Brink, Cornelia: *„Auschwitz in der Paulskirche“. Erinnerungspolitik in Fotoausstellungen der sechziger Jahre*. Marburg: Jonas Verlag für Kunst und Literatur 2000. ISBN: 3-89445-262-5; 95 S.

Rezensiert von: Alexander Rossino, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington

ERINNERUNGSPOLITIK

Disputes are an integral part of all scholarly endeavors, but no professional field is buffeted more by controversy than public history. This has been the case particularly in Germany over the last decade as public exhibitions and memorials that dealt with the murderous racial policies of the Third Reich sparked bitter arguments. Protests and political discussions surrounded the so-called Wehrmachtsausstellung from its 1995 opening in Hamburg to its closing in 1999. Similarly, the planned construction in of a memorial to European Jews killed during the Holocaust remains a source of deep disagreement to this day. That each of these attempts to face the past resulted in controversy illustrates the ongoing struggle in Germany to confront the painful legacy of National Socialism.

However, as the noted photo-historian Cornelia Brink demonstrates in her new book, West Germans had already in the 1960s begun publicly grappling with the Nazi past. „Auschwitz in der Paulskirche“ is a slim volume of fewer than 95 pages, including notes and bibliography, but it is packed with insight into the opening of two photographic exhibitions in the Frankfurt Paulskirche in 1963 and 1964. The first of these was the Warsaw Ghetto Exhibition, which opened on 23 November 1963 and drew 61,000 visitors by the time it closed in January 1964. The second exhibition, entitled Auschwitz - Photos and Documents, opened on 18 November 1964 and had a similarly high number of visitors before closing its doors on 20 December.

Brink notes that both exhibitions opened in Frankfurt during the trial of several former Auschwitz camp guards. This was significant at the time to trial prosecutor, Fritz Bauer, who believed the exhibitions proved the guilt of the defendants, as well as the criminal inhumanity of National Socialism, in the court of public opinion. And indeed this was one objective of the designers, who brazenly included in the Auschwitz Exhibition both contemporary photographs of the defendants entering the courthouse and excerpts from the prosecution's indictment.

Brink thankfully does not linger on the sensationalism in the German press that surrounded the exhibitions. She instead shifts her analysis to the exhibitions themselves, revealing in the process some of the difficult issues faced by the designers. Among these was the question how to present the photographs and documents in a coherent fashion. The designers ultimately settled on what has come to be known as an „intentionalist“ interpretation for both the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz Exhibitions. Accordingly, the genocide of the Jews was depicted as the logical result of the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. The designers argued that the progressive dehumanization of Jews and their isolation from German society led directly to the deadly conditions in ghettoes like Warsaw and the extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As Brink concludes, it is quite clear from the explanatory structure of the exhibitions that „ideas led to deeds.” These deeds were in turn perpetrated by stereotyped Nazis who the designers depicted „in anonymous SA, SS and even Wehrmacht uniforms mistreating their victims while laughing, grinning, or staring without emotion“ into the camera (p. 47).

If there is a problem with Brink's recounting of this organizational strategy it is her unwillingness to criticize the designers, whose interpretation of the historical evidence was overly simplistic and deterministic. One suspects, however, that Brink holds the designers to a lower standard of historical accuracy given that scholarly knowledge about the Holocaust in the early 1960s was far less detailed than it is today.

She is far less forgiving when recounting the deliberate attempt by the designers to minimize the „Jewishness“ of the Nazi's victims in order to make a larger moral point about the brutality of the Third Reich. Jews were instead depicted generically and not as a specific people whose destruction was a primary goal of National Socialism. Calling this the „anonymization of Jewish victims,

[which presented] Jews as types and not as individuals", Brink notes that a difficult problem arose as a result of this interpretation (p. 51). Specifically, photographs showing Jews marked with the Star of David indicated the uniqueness of Jewish plight and the reality that the Nazis had targeted Jews alone for annihilation. This fact undermined the attempt to draw universal lessons about the victimization of humankind from the victimization of the Jews.

More troubling still was the arrangement of the Warsaw Ghetto Exhibition into four „stations" reminiscent of the Stations of the Cross that are an integral part of the Passion of Jesus Christ. Like the obfuscation of Jewish uniqueness, here again was a symbolic statement about the sacrifice of all humanity on the altar of inhuman Nazi brutality. Brink makes it clear regarding this manipulation that memory and history were „vaguely" reconstructed for a certain practical purpose. This strategy made for a good exhibition, but poor history.

Turning finally to the use of historical images, Brink relates the comments of Auschwitz Exhibition designer, Wolfgang Dohmen, who stated in October 1964 that he wanted documents and photographs to „speak for themselves." Brink agrees that historical photographs have a voice, but questions what it is that they say. She then demonstrates that contrary to his stated intent, Dohmen embedded photographs within a context of historical artifacts and documents in order to create an organic whole. Images, artifacts, and documents were positioned to juxtapose perpetrators and victims and to accentuate the typically imperceptible gap between the normal and extraordinary aspects of the history. Advertisements of innocuous metal containers produced by German firms were thus set opposite to canisters of Zyklon B, illustrating that the chemical agent used to murder hundreds of thousands of people was itself originally a „normal" consumer product (p. 64).

Brink also explains that two earlier photographic exhibitions influenced the design of the Auschwitz Exhibition. Karl Pawek's Family of Man and Edward Steichen's Weltausstellung had both been influential in the 1950s in showing various elements of humankind's existence. However, whereas Pawek and Steichen depicted the fundamental nature of man as morally „good", Dohmen complicated the portrayal of mankind by emphasizing that Auschwitz demonstrated mankind's good (the victims) and evil (the perpetrators) sides.

Altogether, Cornelia Brink's book offers a fascinating glimpse into an early confrontation of the Nazi past in the Federal Republic. And although she does not state that it was her intention to do so, Brink destroys the myth that public discussion about the Holocaust and the legacy of the Third Reich did not take place in the FRG until after 1989. Equally important here is her contextualization of the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz Exhibitions, each of which was created to serve a larger social and moral purpose. The debate initiated by the exhibitions and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial hinted at the depths to which the Nazi past resonated in West German society in the 1960s. But as Brink rightly concludes, these controversies could only erupt in a social context where the pain of the past had been repressed.

Alexander Rossino über Brink, Cornelia: *„Auschwitz in der Paulskirche". Erinnerungspolitik in Fotoausstellungen der sechziger Jahre*. Marburg 2000, in: H-Soz-Kult 07.06.2001.