

July 2018  
Press release

## Walter Bosshard/Robert Capa - The race for China

Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur, 22 September 2018 to 10 February 2019  
Media private viewing: 21 September 2018, 10:00-12:00, a tour of the exhibition  
with curator Peter Pfrunder: 10:30, public opening: from 18:00

Walter Bosshard (1892-1975) was the first Swiss photojournalist to become internationally famous as a result of his reportage. As early as 1930, his photo reports had already reached an audience of millions. From 1931, Bosshard concentrated on China. As a photographer and writer, he followed the devastating war with Japan and the power struggle between nationalists and communists, but also dedicated himself to everyday life and street scenes. As well as the classics, this exhibition by the Fotostiftung Schweiz also presents many unknown photographs, which have only recently come to light. These are juxtaposed with China photos by the star reporter Robert Capa. Capa worked in the same places as his friend Walter Bosshard and competed with him for features in the magazine *Life*.

Walter Bosshard laid the foundations for his career in 1927/28 as a photographer for the German Central Asia Expedition, which took him to the Himalayas and the Taklamakan desert. With images and writings from this expedition, he established himself as a photojournalist. As early as 1930, he received a large commission from the *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* and the then-leading Berlin *Dephot* photo agency. Over the course of eight months or so, he was able to travel all over India in order to report on the independence movement. During this period, he succeeded in capturing a number of sensational portraits of Gandhi, which were published all over the world. In 1933, Bosshard relocated to Beijing and became one of the most productive and highly regarded Asia correspondents of his time. His most important platforms were the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and sister titles from the publisher Ullstein, the *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* and the *Zürcher Illustrierte*. Later followed American and British media such as *Life* and *Picture Post*, before he finally accepted a permanent position as correspondent for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)*.

### War in the Middle Kingdom

Bosshard's regular activity as a special correspondent in China began in 1931. The opening of the first Chinese National Assembly, the advance of the Japanese plus the power struggle between the nationalists and communists offered exciting material for the international media. More so than most other reporters, Bosshard followed the developments in the Sino-Japanese war from close quarters. He took photographs on the front, and was committed to informing his readership, but he also took portraits of the most important politicians, generals and warlords; not only on the Chinese side but the Japanese side too. He was among the first to report on the great Japanese offensive of 1937, which saw the Japanese capture, one after the other, the major cities of Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. On 13 December, this culminated in them capturing the capital Nanjing. During seven weeks or so, they were responsible for one of the largest and most gruesome massacres in history, killing an estimated more than 200,000 civilians. The Japanese invasion triggered migration flows that had a profound effect on the social, cultural and economic landscape: Between 1937 and 1945, around 100 million Chinese

were refugees elsewhere in their own country, at that time probably the world's greatest number of displaced people to date.

### **Everyday life and travel**

With his masterful combination of words and images, Walter Bosshard was not just a sought-after eyewitness to this long war. He won just as much attention for his reports on everyday Chinese life and life on the streets. He was a keen traveller who could never get enough of exploring new, unknown territory or embarking on adventurous river journeys into China's most remote regions. For several months, he lived with the nomads of Inner Mongolia, gaining deep insights into their rich culture. The 'Land of the Eight Hills' was one of Bosshard's most-loved retreats, where he would always relax after the hectic life at the front. His fascination expressed itself in images of the fantastic landscape, but also in expressive reportage of the basic way of life of these people so connected with nature, whose existence was threatened by the war and the advance of civilisation.

### **The fall of Hankou**

1938 was a key year in Bosshard's photojournalistic career. Like other western correspondents, he resided in Hankou, the temporary Chinese capital, which for months was subjected to the most severe Japanese bombing. Hankou was without doubt the media hotspot of that time. Every night, the correspondents would climb onto the roof of the Lutheran mission, in order to follow the spectacular air battles between the Japanese and Chinese aircraft or to discuss China's chances in their desperate resistance against the advancing enemy. One of the observers was the already-famous photographer Robert Capa, who had come to China with a film team of the well-known documentary film-maker Joris Ivens. He had accepted the job as second cameraman for Ivens' film *The Four Hundred Million*, because he hoped to also be able to assume the role of a reporter and photograph his own stories. He was especially interested in the communists' resistance struggle against the nationalist Kuomintang government. In this movement he saw a far eastern extension of the antifascist movement, which he had already followed at close quarters in the Spanish civil war. However, the nationalists monitored the film team so closely that it was virtually impossible for Capa to move freely. Nonetheless, he still succeeded in producing some shocking reports – about the constant air strikes, the fear of the civilian population, the Chinese refugee flows and the daily struggle for survival. It was in Hankou that Robert Capa developed a friendly relationship and playful rivalry with Walter Bosshard. Both had the ambition of seeing their stories published in the renowned American magazine *Life*.

### **Visiting Mao**

In 1938, the two photojournalists competed for the first reports from the extremely remote 'red capital' Yan'an, where the communists under Mao Zedong were gathering their forces and preparing for guerrilla war against the Japanese. The western media were eager for news from Mao's camp, because at this time it was not at all apparent what role the communist movement would play in China's future. And it came to pass that, in July 1938, Walter Bosshard became the first European correspondent to reach Mao, accompanied by his friend Archibald Steele, China correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*. Beside an extensive interview with the mastermind of the new China, Bosshard also shot a film featuring probably the first moving images of Mao, as well as photographing the everyday life of the communists, who had organised in loam caves at Yan'an. *Life* published the results in an article partially printed in colour, whereas the *NZZ* presented the sensational material as a six-part series, always featured on the front cover, in July and August 1938. After this coup, Robert Capa admitted defeat and returned home frustrated.

### **Films and picture stories**

Bosshard's Yan'an film was just one of numerous documentary films with which he brought dynamism to political reporting. In doing so, he remained true to his photographic reports, in that he packaged his subject matter in well-told stories. In the photojournalism of the 1930s, the credo of documentary photography, which regards interference with the photographed scenes or the staging of footage as sacrilege, did not have the weight it came to have in the postwar era. So for Bosshard it was quite legitimate to actively direct scenes so that he could convey certain content, in order to grant his public an understanding of the 'true' situation in China. A prime example of this is his picture story 'The Life of a Chinese Guerrilla', photographed in 1938 and published in the British *Picture Post* in 1939. The farmer Chang voluntarily underwent training as a guerrilla fighter, and was severely injured by enemy fire during a mission against the Japanese. Over the course of 17 photographs, the complex relationships between China's defensive battle and breakthrough in the civil war were credibly explained. The visual dramaturgy peaked in a shot that showed Chang fall as he was hit – a distant echo of Robert Capa's fallen republican militiaman.

### **Smart networker**

Thanks to his great familiarity with the local situation and an excellent network, Bosshard was always able to secure advantages for himself, which he harnessed to quickly and efficiently achieve his objective. In 1937, Archibald Steele wrote of his Swiss colleague: "Anyone who finds themselves in the far east with a camera and notebook is familiar with the problems that chroniclers face. Despite censorship, bureaucratic obstacles and stubborn officials, Bosshard, the photojournalist who works for Ullstein, succeeds in practising his trade without falling out with the Japanese, Manchurian or Chinese officials. These days, you need to be a diplomat to be successful with a camera as a correspondent and artist... All the bigwigs in Asia know Bosshard; diplomats, statesmen and the military, because he loves taking their portraits in their private surroundings."

And in his book *Death at My Heels* (1942), David Walker, correspondent with the British newspaper the *Daily Mirror*, reminisces thus: "You couldn't have wished for a better travel companion than Walter Bosshard. A Swiss of the best and most tenacious sort, who had led camel trains through Tibet and China and God knows where else. He could conjure things up out of thin air – hot chocolate, which he seemingly carried with him in his sleeves, or biscuits, as if he'd just plucked them from the next tree. He had just one fault: If we reached that point where mules were afraid to continue forwards, he would spring further on like a mountain goat and climb even the steepest slope. It was bloody hard work."

### **China in Walter Bosshard's works**

The decade that Walter Bosshard spent in China was without question the most important period in his photojournalistic career. From an international point of view, there are only a few photojournalists who followed and portrayed that difficult time of the Japanese occupation of China so consistently and with such great intensity. For audiences in Switzerland and in the west in general, he was an authority for a number of years, at least until the end of the second world war. "And do you know, my dear friend, that your reputation and the appreciation of your journalistic work continues to grow?", wrote Zouzou in a letter to Bosshard in 1942. Zouzou, better known to the Swiss public under the name Gilberte de Courgenay, was pleased that "the street vendors of the *NZZ* wear your name in big letters on their hats or chest, in order to advertise an article by WB, so that passersby scramble to obtain that issue." However, this fame gradually faded in the postwar years, as Bosshard concentrated more and more on writing. And in 1953, after an accident in Korea, he retired from journalism altogether. After his death in 1975, this once-famous name sank into complete obscurity.

### **Exhibition and book**

For the purpose of this exhibition by the Fotostiftung Schweiz and the accompanying book *Walter Bosshard – China brennt. Bildberichte 1931–1939* ('Walter Bosshard – China burns. Photo reports 1931–1939'), the Fotostiftung Schweiz's archive of negatives and the comprehensive Bosshard holdings in the Archives of Contemporary History (ETH Zurich) have been reevaluated. During the course of additional research, many missing images came to light, which are being shown for the first time. In the exhibition, they are confronted with Robert Capa's China photographs. It is clear that Bosshard's reportage has stood the test of time well. Even today, they put ourselves right in the middle of those dramatic happenings in the far east. Bosshard's photojournalistic legacy is a unique, fascinating and vivid source for immersing ourselves into that decade in China's history which so momentarily changed our world.

An exhibition by the Fotostiftung Schweiz in partnership with the Archives of Contemporary History (ETH Zurich), ullstein bild Berlin and ICP New York.

Exhibition curator: Peter Pfrunder.

The Fotostiftung Schweiz is regularly supported by the Swiss Federal Office for Culture, the cantons of Zurich, Thurgau and Ticino and the City of Winterthur.

### **Publication**

To accompany the exhibition, Limmat Verlag will be publishing the following book: *Walter Bosshard – China brennt. Bildberichte 1931–1939*. ('Walter Bosshard – China burns. Photo reports 1931–1939'). Edited by Peter Pfrunder, Fotostiftung Schweiz. German language, 290 pages, approximately 150 photographs and illustrations.

### **Special events**

**Sunday 23 September, 11:30** Tour with discussion: Peter Pfrunder in conversation with Zhang Wei, university lecturer and author (including among others *Zwischen den Stühlen: Geschichten von Chinesinnen und Chinesen in der Schweiz*, 2007 ['Between two stools: Stories of Chinese in Switzerland'] and *Eine Mango für Mao*, 2018 ['A Mango for Mao']).

**Sunday 11 November, 11:30** Tour with discussion: Peter Pfrunder in conversation with Anton Holzer, photo historian and publisher of the magazine *Fotogesichte*, about the early period of modern photojournalism.

For **press enquiries** please contact Sascha Renner: renner@fotostiftung.ch, T +41 52 234 10 35.

**Press images** in print quality and other exhibition documents can be downloaded from the following link: [www.fotostiftung.ch](http://www.fotostiftung.ch) (Press section). We request that you please supply us with a specimen copy.