The Wiederaufbau of Perception
German Photography in the Postwar Moment, 1945–1950

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In the summer of 1943, during a long heat wave, the RAF (Royal Air Force), supported by the US Eighth Army Air Force, flew a series of raids on Hamburg.’ So begins German author W.G. Sebald’s account of the firebombing of this northern German city in his book Luftkrieg und Literatur. With a thoroughly straightforward – if sometimes fragmented – vocabulary, Sebald goes on to regale his reader with the grizzly details that follow his textual establishing shot:

‘In a raid early in the morning on July 27, beginning at one A.M., ten thousand tons of high explosive and incendiary bombs were dropped on the densely populated residential areas east of the Elbe ... A now familiar sequence of events occurred: first all the doors and windows were torn from their frames and smashed by high-explosive bombs weighing four thousand pounds, then the attic floors of the buildings were ignited by lightweight incendiary mixtures, and at the same time firebombs weighing up to fifteen kilograms fell into the lower storeys. Within a few minutes, huge fires were burning all over the target area, which covered some twenty square kilometers, and they merged so rapidly that only a quarter of an hour after the first bombs had dropped the whole airspace was a sea of flames as far as one could see.’

Sebald’s account, written in 1999, continues by describing how these flames merged into a firestorm that ‘snatched oxygen to itself so violently’ that burning hurricane-force winds rushed toward the city centre lifting gables and roofs, flinging rafters, melting tram car windows, boiling stocks of sugar in bakers’ cellars, and driving human beings ‘like living torches.’ Just as horrifically, those who fled air raid shelters to escape their oxygen-deprived suffocation ‘sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by melting asphalt’ or simply experienced instant desiccation as the blast-furnace-like winds sucked away their hydration without mercy. The heat generated by these fires was so great that ‘bomber pilots said they had felt [it] through the side of their planes.’
Events such as these, experienced in numerous German cities, were unprecedented in their scale and horror. Moreover, they ran parallel to the indescribable atrocities of the Holocaust that fellow citizens committed, the war crimes committed by National Socialism’s armies in the East, and the generalized density of totalitarian oppression that bedaubed Germany through the 1930s and early 1940s like a smothering blanket. Given these deeply traumatizing conditions preceding the mid-1945 defeat, postwar Germany faced a tremendous challenge in digesting and articulating its memory of the preceding twelve years of terror.

Yet, somehow, this task actually had to wait twenty years until the arrival of film directors such as Alexander Kluge and Margarethe von Trotte, novelists like Ruth Rehmann and Heinrich Böll, and painters like Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. Their work of coming to terms with the past has since been taken up by others who fastidiously devise new ways of digesting the country’s difficult history. Artist and historian of photography Rudolf Herz, for example, directly confronted the cultural memory of Nazi-era Germany by, among other things, reproducing multiple photographs of Adolf Hitler and displaying them as murals. In his Zugzwang (1995), Herz pairs a once ubiquitous portrait of Hitler with another likeness of Marcel Duchamp. Both, it turns out, were snapped by the man who became Hitler’s personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. Herz’s photomural thus points to an uneasy historical coincidence while emphasizing the visual normality of both ‘evil’ and avant-garde genius, and the unwelcome grimace of Hitler that this normality once swaddled. In adapting the contemporary practices of conceptual and installation art to the task of collective memory-making, Herz introduced a new and forceful way to process the traumatic past.

But it is with the arrival of Sebald’s accounts in the same decade of the 1990s that the contrasting need for, and inadequacy of, collective German memory about fascism and the war were thoroughly introduced as an innovative narrative strategy. It is precisely this inventive aesthetic formula, made in response to ‘extreme history,’ to use Todd S. Presner’s recently coined term, that forms the subject of this essay. More specifically, the following pages inquire into the marked absence of such aesthetic innovation in postwar German photography during the five years that followed the Second World War’s conclusion. Why, I ask, was this corpus of images so conventional both in content and style?

Looking back from today’s vantage point, a number of signals delivered at the war’s end suggested that a modest aesthetic experimentation, capable of powering new ways of confronting the recent past, might have indeed arisen from the ashes of Germany’s defeat. Wolfgang Staudte’s 1945/46 film The Murderers Are among Us, for example, squarely focused on the unpunished war crimes of fellow citizens. In his film, the lingering trauma embodied by comfortably surviving persecutors, living in plain sight, is dramatically mirrored in towering slivers of ruined buildings that collapse into clouds of punishing dust between the movie’s scenes.

In another signal of aesthetic reconciliation, Dresden press photographer Richard Peter climbed into his city’s ghostly air raid shelters, which had become tombs, and snapped uncomfortably close photographs of strangely desiccated corpses. In his pictures, a suffocated mother collapses over her dead twins’ pram, a closely framed woman lies buried to her bust in rubble, and a fully outfitted soldier seemingly screams from his ruin-strewn expiration. Germany, in these moments following total defeat, seemed ready to confront the memory of its past with reasonably innovative pictorial representations.
of that past’s location in the present. The result could have been a vitally important public confrontation with a recent history whose horror was so great that it escaped conventional forms of representation.

Yet this moment of aesthetically fresh reflection would scarcely last. By 1949, the subject of war crimes disappeared from the cinema of Germany’s occupied zones while even piles of rubble (Trümmer), so central to the everyday experience of urban residents, fell from the content of photography. Instead of these lingering signs of atrocity and destruction, audiences in the West, who largely consumed their images from film, illustrated periodicals, and photobooks, found themselves fed a conventional pictorial fare. Standard forms of narrative cinema now reigned while a conventional diet of photojournalism, touting the country’s coming reconstruction (Wiederaufbau), nourished audiences with reassuring visions of the future. Particularly after the founding of the two Germanys in 1949, photographs in the Federal Republic’s print media highlighted the country’s quickly developing consumer economy, while residents in the German Democratic Republic found straightforward prints of heroic socialist reconstruction. In the new West and East, photographers avoided difficult subject matter and postponed the development of a new visual grammar that might have helped digest the lingering presence of a deeply traumatic past.

Quite intriguingly, this pictorial docility stood in stark contrast to the country’s pioneering encounter with photography made just two and a half decades earlier. Following World War I, German photographers, artists, and pamphleteers unhesitatingly confronted the unfathomable experience of combat and the disorienting spectre of the revolution that rocked the nation from 1918–19. To approximate these phenomena with images, artists and activists devised extraordinarily novel techniques. Members of Berlin’s Dada movement, for example, composed photomontages in which a harried contemporaneity of volatile speech and physical violence seemingly stamped itself directly on pictures, thereby advancing well beyond photographs merely imprinted by light. In one such composition, John Heartfield and George Grosz collaboratively ‘assembled’ Sunnyland [Sonnigesland], the largely photographic detritus of Germany’s wartime ‘Hurrah Kitsch,’ in order to re-present it as a confused and contorted explosion. Militarist images that once offered soothing visions of clean and heroic war now waged an outright assault on viewer perception. The observer of this montage literally had to physically contort herself to study its pasted detritus, spinning the picture clockwise and counterclockwise, or just ratcheting the head back and forth to attempt a view.

In 1924, upon the tenth anniversary of the Great War’s declaration, pacifist Ernst Friedrich published a book that made a comparable photographic assault. His War against War [Krieg dem Kriege!] featured shocking photographs juxtaposing the war’s meat-grinding reality and the patriotic fantasies that failed to anticipate – or that just plain cloaked – this horror. In cases such as these, makers and manipulators of images demonstrated the utter fluidity of photographic meaning and, just as importantly, they stressed the medium’s inability to represent the extremes of modern experience without the aid of radical pictorial reinvention. It was ultimately just this innovation that characterized the photography of the Weimar era.

Yet in postwar Germany, particularly between 1950 and 1955, most citizens saw photographs of smiling faces and fresh new buildings with scarcely a trace of the recent horrors that the vast majority of these same viewers had just witnessed. Of course, no single explanation can account for a discrepancy of such epistemic importance, and
scholars can point to a number of factors that explain this second postwar moment’s pictorial docility. Andreas Huyssen, for example, has recently suggested that in the wake of the war’s horrors, an emotional refusal overtook image-making and reception in Germany. ‘Confronted by the [press] photographs and films from Dachau and Buchenwald,’ he explains, ‘psychological image denial took over. The experience of crushing defeat and bombed-out cities, combined with a guilty conscience, produced paralysis of the visual imagination. The result was an inability to mourn the victims of Nazism both at home and abroad.’ The dearth of German photographs addressing the past, therefore, came not from a ‘Bilderverbot (prohibition of images) grounded in insight into the limits of representing extreme trauma,’ but in the very refusal of that trauma’s location in the present.7 Curator Stephanie Barron adds that, specifically, the occupied western sectors of Germany experienced an ‘economically induced amnesia’ as the ‘economic miracle’ covered emotional wounds with full employment and tantalizing consumer goods.8 Augmenting this representational swaddling was the rising cold war struggle between East and West, a conflict forcefully occupying the terrain of culture and thereby turning iconic attention to the present as shaped by competing visions of the future, and not the past.

Correspondingly, the increasingly thriving industry of illustrated periodicals and photobooks that quickly arose in the economic prosperity of the 1950s, pursued tepid approaches that effectively normalized the content and form of contemporary photography. The weekly news magazine Der Spiegel, for example, claimed that ‘it does not want art, it wants craftsmanship,’ thereby tamping down any aesthetic experimentation that might provide new ways of envisioning a difficult past as visible in the present. Photo historian Klaus Honnef has recently explained that the magazine’s editor, Rudolf Augstein, specifically wanted ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,’ a desire partly fed by disgust with the preceding years of fascist photographic propaganda.9 This exercise of compensation, grounded in a pictorial neutrality prized by photographers such as Max Ehlert, one of Augstein’s regulars, reassuringly demonstrated no discernable artistic ambitions. Nor did this regime of photojournalism seek to address the past that it so thoroughly rejected or, in some cases, from which it wished to hide. Indeed, Ehlert, as it turns out, had been an expert at photographically staging fascist pomp and ceremony only a few years earlier for the expired regime.

Through such cases of disgust, strategic forgetting, and psychological denial, a collective ‘mechanisms of repression’ arose that, according to Honnef, ‘fostered a selective image of the immediate past … and a collective amnesia.’10 The photographs that arose from these conditions lay in particularly stark contrast to those snapped a few years earlier by American photojournalists such as Margaret Bourke-White and Lee Miller, who focused and even radically enhanced their signature documentary approaches while reporting on the atrocities they found in liberated death camps.11

Postwar German photographers and photography were thus charged with an aesthetically stifling task. Among the static pictorial media, it was the one most strongly associated with seamless and legible mimesis. Its apparently natural mode of representation essentially made it an important pictorial workhorse. Therefore, in a conflicted climate of truth and amnesia spiked by the growing cultural tension strung between Germany’s western and eastern states, the medium was heavily charged with the job of forgetting the past and envisioning Germany’s split future.
It was ultimately this pressure that banished photography from the avant-garde domains that it had previously occupied (and led) in the Weimar period. Now, five years after the Second World War, the medium’s fast linkage to mimesis in both the West and East led to a fascinating development of intentionally conventional pictures. Photography, in essence, was instrumentalized for the restoration of normative vision after the great traumatic disorientation of the thirties and early forties. Running parallel to brick, mortar, and steel buildings which rose across the country, and assisting the two new currencies that accelerated the Wiederaufbau of both Germanys, photography was tasked with the reconstruction of perception.

The evidence for this phenomenon even can be found in an important set of postwar photographs that actually preceded the ‘economic miracle’ and leaned with particular force on traditional photographic realism: the body of images often referred to as ‘rubble photography’ (Trümmerfotografie). These photographs largely arose in the five years following defeat. In this period of time, professional photographers found that their primary means of income, such as photo studios and photo agencies, had utterly collapsed. If their cameras and equipment had survived plunder and requisition, they generally turned to assignments given by the few new photoweeklies such as Heute, which was set up by the American occupation forces in 1945, and a new array of photobook publishers on the lookout for fresh contemporary material to publish. With the 1949 currency reform in the West and end of Soviet occupation in the East, these venues for the publication of photography suddenly flourished, leading to a dramatic hunger for documentary photographs, the genre that dominated these postwar years.

At their most basic, rubble photographs betray their documentary charge in a fascination with the indescribable expanses of devastation which German cities had become. Already in these pictures largely snapped before 1950, one can find a use of conventional vantage points that avoids any perceptually challenging pictorial grammar, and a reliance on prepackaged forms of meaning that lie external to the war’s direct experience.

As for the first scenario, one finds an avoidance of the disorienting vantage points that are generally associated with the interwar avant-garde. Instead, the vast majority of these pictures capture the vastness of destruction within a single and traditionally structured frame. The Berlin-born photojournalist Henry Ries, who had fled fascism and returned after the war, lavished his photographic attention on ruins that clearly surprised him. Nollendorfplatz in Schöneberg (1946) shows a flattened mound of rubble in the foreground and – in the middle ground – two streets merging into one, the length of which recedes along a deep orthogonal line to the left. Along this plunge one sees a seemingly endless stretch of fragmented façades that form a background of spindly destruction. With only one man walking far down the street in what is likely an early summer morning, Berlin appears a post-apocalyptic ghost town. A rail track and slightly obscured refuse carriages constitute the only signs of clearing work. In order to make sense of this vast and potentially upsetting content, Ries offers a picture that fits firmly within traditions of urban view photography, particularly as found on postcards. As in these small format pictures, an easily perceivable object or space in the foreground anchors the viewer’s position within the image, as the middle and backgrounds withdraw along a diagonal urban recession. A clearly defined horizon line then helps frame this ravaged space from above while also giving it a sense of scale.

Ries achieves a similar pictorial encapsulation in his Goose Thief Spring in the Destroyed Ferdinandplatz. Here he redeployes the genre of urban monument postcard photography to
situate his fountain in the foreground. This anchor then allows him to reach out tentatively for a Dresden of rubble hills, clawing metal debris, and spiky building remains, the last of which are punctured by shrapnel and empty windows. In this case, no human populates the apocalypse, although a centrally situated track suggests the onset of clearing efforts. Distinctly missing from these pictures are content-based or formal signals pointing to the causes of such vast destruction and the human lives lost. The war’s violence is thus confined to the conventionally depicted rubble itself, whose radically disheveled features, as listed above, mark the terribly destructive force of the bombs and consequent fires that created this scene. No dramatic vantage points or close framing help to suggest this brutality. Nor do bodies or even visible traces of incineration serve to signpost the experience and cause of this destruction.

Outside this sort of press photography, a number of photobooks dealing with the subject of ruins were published, and these also concentrated on the vastness of Germany’s urban destruction. But in these more carefully produced photo series, external narratives borrowed from Christian religion, Greco-Roman antiquity, or cold war culture displace attention away from the actual causes of destruction and the specific trauma endured. Such is the case in one of the era’s most famous rubble books, authored by Cologne-based photographer Hermann Claasen. Entitled *Gesang im Feuerofen. Köln – Überreste einer alten deutschen Stadt* (Hymn in the fiery furnace: Cologne – remnants of an old German city, 1947), it offers views of destruction that have since become iconic. Particularly recognizable are his multiple pictures of the mangled Hohenzollern bridge and the skeletal façades of Cologne’s buildings set against foreboding and dramatic cloud formations. Yet making sense out of this catastrophic rubble-scape is the religious metaphor set up by the book’s title, a reference to the old testament’s Daniel whose three companions refuse Nebuchadnezzar’s idolatrous demands and are thrown into an oven. Their ‘hymn to God’ leads the three to divine salvation even amidst the kiln’s licking flames. Of course, this reference stood uncomfortably close to the ovens in which six million Jews were incinerated. But Claasen assures his desired reading by highlighting the perseverance of Christian icons, institutions, and religious practice amidst his city’s post-inferno-like ruins. Paired images of the destroyed St. George Church, for example, show a crucifix miraculously hanging from the structure’s bare arches while another shot tightly focuses on Christ’s sad face, bomb damage clearly having cleaved his head.

Another photograph shows sculptures of angels on the Cologne Cathedral’s south portal. Caged in bomb protection, they blow their horns and announce the Final Judgment, which the destroyed city actually seems to have experienced. His panoramic *Corpus Christi Procession* illustrates a line of black-clad nuns who process before the sort of ruined expanse featured in Ries’s Berlin photographs. As historian of photography Ludger Derenthal observes, however, here ‘there is no before and no after, no life amidst the rubble and clearing work.’ Rather than manifest a historical moment in the course of twentieth-century history, these catastrophic ruins telegraph a ‘rebirth of belief’ in the wake of Germany’s destruction. In such a manner, Claasen’s pictures and the ruins they represent find meaning through religion rather than the political/historical causes of the war, or the actual human suffering experienced as these buildings came crashing down. According to the book’s narrative, Cologne’s very rubble points to ‘a return to the great order of God’s creations,’ as Claasen’s introductory text explains.

It is here that one can trace in emulsion the process of Germany’s quick amnesia even before 1950. Forgetting in the face of such omnipresent and undeniable destruction
required a dramatic reassignment of meaning. In Claasen’s case, that reassignment occurs with an imposition of religious metaphors and an image succession that increasingly focuses on ecclesiastical symbols recovered from the ruins and placed in the support of such a reading. Similar significatory relays in the images made by other photographers at this time do comparable work. And what these pictures collectively suggest is that in the West, religion, art history, and (toward the decade’s end) boisterous signals of physical or economic regeneration often guide the presentation of potentially traumatizing content. Such pictorial conceits ultimately provided a guide for seeing and digesting the material facts of Germany’s recent destruction. They enabled, in other words, the overwhelming presence of the past to be perceived through familiar, comforting, and specifically timeless metaphors.

Once stripped of their recent history by a heavily applied religious relay, Claasen’s ruins of Cologne could become beautiful and spiritually moving artifacts. The former Weimar-era chancellor Heinrich Brünning, who had catastrophically ruled by direct decree during his tenure, noted on the book jacket’s flap, ‘I have scarcely ever seen something so beautiful and moving in the art of photography. This book makes a greater impression than any speech.’ Among other things, his words offer a curious echo of Weimar-era satirist Kurt Tucholsky’s statement about the power of social documentary photographs, each of which could ‘say more than a thousand words.’ With the contemporary significance of these visions deferred to the terrain of religion, Germany’s destruction now revealed a beauty that Brünning could lavishly praise. This may seem an odd reception of such tragic pictures, yet it actually represents an important strain in postwar German photography: the aestheticization of catastrophe through ahistorical or anachronistic metaphors.

In so doing, photography in western sectors could reconstruct traumatized perceptual capacities and help prepare them for the viewing of difficult cityscapes. Famous interwar photographer Herbert List provides another example of this scenario. In the year preceding the war’s end, he had been photographing ancient ruins in Greece before returning to Munich. With camera in hand he now took to the city’s streets and photographed toppled statues and isolated façades as if they were each 2,500 years old. In some cases he produced an almost surreal juxtaposition of significations, such as the roaring lion placed before the destroyed Löwenbräu brewery and paired with a ‘drive slow’ sign. Yet his equally surreal Man Leading Horse during Reconstruction of Munich’s Polytechnical School uses the sculpting and tactile effect of strong light, common to his Greek photography, to suggest a sleeping Teutonic Athens before its rebirth. In a similar vein, the city’s fragmented Marstall façade becomes a Roman aqueduct.

In these images, List was essentially employing a strategy of highly aesthetic pictorial deferral that he had perfected on the Mediterranean. As he explained in 1943:

‘Through lighting, matter can be raised to over-conspicuousness, or its materiality can be wholly transcended. Framing and shifts of relative proportions often contribute to things taking on new meanings: they can no longer refer to their surroundings. From even the smallest objects, magnificent aspects can be actualized … The new meaning may replace the received one by depriving the object of its original significance, or it may supervene as an additional meaning, which need have nothing at all to do with the first.’

It was through such formal work that List ‘deprived the object of its original significance’ and overlay a sheen of antiquity. As a consequence, he could declare of this subject matter, ‘Among the ruins lies the beauty of the calm after the storm, the beauty of pure
form without content. The columns of the Propyläen have been sanctified by their destruction. The remains of the Hofreitschule reach up into the void like an aqueduct.\footnote{21}

This effort to find transhistorical form in Germany’s ruins and, moreover, to grant these forms a soothing classical beauty, finds its most stunning articulation in designs for an unrealized book by photographer Karl Heinz Hargesheimer (know as Chargesheimer) and then-philosophy student Günther Weiß-Margis. With the proposed title Form und Urform (Form and archetype), its contents were meant to focus on the ruins of Cologne much like Hermann Claasen’s book. Here too the goal was to normalize Germany’s physical destruction. But it planned to do so by making ruins a lesson in architectural and pictorial composition. A destroyed building, as Weiß-Margis explains in his draft text, was reduced to a bare structure which, in turn, reveals the archetypical form on which the structure’s design was based. Here again, an understanding of ancient ruins guided the men’s thinking. As Weiß-Margis explained, ‘Antique ruins are beautiful! Haven’t we known that for a long time? Why, therefore, do our own ruins frighten us so much?’\footnote{22} The most obvious answer to this question might be that Germany’s Trümmer recorded the brutality of the recent past in stone, to reference the title of Alexander Kluge’s famous 1961 film.\footnote{23} But this book draft specifically sought to cleanse Germany’s ruins of just that history and thereby to restore the possibility of untroubled contemporary perception.

I would suggest that this gesture is ultimately symptomatic of the role photography played in the western sectors as early as 1945. As a medium closely associated with legible mimesis, it could scarcely overlook the country’s most striking and unavoidable reality. Yet even as it succumbed to this realist inevitability, it declined to participate in constructing a pictorial grammar that might articulate or in some way signal the traumatic events which produced these piles of ruins in the first place. Instead, western Trümmerfotografie borrowed from traditional photographic approaches and trans historical metaphors to give these visions smooth form and meaning, thereby suppressing their capacity to excite memory. This genre of photography essentially taught viewers how to see religion, art, and hope in vast material signs of an otherwise disorienting catastrophe. What one finds here, in other words, is the universalization of a historically specific case of destruction and suffering.

In the eastern Soviet-occupied sector, one could occasionally find a more aggressive rubble photography. But here too the use of metaphors and, in some cases, allegories, became critically important. This was true of the other most notable rubble photography book to emerge next to Claasen’s own. Entitled Die Kamera Klagt an (A camera accuses, 1950), it features the work of Dresden-based photojournalist Richard Peter and sports what is arguably the most famous image of Germany’s ruins.\footnote{24} Snapped from Dresden’s city hall tower, it foregrounds a sculptural allegory of kindness with its left hand extended, spreading grace before a destroyed cityscape with no horizon line and therefore no visible end. Here the camera unreservedly makes its accusation through ironic juxtaposition.

Many of Peter’s other pictures roughly follow the pattern we see in Claasen’s work. But Peter’s attention to the dead of Dresden makes for a significant departure. He opens this subject, which is confined to a discrete section of the book, with a dramatic image he staged in the destroyed art academy, placing a skeleton – normally used for anatomic study – before a window opening onto the nearly levelled Church of Our Lady (die Frauenkirche). Struggling to find terms that could reference the death of perhaps 50,000 people, he reaches for allegories generally associated with the symbolist painting of...
Arnold Böcklin and Max Klinger. Yet the photograph published opposite this one is far more haunting. Entitled *The Tragedy of the Opened Basement*, this *pendant* mercilessly closes in on a battered wall of baroque architecture where scribbles cry out for missing relatives. These texts suggest the frantic search and personal loss that the building had been made to witness. By having the scribbles stand in for the missing to whom they appeal, absence itself represents loss.

The corpses possibly referenced by the building’s text appear on the subsequent pages as Peter takes his viewers into a similar building’s basement. And it is here that one finds the closely framed and starkly illuminated photos of suffocated bodies mentioned at this article’s outset. One of the more ghoulish aspects of these images is the degree to which the figures look stuck somewhere between life and death. Their clothes are generally intact and their hair, particularly that of the women, survives. The figures slump forward or backward as if caught in sleep rather than having expired in suffocation. Here it is important to remember that Peter only published this volume in 1950 after the German Democratic Republic had been founded and cold war rhetoric had escalated significantly. It is within this context that the photographer finally could publish the haunting pictures that he had originally taken four years earlier. Within the framework of his book, they appear not as a confrontation with Germany’s war guilt (as would be the case with the corpse still wearing his national socialist military uniform) or with the trauma so broadly suffered. Nor do they introduce the difficult subject of Germany’s heavy bombing of British, Polish, and Soviet cities, for which this act was seen by the allies as fitting retribution. Instead the text in Peter’s book condemns the two western countries responsible for Dresden’s firebombing: the United Kingdom and the United States. The prologue, penned by poet and party politician Max Zimmering, intones of the lost Dresden:

‘The brilliance that once was in your eyes, illuminated by music and painting, / Was made to yield to a particular shame, and that shame / Carries the name of Wall Street.’

A similar passage in Zimmering’s introduction notes that surviving Dresdeners unhesitatingly embraced the Red Army soldiers who arrived with the fall of National Socialism. At the book’s end, the city’s rebirth is indicated through mounds of rubble being cleared away and then – in the last image pair – by the newly reconstructed city hall and a mason climbing atop an unidentified structure.

Deploying images of the destroyed Dresden for cold war rhetoric rather than a straightforward meditation on Germany’s traumatic past became standard practice for an East German state that accepted no responsibility for the preceding war and its crimes. Peter’s photographs thus serve not to chronicle the German past as marked on the present, but to visualize the difference between war and peace in the future, with the GDR continually rallying behind the latter. Here photography reconstructed the possibility of perceiving an unrecognizable world by speaking in strict terms of contemporary political rhetoric while also deploying immediately recognizable allegories.

From this point around 1950 forward, the photography of both Germanys generally fell into predictable patterns. In the West, photojournalists such as Hannes Kilian celebrated the famous ‘economic miracle’ with images such as *Grocery Store after the Currency Reform*, of 1948, and *Feeding Wave*, of 1956. Both of these photographs lavish attention on material plenty and the new citizens who enjoy it. Parallel to a world mediated through a vast array of picture magazines was one built by artists such as Otto Steinert. His ‘Subjektive Fotografie’ movement encouraged photographers to realize deeply personal
and aesthetic meanings through photographic techniques associated with the interwar avant-garde: blurring, dramatic vantage points, close-ups, solarization, and negative printing. This was one of the few places where postwar photography gave up its mimetic charge and approximated the language of avant-garde modernism.

But unlike Dada, Ernst Friedrich, or other cases in the Weimar era when photographers used cutting-edge techniques to digest the recent past or the tumultuous present, ‘subjective photography’ was about autonomous aesthetic expression, not history or the present. These images thus declined to confront the recent past or in some way solicit a viewing experience that mirrored the trauma that lingered in the present. As Astrid Ihle has recently explained of such postwar art photography,

> Photographers of the Federal Republic may have bound themselves to the modernist tradition, which had been interrupted and condemned as “degenerate art” by the National Socialist regime. But their work failed to hold the social aesthetic meaning of the avant-garde of the twenties. After years of the medium’s ideological appropriation, many photographers felt that emphasizing the aesthetic autonomy of their work was a worthwhile goal. With this sentiment, Otto Steinert used his concept of “subjective photography” to revive the formal and technical styles of the Bauhaus. But he reached for these tools in order to foreground the photographer’s creative interpretation over the mere illustration of reality.  

In the East, photography faced an increasingly strong realist charge to heroically represent the new socialist state and avoid the ‘formalist’ aesthetic practices associated with subjective photography or even earlier images. Particularly as the 1950s began, the sense that a photographer had paid too much attention to the manner in which he or she presented their subject excited this disqualifying charge, or a related one of antisocial autonomy. As Ernst Nitsche, one of the more strident enforcers of these aesthetic restrictions, declared in 1953:

> ‘To develop a realistic art of photography, one must naturally consider the German Democratic Republic’s new social relations ... Abstract and formal pictorial compositions that allow nothing to be recognized and that only generate a false sentimentalism, kitschy photographs of an antiquated style: these all betray isolation from the people and provide an objective help for imperialism.’

In the face of this threat, which could lead to publishing or exhibition bans, or worse, photographers began staging their shots so as to achieve complete control over the content. Perhaps more than in the West, therefore, photography in the East bore the burden of reconstructing perception for a postwar world.

Given the specific historical, material, and psychological conditions of postwar Germany, perhaps a confrontation with the past, aided by aesthetic experimentation, was simply not possible. At a moment of such tremendous loss, the country as a whole may have been experiencing a form of melancholy that would only allow gentle pictorial recuperation. This phenomenon combined with a wish to move beyond the previous regime’s shocking crimes, and to overlook those who committed them, may have made any form of pictorial shock untenable.

It is thus useful to recall W.G. Sebald’s account of the firebombing of Hamburg. In these passages the author labours to forge a new narrative grammar to articulate this horror. With such a goal, he draws upon numerous sources all at once, including eyewitness accounts of both citizens and bomber pilots alike, meteorological reports, data on the melting points of sugar and asphalt, and extrapolations based on the physical limits of wooden structures under specific conditions of explosion, heat, and wind. In this manner,
Sebald creates what Presner describes as a single 'synoptic and artificial view' – rather than a synthetic one – to account for the event. In this 'modernist form of realism,' as Presner explains, Sebald's narrative 'oscillates between global and local views, perspectives from above and below, points of view within and external to the bombing, and finally knowledge gained before, during, and after the catastrophe. No one who was there could have seen what he describes, and yet – or for exactly this reason – it is strikingly real.'

This, then, is the sort of linguistic inventiveness unrealized in the representational grammar of photography during the late 1940s and through the 1950s. Sebald's book Luftkrieg und Literatur (Air war and literature, translated into English as The Natural History of Destruction), therefore, demonstrates the productive outcome that is possible when the powerful pressure of 'extreme history,' as Presner calls it, is placed directly upon mimesis. But in Germany's postwar period, the extremity of this history had been willfully forgotten and photography, when asked to perform normative mimetic service in order to restore perception, obliged.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 353.
3. By pairing Hitler’s portrait with Duchamp’s, Herz also seems to reference the dictator's unhappy experience with art making.
4. For more on this installation, see Georg BUSSMANN and Peter FREIE, eds., Rudolf Herz: Zugzwang (Essen: Kunstverein Ruhr, 1995).

9. Rudolf Augustin, 'Lieber Spiegelleser,' *Der Spiegel*, 1953, no. 29 (July). This quote and the accompanying analysis lies in Klaus Honnef, 'From Reality to Art: Photography between Profession and Abstraction, in *German Photography* (note 5), 139.

10. K. Honnef, 'From Reality to Art (note 9), 140.

11. For a sharp study of this development in Lee Miller’s photography, see Katharina Menzel-Ahr, *Lee Miller: Kriegskorrespondentin für Vogue: Fotografien aus Deutschland 1945* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2005).


13. A notable exception here is the painter and photographer Edmund Kersting who used double-exposures, solarization, and other darkroom techniques to build allegories of death in his personal photos of the destroyed Dresden. It was only his standard photographs, however, that were published at the time.

14. For more on Ries’s photography of these years, see Ezard Reuter and Janos Frescot, eds., *Henry Ries: Photographien 1946–1949* (Berlin: Nicolai, 1998).

15. The great majority of the book’s images are of destroyed churches and their sculptures.

16. This panorama actually consists of two photographs taken at slightly different intervals. This is apparent in the central group of ruins, which is repeated. The fact that Claasen wished to extend the length of this procession may demonstrate his need to associate the vastness of Cologne’s ruins with the ageless depth of its religious observations.


19. Kurt Tucholsky (writing under the pseudonym Peter Panther), 'Ein Bild sagt mehr als tausend Worte,' *Uhu*, no. 2 (November 1926): 75.


22. Quoted in L. Derenthal, *Bilder der Trümmer* (note 12), 85. Derenthal has carefully pieced together how the book would have looked. This quote comes from one of Weiße-Marigs’s two typed manuscripts, portions of which were published in 1950 in the journal *fotografia*. 


26. Other examples of cutting-edge photography of the Weimar period, firmly focused on the present as shaped by the past, would be the startling photomontages of *Die Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, only a small portion of which were composed by John Heartfield, the pictures of the Worker Photography movement, and the photographs of Helmar Lerski. I would also maintain that the work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Umbo (Otto Umbehr), Andreas Feininger, among others, forged a parallel project by using aesthetically inventive tools to train citizens in the perception of a modern present. This was a moment characterized by overlapping time frames and other forms of powerful sensory stimulation that had earlier been associated with the war and revolution.


28. Ernst Nitsche, 'Realismus und Formalismus in der Fotografie,' in *Die Fotografie* 7, no. 4 (1953): 113. Heavily policed debates on the role of photography in the East after 1949 were played out in this journal.

29. T.S. Presner, '"What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals"' (note 1), 354.

30. Charlest Haxthausen brilliantly suggested that I title this article 'Luftkrieg und Fotografie' with Seebald’s book in mind.

**ABSTRACTS**

The article inquires into the marked absence of aesthetic innovation in postwar German photography during the five years that followed the Second World War’s conclusion. Looking specifically at the genre known as *Trümmerfotografie* (rubble photography), it asks why this corpus of images was so conventional both in content and style, despite its shocking subject matter? The article suggests that after the horrors of fascism and war, psychological denial, a guilty conscious, and deep melancholy overtook German image making. As a consequence, the country’s increasingly thriving industry of illustrated periodicals and photobooks pursued tepid pictorial approaches that effectively sought to assuage and reconstruct the traumatized capacity of visual perception.

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