

Walter Bosshard / Robert Capa

The race for China

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 *Münchner 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 *Münchner 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 filmmaker 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 venders 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.

The photographic legacy of Walter Bosshard

The Walter Bosshard Archive at Fotostiftung Schweiz contains around 25,000 negatives. In the 1960s Bosshard gave it to his friends Jeanne and Ulrich Doerfel-Schneider, who donated it to Fotostiftung Schweiz in 1991. Parts of it had already been lost or destroyed during Bosshard's lifetime. Only recently has a substantial stock of original enlargements (vintage prints) been discovered in international press archives. In addition to these *vintage prints*, the Fotostiftung Schweiz exhibition includes *modern prints* (posthumously produced silver gelatine prints) and *archival pigment prints* specially produced for this project. The original negatives have been reproduced as high-resolution image files and digitally printed on fine art paper (Photo Cotton Rag).

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

Exhibition curator: Peter Pfrunder.

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Walter Bosshard

- 1892 Born on 8 November in Samstagern/Richterswil (Switzerland).
- 1908–12 Trains as a primary school teacher at the Küssnacht seminary.
- 1912–14 Studies art history at the universities of Zurich and Florence, interrupted by the start of the First World War.
- 1914–18 Work as a teacher in Feldmeilen, interrupted by military service in Ticino.
- 1919–25 Work on a plantation in Sumatra (Indonesia), in the gem trade in Thailand, then as a sales representative in India and the Far East.
- 1927–28 Photographer and technical director of the German Central Asia Expedition (together with Emil Trinkler and Helmut de Terra).
- 1928–30 Bosshard's reports on the Central Asia Expedition appear in a number of newspapers and magazines. He becomes part of the innovative group of photo journalists represented by the *Dephot* (Deutscher Photodienst, Berlin) agency.
- 1930 Bosshard travels to India on behalf of *Dephot* and the *Münchener Illustrierte Presse*. He is made famous by his reporting on Gandhi and the independence movement in India.
- 1931–38 Reporting on China and Manchuria, mainly for Ullstein-Presse (*Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*). The opening of the Chinese National Assembly in Nanjing (May 5, 1931) marks the beginning. Reports on everyday life and society, adventurous expeditions and political events, personalities from politics and the army. Numerous reports on the Sino-Japanese War and the long power struggle between the nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the Red Army led by Mao Zedong.
- 1933–39 Permanent residence in Beijing. In addition to illustrated reports for the weekly press, he also produces a number of films and extended journalistic and literary texts.
- 1933 Expedition with the geographer Günther Köhler to the little explored Koko-Nor area (border region between China and Tibet, on the upper reaches of the Yellow River).
- 1934–36 Four extended journeys through Mongolia.
- 1935 Yangtze River trip. Bosshard explores the Blue River by boat and visits the cities of Hankou and Chongqing, then centres of the nationalist government.
- 1937–39 Bosshard turns his back on the "Aryanised" German media. He finds new clients in the English-speaking press (*Black Star*, *Life*, *Picture Post*).
- 1938 Exclusive photographs of Mao Zedong at his headquarters in Yan'an, pictorial reports on the conquest of Hankou.
- 1939–41 Regular contributions to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ).
- 1942–56 He becomes the NZZ's foreign correspondent.
- 1947–49 Residence in Beijing. Second visit to Yan'an in January 1947. Coverage of the civil war that brought the Communists to power and led to the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. When fleeing from China Bosshard has to leave behind or destroy part of his archive.
- 1953 Accident on 23 October in Panmunjeom, Korea. Bosshard trips on a tree root and breaks his hip. He never fully recovers from the consequences of the accident.
- 1956 At the end of the year he resigns from the NZZ for reasons of health and advancing age.
- 1957–75 Bosshard spends the evening of his life between his chalet in Grimentz / Val d'Anniviers, where he spends the summer months, and Egypt or Spain, where he goes for the winter.
- 1975 Walter Bosshard dies on 18 November 1975 in Torremolinos (Spain).