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Photo of Kellogg–Briand Pact Meeting, Paris, 1931

Daniel H. Magilow

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the German-Jewish photojournalist Dr. Erich Salomon (b. 1886, Berlin–d. 1944, Auschwitz) covered trials, political summits, and society functions. He avoided attracting attention by dressing appropriately (sometimes in tuxedos), and mimicking his subjects' manner and style.¹ To cite his 1931 photo book's title, Salomon captured "famous contemporaries in unguarded moments," when they would, in principle, reveal their true faces.² Using specially modified hats, walking sticks, and tiepins to conceal lenses and cufflinks to conceal the shutter release, he secretly photographed in low light conditions. He voluntarily surrendered dummy negatives to authorities to keep them from confiscating his real ones, which he then published in illustrated magazines (*Illustrierten*), notably the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Uhu*. Editors marketed him as a celebrity photographer, "Dr. Salomon," the intrepid journalist who revealed the difficulties (and boredom) of parliamentary democracy and served as readers' advocate against the powerful.³ He stands out as Weimar Germany's most famous photojournalist and an innovator of candid-camera style photojournalism.⁴

Yet to end here is to bypass an opportunity that the work of this foundational photojournalist offers for reflecting on the aesthetic, ethical, and political questions that candid snapshot form invites. Salomon's secretive, transgressive, and sometimes illegal approach heralded activist photojournalism that exposes atrocities and injustices. But did his role in legitimizing the easily (re)produced, exchanged, and consumed candid snapshot also help pave the way for celebrity voyeurism and an erosion of personal liberty and privacy? The issue is complex because *thematically*, Salomon's candids promote a vision of democratic society based on legal norms and transparency. Yet the latent aesthetic politics of Salomon's approach are not as unambiguously progressive.

Useful for this examination is a signature photograph Salomon took in August 1931 after he infiltrated a state dinner at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs held for German Chancellor Julius Curtius and Foreign Minister Heinrich Brüning. At this banquet, French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand caught Salomon in the act of photographing. The image depicts Briand, Minister of the Colonies Paul Reynaud, and several other Ministers. Reynaud is blurry, having turned just as Briand recognized Salomon. The looks on the officials' faces disrupt the image's function as an objective, behind-the-scenes, third party view of politics. After Briand catches Salomon *in flagrante*, it becomes an image about Salomon's efforts to efface his involvement. But rather than react angrily, Briand's smile betrays the ministers' friendly, symbiotic relationship with Salomon. Whereas Weimar Germany's politically extremist press tarred such



Figure 1.11 Erich Salomon, *Aristide Briand* discovers the photographer who had procured himself unauthorized admission to a reception at the *Quai d'Orsay*. Briand comments: "Ah, le voilà! Le roi des indiscrets!" Also pictured: Paul Reynaud, Alexandre Champetiers de Ribes, Edouard Herriot and Léon Bérard, 1931. Berlinische Galerie, Berlin/ Erich Salomon/Art Resource, NY.

politicians as incompetent, corrupt plutocrats, Salomon humanized them with candid but not-unflattering photos and only worked with politically mainstream publications. In turn, his subjects tolerated his infiltration of their functions. Briand reportedly once said, "There are just three things necessary for a League of Nations conference: a few Foreign Secretaries, a table, and Salomon."⁵

While this photograph's manifest content promotes political transparency, its historically specific form—the instantaneous snapshot, created in exceptional circumstances and circulated as a commodity in the illustrated press—arose in a historically specific setting, amid the late-Weimar Republic's political, economic, and social crises. In this milieu, right-wing political and photographic theorists fetishized dangerous instants, states of exception, and moments of decision as occasions of heightened and authentic experience. For instance, Ernst Jünger argued in "On Danger," the preface to *Der gefährliche Augenblick* (The Dangerous Moment), a photobook of high-speed crashes, political assassinations, and other catastrophes, that accidents, violence, and danger offer heightened access to authentic experience precisely because they bypass the bounds of bourgeois rationality and social convention. Modern

technology can now capture this special moment by freezing it in the candid snapshot. Jünger praised the candid snapshot for the disinterested, objective coldness with which this form—regardless of its content—could offer proprietary access to the fundamental struggles of existence.⁶

Moreover, conservative social theorists conceived the project of rendering political order in Weimar Germany's dangerous moment in terms analogous to the task of rendering aesthetic order through the candid snapshot. In his *Political Theology* (1922), for instance, Carl Schmitt argued that "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," meaning that the sovereign alone decides when it is appropriate to transgress laws in the public interest.⁷ Schmitt's approach to rendering *political form* in a state of exception resembles Salomon's method for photographing dangerous moments when doing so wasn't allowed. He simply claimed the right to do so and used whatever guises necessary to achieve his goals. Fortunately, Salomon had the wherewithal not to abuse his power, even as he sovereignly arrogated to himself the right to bypass laws and convention in pursuit of news.

Today, the German Society for Photography's lifetime achievement award for photojournalists, the "Dr. Erich Salomon Prize," honors its namesake because, "Even today, his vision and standards of value still form the norm around which a critical profession orients itself."⁸ Its recipients are those who, like Salomon, used photojournalism to laudable ends. Yet it is worth reconsidering the history of Salomon's snapshot approach. While some exceptional situations may justify a photographer's "stealing" of the moment, historically, an uncomfortably similar logic permeated right-wing thought on the eve of Hitler's rise.

Notes

- 1 Allan Sekula, "Paparazzo Notes," in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984): 29–30.
- 2 Erich Salomon, *Berühmte Zeitgenossen in unbewachten Augenblicken* (Stuttgart: Engelhorn, 1931).
- 3 See for instance "Eine neue Künstler-Gilde. Der Fotograf erobert Neuland," *Uhu* 6, Nr. 1 (October 1929): 34–9 and "Das Kabinett des Dr. Salomon, des Photographen mit der Tarnkappe," *Das Leben* 9, Nr. 6 (December 1931): 5–11.
- 4 Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: Godine Press, 1980): 118. Nachum T. Gidal, *Jews in Germany: From Roman Times to the Weimar Republic* (Cologne: Könemann, 1998): 379.
- 5 Quoted in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982): 220.
- 6 Ernst Jünger, "Über die Gefahr," in *Der gefährliche Augenblick. Eine Sammlung von Bildern und Berichten*, ed. Ferdinand Buchholz (Berlin: Junker and Dünhaupt, 1931): 11–31. Translated by Donald Reneau as "On Danger," *New German Critique* 59 (Spring/Summer 1993): 11–16.
- 7 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1922): 13.
- 8 "Dr. Erich Salomon Preis der DGPH," *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Photographie E.V.* <http://www.dgph.de/english/dr-erich-salomon-award-of-the-deutsche-gesellschaft-fuer-photographie> (accessed 5 December 2013).