

Meinrad Schade – War without War

Meinrad Schade has been working on his long-term project “Before, Beside and After the War – A Search for Traces on the Margins of the Conflicts” for more than ten years. He has travelled parts of what is today Russia and the states of the former Soviet Union, such as the Chechen Republic and Ingushetia, Kazakhstan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine, and focussed on former, still smouldering and perhaps recurring conflicts in detailed essays. Our exhibition “Meinrad Schade – Krieg ohne Krieg” (War without War) is devoted to this project.

Meinrad Schade is not a war photographer in the classical sense. He does not take photographs at the hotspots of military conflicts so as to supply the sensationalist press with images of violence. He deliberately opposes this “market”, which is also flourishing on the Internet, because he doubts that images of this kind have an enlightening effect or act as a deterrent. Schade works slowly and concentrates fully on the secondary scenes in areas of conflicts, the places ignored by the media or else just forgotten. He tries to empathise, he listens, observes, takes a stance and develops a personal perspective. Incorruptible and precise, he shows how traces of conflicts have become inscribed in the landscapes. He gives a say to the physically and mentally damaged people and takes a critical view of those who escaped unharmed and proudly celebrate their former victories. Meinrad Schade outlines a complex unsettling image of a precarious existential state between war and peace, catastrophe and normality. As a result, larger connections are revealed which are similar all over, be it in Eastern Europe or Israel or in the Palestinian territories, where he is currently continuing his project.

More recently Meinrad Schade has been photographing other war scenarios where – either under the heading of historical enlightenment or with overt commercial interests – wars are re-enacted, realistically: the War & Peace Show in England and the arms fair in Paris. The photographs he has taken there point to the fact that our society has a deep-seated fascination with weapons and violence and that it is above all money which ensures that the series of wars being fought around the world will not come to an end.

Martin Gasser

1 VICTORIOUS Kiev and Volgograd, 2007/2009

Both cities, the Ukrainian capital Kiev and the southern Russian city of Volgograd (Stalingrad from 1925 to 1961), have the Soviet honorary title of “hero city” and monumental “The Motherland Calls” statues rise above both of them. These monumental female figures brandishing swords are visited by thousands of people every year. They commemorate the Great Patriotic War, as the Second World War is called in the states of the former Soviet Union, and above all, the victory of the Red Army over the German Wehrmacht in 1945. After the heroic struggle against National Socialist Germany, the Soviet Union lamented about 27 million dead – more than any of the other warring parties – of which almost 10 million were from Ukraine.

To this very day, commemorating that catastrophe is a fixed component of social identity in many parts of the post-Soviet region. Thousands of museums, memorials, parks and monuments recall the victorious battle against the German Reich. Today this omnipresent culture of remembrance also includes the annual victory celebrations on 9 May, the “Day of Victory”, with their huge military parades headed by highly-decorated war veterans. These colourful mass events, which also attract the younger generations, not only glorify past resistance but also increasingly evoke, under the current policies of Vladimir Putin, a new nationalist cohesion, a new reinvigorated Russia. Even the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin is being remembered and idealised as a defender of the homeland and a successful commander, blurring the consequences of his reign of terror and the millions of people who fell victim to it – little wonder, therefore, that there is talk about Volgograd being renamed Stalingrad once again.

2 DISPLACED Chechnya and Ingushetia, 2003

The autonomous republic of Chechnya in the northern Caucasus broke away unilaterally from Russia in 1991, a move that Moscow tried to reverse with the First Chechen War of 1994-1996. The result was thousands of civilian victims as well as huge streams of refugees. Despite the ceasefire agreement, the tension in the country remained with frequent terror attacks and abductions occurring. This state of insecurity and instability, plus the attempt on the part of Islamist rebels to establish an Islamic theocracy, led to the Second Chechen War in 1999, during which Putin, now President for the first time, exhibited extreme severity. The consequences for the civilian population were catastrophic and many Chechens were reminded of the time of forced deportations under Stalin in the Second World War.

Most of the people fled west to the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia, where they were accommodated in tent camps, former agricultural and industrial facilities or in groups of huts. In a short space of time about 300,000 internal expatriates – i.e. within the former Soviet republic of Chechnya-Ingushetia – flooded into the country practically doubling the population. Although the living conditions in the temporary camps were precarious at first, the relationship between the refugees and the locals was good given that they both belonged to the same Vainach ethnic group and the majority of them were Sunni Muslims.

When Putin declared the war in Chechnya to be over in 2000, the situation of the internal refugees increasingly deteriorated. A new government, intent on demonstrating its loyalty to Moscow, began to dissolve the refugee camps and send the people back to their largely destroyed homeland, a homeland which in the meantime had become alien to them as a result of the “modernisation” financed by billions of Russian roubles.

3 CONTAMINATED Kazakhstan, 2010

Semei, formerly Semipalatinsk, is located in the central Asian steppe landscape to the east of Kazakhstan. The Soviet Union carried out its own first atomic weapons test near Semei in 1949, four years after the United States first used an atomic bomb in the Second World War. In the 40 years that followed, another 450 tests would be carried out at that site, which has taken its place in history under the name Polygon Semipalatinsk. Until 1961 those tests were mainly carried out above ground, so that probably up to 400,000 people were directly affected. The local population was scarcely warned in advance or informed about possible dangers. The people even liked watching the “lovely mushrooms” and the brightly lit sky. It was the period of the Cold War, and the West and the East were upgrading their arms and striving for military supremacy – so regard for man or nature was not on the agenda. When the almost 19,000 square kilometres site Polygon Semipalatinsk was closed in 1991 by the Kazakh government, it was the largest test site of its kind in the world. The testing plants were demolished and sealed, and the intention was to reopen the whole area in the near future to exploit the raw materials.

The consequences of the nuclear weapons tests for the people living nearby were, and still are, disastrous. A whole region about seven times the size of Switzerland was contaminated – a fact that cannot be disguised by renaming Semipalatinsk Semei in 2007. Cancer, miscarriages and the most serious of physical and mental deformities still occur. Exactly how many people were affected by the atomic weapons tests is a much contested question. In any case, those who still live here today and suffer from enormous mental and physical after-effects feel let down by their government. The latter prefers to enrich itself 600 kilometres away in the capital city of Astana and to draw international attention to itself by having futuristic buildings constructed.

4 ISOLATED Nagorno-Karabakh, 2011/2012

By international law, the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh located in the southern Caucasus still belong to Azerbaijan, despite the fact that the region, about 11,000 square kilometres in size and populated mainly by Armenians, separated by referendum from Azerbaijan in the course of the demise of the Soviet Union. The local Azeri minority had boycotted the referendum and did not accept the result, leading in 1991 to a military conflict lasting four years. The consequences of that conflict were wide-ranging ethnic cleansing, thousands of dead and enormous streams of refugees. Hundreds of thousands saw themselves forced to leave their homeland. In 1994 a ceasefire was agreed and since then the western neighbour, Armenia, has full control over Nagorno-Karabakh. It also occupies further Azeri provinces, something that is repeatedly condemned by the United Nations. The situation in the occupied territories is still explosive. There are repeated fatal incidents on the contested demarcation lines and on the regular state borders. And repeatedly civilians are injured or even killed in the border areas, which are almost totally mined. All of this merely serves to harden hearts.

The general living conditions for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh are precarious. The country is impoverished and can only survive thanks to its protecting power, Armenia. There may well be a president, a government, an elected parliament and an army, and “representations” are maintained in different countries, but internationally the republic of Nagorno-Karabakh is not recognised. No flag and no fervently sung national anthem can conceal the fact that the self-proclaimed republic is totally isolated and cut off from the rest of the world – something which Russia will not want to change as it has concrete military and economic interests in both states embroiled in the conflict.

5 HARD-FOUGHT Israel and the West Bank, 2013/14 – a work in progress

“Such a peaceful country – as long as you don’t think about the conflict. The cafés are full, the beaches too. Friendly people, lovely and intelligent young people, everywhere. But there’s something worrying in the air. Beneath the surface lie forces that can break out within a second. From one minute to the next we are perhaps even at war again.”

It is precisely this state described by the Israeli writer Joshua Sobol of hovering between war and peace that interests me about Israel. In the context of my long-term project “Before, Beside and After the War”, this country serves as a model: in its short history it has repeatedly experienced wars whose traces are quite manifest, and new conflicts are always a possibility. Outside threats are repeatedly being conjured up by the leading politicians, and the Israeli army is constantly ready for war. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is omnipresent and has led to a permanent unresolved makeshift solution that has left a lasting mark on the face of Israel – the state has been in a permanent state of war since its foundation in 1948.

Yet the new war and attendant terror spreading around the Arab region are ousting this conflict more and more from the visual field of the media. Only unusual events, like another military operation by Israel, the third Intifada or a possible peace agreement, could put the theme back in the headlines again. Unheeded by the global media, a kind of “strange normality” has been established in Israel with which I, as a photographer, want to engage – also in the future in the Gaza Strip and on the Golan Heights. My photographs are an attempt at approaching the complicated situation in all parts of Israel, a situation that is very difficult to describe in words without the risk of slipping into stereotypical interpretive patterns.

Meinrad Schade

6 ON DISPLAY Beltring (England) and Paris, 2009/2014

The “War & Peace Show”: Every July more than 100,000 people from all over Europe make the pilgrimage to Beltring in Kent, England, to visit the War & Peace Show. This is a large “living history” event during which playful re-enactments of military events from the Second World War are particularly popular. The men in original uniforms – often including military underwear – who indulge in this leisure time-activity and play-act in front of hundreds of enthusiastic spectators, call themselves re-enactors. Their most important concern is to make history tangible for others and in this way sharpen their awareness of the terrors of war. Whether this is actually the case is more than questionable. Instead, the War & Peace Show seems to satisfy a persistent and deep-seated fascination in society for war and violence under the pretext of historical enlightenment.

“Eurosatory”: The world’s most important arms industry trade fair takes place every two years to the north of Paris: Eurosatory, co-organised by the French Ministry of Defence. Last year more than 1,500 exhibitors from 58 countries took part in that arms fair, which attracted almost 56,000 visitors, including 172 official military and government delegations from 88 countries. On the huge fair grounds you can buy just about everything from a simple handgun to the most complex weapons systems, things to satisfy the real and supposed security needs of the international community of states.

In addition to the large fair halls, there is a 20,000 square metre large war site set up like a kind of open-air stage on which the latest military vehicles and mobile weapons systems are presented in realistic like deployment scenarios to a public with a wish to buy. Two such “live demonstrations” take place each day, at 10.30 am and 3.00 pm – war staged according to a programme.

Meinrad Schade

Meinrad Schade, born in Kreuzlingen in 1968, decided to pursue photography after completing a degree in biology at the University of Zurich in 1996. He first trained as a photographer in the context of the *Gruppe Autodidaktischer FotografInnen* (GAF) in Zurich in 1997/98 and then completed the *Lehrgang für Pressefotografie* (program for press photography) at the *Medienausbildungszentrum* (MAZ) 1999/2000. After working as a press photographer with the *St. Galler Tagblatt*, Schade began working in 2002 as a freelance portrait photographer and photojournalist, and joined the *Lookat Photos* agency. Thanks to grants from the Cultural Foundation of the Canton of Thurgau, he has since 2003 pursued various long-term projects, which are shown in exhibitions. 2006, 2008 and 2011 he was nominated for the *Swiss Photo Award* (ewz.selection) and in 2011 honoured with the award in the category “Editorial Photography.” In 2013 he won the n-ost journalism prize for “photojournalism.” www.meinradschade.ch

Accompanying publication

Scheidegger & Spiess will publish the book *Meinrad Schade – War without War. Photographs of the former Soviet Union*, edited by Nadine Olonetzky, with texts in German and English by Nadine Olonetzky, Fred Ritchin, Mikhail Shishkin and Daniel Wechlin. Hardback, approx. 270 pages, 163 reproductions, four colour; CHF 50.00 in the museum shop (CHF 59.00 in retail bookshops).

Reportagen Extra

A special edition of the *Reportagen* magazine (March 2015) will be published featuring a reportage from Palestine by Christian Schmidt, photographs by Meinrad Schade and extensive commentaries by Daniele Muscionico.

Panel discussion (in German)

Wednesday, 29 April 2015, 7 pm: “Der Fall des Sowjetimperiums und seine Auswirkungen auf die Gegenwart” with Sonja Margolina (journalist, Berlin) and Daniel Wechlin (NZZ Russia correspondent, Moscow), chaired by Julia Richers (Professor of Eastern European History, University of Bern). In collaboration with the publisher Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich. Limited number of seats; reservations at info@fotostiftung.ch or phone +41 52 234 10 30.

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