. Taken together, both halves should inoculate historians from simply looking at the photographic elements in a monograph or article as mere filler or pictures, and instead as complicated documents in and of themselves, deserving thought and reflection.

In the book's first essay, Elizabeth Edwards extends the introduction's theoretical arguments, writing that, unlike other sources, photographs seem to promise an immediate entry into the past as it really was. She reminds readers of Walter Benjamin's important idea that photography and history ought to be complementary. This essay, though, gets bogged down in the kind of jargon that stymies rather than aids thought. I suspect that many readers who would read this volume hoping to become more effective, subtle consumers of photographs might give up when faced with sentences such as, "(b)oth photography and history are 'citational structures', always referring through their permeability, to something beyond and of perhaps limited knowability, despite all appearances to the contrary" (31).

Thankfully, the next five essays move away from such meta concerns to examine photographs and how they can help interpret some painful episodes in German history from the first half of the twentieth century. Their topics range from concentration camps in German Southwest Africa through disfiguring injuries in World War I, the resettlement of ethnic Germans in the East in the early days of World War II, the German occupation of France in the same war, and ruined German cities in the wake of the war. Perhaps because they are less theoretical than the introduction and first essay would lead readers to expect, they work well.

Claudia Siebrecht effectively shows how one colonial woman's photographs create a sense of how "foreign" the Africans were, which, in turn, justifies the German "civilizing project" (39). Annelie Ramsbrock tells the story of how a famous book of photographs of war wounded, meant to show the horrors of modern warfare, in fact used images that were originally intended to document the progress of plastic surgery and facial reconstruction techniques. Although this does nothing to mitigate the war's horror and effects on body and mind, it reminds readers that photographs in particular, and documents in general, often have very different original purposes than those to which they are subsequently put, and scholars need to find these original uses to form a better-rounded understanding of said documents. Elizabeth Harvey extends this with her study of published photographs of German settlers who colonized Eastern Europe. She explains the triumphalist racist message these photos were meant to convey as well as an underlying patronizing attitude towards the settlers. For example, in one image of a settler mother and infant, a foregrounded nurse in uniform tending the infant in the mother's arms is depicted as having technical expertise and thus agency. Harvey argues that even as the settler images were supposed to show Germans in the Reich the wonderful opportunities available in the new Eastern territory, they also showed how much these settlers would need the technical aid that only the state could provide. Julia Torrie examines vacation and leisure-time photographs taken by German soldiers in occupied France during the Second World War to explore the issue of how even seemingly innocent, touristy images both established and underwrote an ideology of conquest and possession. Finally, in an oddly un-illustrated, quite short essay, co-editor Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann argues that photographs of Germany in ruins reflect very different kinds of experiences, which translate loosely into a triumphalist Soviet eye, an elegiac German eye, and an ethnographic American and British eye.

The previous five chapters do something peculiar. On the one hand, they show that historians really can read photographs much more carefully and subtly than they often tend to. This is, obviously, a good thing. On the other, they read these photos in the same way that they would read most documents, in short, as problematic pieces whose meaning only becomes clear after close reading and interpretation. I believe these essays show that Evans is correct when she asserts

that the discipline can do better, but they do better in the most traditional fashion, without the need of the over-the-top theoreticization proposed by Edwards.

The next four chapters move away from the overtly political into areas in which culture and politics intersect, investigating in turn GDR abstract photography, the erotic, West Berlin's re-urbanization, and the work of East German photographers who photographed people whom the state would have liked to ignore. The final essay examines the shifting focus of the photographic record of the events of 1989 in the German Democratic Republic. If the book's first half seems to show that photographs could have more than one meaning or interpretation, the second half not only shows that photographs have several possible meanings, but also forces readers to confront this core fact as being at the medium's heart. In other words, when photographs are not merely illustrative but the very focus of a writer's inquiry, questions about what they are and what they mean explode in ways that Jennifer Evans's introduction leads her readers to expect.

Finally, in the work's epilogue, Julia Adeney Thomas reminds readers that photography is fraught with moral questions, and photographers and viewers alike need to develop an ethics for the medium. This is a welcome conclusion to a volume, the premise of which is in many ways fundamentally moral.

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