

Politically correct pictures?

Written by Hans Durrer

In April 2008, the International Herald Tribune (IHT) reported that a photo exhibition in Paris — "The Parisians under the Occupation" — put on view for the first time 270 colour photographs of daily life in the French capital during World War II.



The article — and quite some other internet sources that I looked up — said the exhibition was highly controversial. Not for the fact that the photographs were shot by André Zucca while working for *Signal*, a Nazi propaganda magazine, but because the pictures seemed to give the impression, in the words of the IHT, "as though all Parisians enjoyed days in the park and

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promenades down broad leafy avenues, when in fact thousands, mainly Jews, were being deported to Nazi extermination camps ... Three smiling young women in white-rimmed sunglasses pose in the Luxembourg Gardens in May 1942; well-dressed couples relax at outdoor café tables at Fouquets, on the Champs-Élysées, as two uniformed German officers stroll by; an elegant woman in fur and jewels shares luscious-looking cherries with a well-heeled man on a park bench, their baby beside them in a pram."



Initially, the photos were displayed without any information to put them in their historical context — probably because the title "The Parisians under the Occupation" seemed to contextualise the photos sufficiently — but after complaints from historians, visitors and groups like the French Human Rights League — I briefly wondered how many (four, five, ten?) voiced their protest but wasn't told — leaflets were being handed to visitors that informed them that: "What André Zucca portrays for us is a casual, even carefree Paris. He has opted for a vision that does not show —

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or hardly shows — the reality of occupation and its tragic aspects: waiting lines in front of food shops, rounding up of Jews, posters announcing executions." Last but not least, the historian Jean-Pierre Azéma, who has written about Zucca, told the newspaper *Le Monde* that it "should have been 'Some' Parisians under the Occupation ... and not 'The' Parisians." This was not the only thing that he had said but that kind of political correctness is really beyond me. How stupid and ignorant does this man think we are?

In addition, I could hardly believe what I read: photographs of life in Paris, taken between 1940 and 1944, can't be put on view without telling the visitors that they will be looking at "a casual, even carefree Paris"? Would that not have been pretty obvious? I mean: Does a visitor who looks at a photograph of, say, three smiling young women in white-rimmed glasses posing for the camera really need to be told what he is looking at? Moreover, do people who go to a photo-exhibition entitled "The Parisians under the Occupation" really need to be told, when they are looking at pictures of, say, well-dressed couples relaxing at outdoor café-tables, that the photographer did not focus on the tragic aspects of the occupation? Well, some people seem to think so. And, that is a problem. Not that they think like that — people are entitled to any kind of stupid thoughts — but that they are able to impose their views on others.

The issue here is political correctness which is simply another word for censorship — a censorship that masks itself as critical thinking. When, in 2007, the Brazilian photographer's Sebastião Salgado's impressive coffee table tome "Africa" was published (by Taschen, in Cologne, Germany), the *Berliner Zeitung* gave three Africans — two photographers and a professor of art history — the opportunity to voice their criticism. They scolded Salgado for rendering an Africa of cliché — flora and fauna, that is. Akinbode Akinbiyi, a photographer, who lives in Berlin, objected for instance to the title: "The title implies that it is a book about Africa. But, as far as I'm concerned, his view is very limited. And old-fashioned. Salgado only shows rural areas, hunger, misery, war, refugees. It is a very narrow-minded view of Africa. One can do that of course but one cannot simply call it 'Africa'. More suitable would perhaps have been 'Miserable Africa' or 'My Poor Africa'."

Well, perhaps not.

We all know that military and government censors, editors and photo-editors decide what we are getting to see — and what not. To some, apparently, that kind of censorship is not enough, they seem to expect photos, the accompanying captions, the titles of photo-books, and of photo-exhibitions, to show the world as they've decided to see it — they do not trust people's common sense. Needless to say, they might have a point there for common sense is indeed not as common as the expression suggests. However, to assume that common sense does not exist at all seems quite a stretch.

People visit photo-exhibitions for a variety of reasons — to have their views confirmed, to recognise sites, to learn something new, etcetera — but they do not enter museums, or look at photo-books, with a blank slate. In other words, to imagine somebody walking into the Paris exhibition of Zucca's pictures and then coming out thinking the German occupation from 1940 to 1944 was enjoyable — this is absurd. Visitors might however leave with the impression that the occupation not only meant "waiting lines in front of food shops, rounding up of Jews, the posters announcing executions." That would be a good thing, not least because the occupation did indeed also mean what most of Zucca's photos showed. Besides — and despite the fact that we rarely hear about such things — people, in times of war, who aren't in the thick of fighting do eat ice-cream and go on holidays, soldiers make love and aid workers party, concerts and sports events take place.

