

## HISTORY OF LEICA

### BOOK REVIEW

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#### ***Leica: Witness to a Century***

Alessandro Pasi;

Bolis Edizioni srl, Italy and W.W. Norton & Co, New York, NY;  
English Edition, 2004; 160 pages.

Most probably you are familiar with the iconic image of Che, if not the photograph then perhaps a stylized poster, drawing or stencil derived from the print. Che Guevara gazes to the future, serenely passionate and self-assured as a commander of revolution. The image was photographed on March 6, 1960 by Alberto Diaz Gutierrez, also known as Korda, with a Leica M2 rangefinder camera. The picture became a universally recognized symbol of revolutionary fervor.

The photograph of Che is among 130 memorable images featured in *Leica: Witness to a Century*. Yet author Alessandro Pasi provides so much more in this book. His production—it's so comprehensive and multi-faceted that it deserves the accolade—is among the most impressive historical reviews of a camera system that I have had the pleasure to read.

Three reasons why it's a great book: First, the story of Leica technical development is paired with renowned photography and photographers—illustrating how innovation enabled creativity. Wide-ranging narrative is provided about the photographers themselves. In addition to the outstanding photography, the book includes 30 elaborately detailed color images of Leica cameras to illustrate their evolution over the years.

Second, the graphic design and layouts are colorful and perky—no two pages look the same. That together with a diverse selection of images make for a lively book, avoiding the tedium frequently found in tomes of camera history.

Third, *Leica: Witness to a Century* deals with World War II—what Leica the company did and how it fared, as well as military cameras and war photography. In comparison, every other camera system history that I have read has summarily treated the war and the camera's role in it as a minor footnote to history, glossed over in a paragraph or two. In this comprehensive history of Leica, the coverage of the company and its cameras in the war is substantial, highly informative, and appears rigorously objective.

## The First Modern Camera

Leica introduced the earliest practicable portable, hand-held camera in 1914. The instrument used film instead of cumbersome glass plates, with substantially higher photosensitivity that eliminated the need for time exposures in daylight. The book describes this dynamic development and the men behind it in lavishly illustrated detail.

The manufacturer of Leica cameras, the firm Optische Institut von Ernst Leitz of Wetzlar, Germany, founded in 1869, had specialized in microscopes. Singular credit for the first film camera goes to Oskar Barnak (1879-1936), an optician and photographer who convinced the firm's father-and-son owners, Ernst Leitz I and II, to adopt and manufacture his prototype camera. The first model was called the Ur-Leica, the *Ur* meaning original or prototype. The name Leica, derived from Leitz, was reportedly suggested by Barnak himself (whom is described as "a modest genius.").

Further credit Oscar Barnak with the design of the universal 24x36mm film format. Based on the technology of the times, the film dimension was calculated to provide a million elements or points of exposure, which Barnak considered the minimum necessary to produce a quality image. The first lens for the new Leica camera had a 50mm focal length, which Barnak adopted because its angle of view approximated the human eye. The shutter offered two speeds, 1/25 and 1/50 sec. A lever rotated the lens for focusing, but the photographer had to estimate the distance. The camera did not have a rangefinder or viewfinder, but featured a rudimentary peephole-and-bracket sighting device. Thoughtfully, the instrument included an attached lens cap and lugs for a shoulder strap. Following the Ur-Leica, several hundred models of an improved Leica were sold by special order, but production was interrupted by World War I and the depression that followed in Germany.

The first mass-production version, the Leica I, appeared in 1925. By this time, numerous competitors had come on the scene, but Leica remained the portable camera of choice among professional photographers, photojournalists and numerous artists. Innovations with the Leica I included a direct optical viewfinder, combined film advance and shutter setting, and shutter speeds from 1/20 to 1/500 sec as well as B. The camera also had what was considered the first quiet shutter release. At the time, the Leica was particularly admired for its wide depth of field that could be applied in hand-held photography. Films were far slower than contemporary emulsions. Typical film speed was ASA 25 compared to 100 today.

*Leica: Witness to a Century* continues on to describe the development of Leica rangefinder cameras through the contemporary M7, and SLR cameras up to the R8. Colorful advertisements that appeared with each camera accompany the descriptives.

The book truly shines in its presentations of memorable photography taken with Leica cameras, together with biographies of the photographers. Leni Riefenstahl and Paul Wolff are showcased and contrasted to Gisele Freund and Robert Capa. Henri

Cartier-Bresson and Alexander Rodchenko are celebrated. Imagery of the horrors of war, captured by German photographers in the Second World War and published in *Signal* as the fronts began to collapse, merit a small section of their own. Post-war recovery is represented by the photographers' cooperative Magnum and a number of artists including Elliott Erwitt (famous for capturing the *joie de vivre* that reemerged after the war), Inge Morath ('national' portraiture and photojournalism), and Mario De Biasi (famous for his portrayals of New York City).

Leica imagery representing the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is more oriented to photojournalism. A pensive President Kennedy, photographed by Georgetown photographer Fred Maroon. The revolutionary Che Guevara by Alberto Diaz Gutierrez. The Beatles' last concert, captured by Jim Marshall. A flower child meets bayonets at an anti-war demonstration at the Pentagon in a powerful, close-up image by Marc Riboud. The launch of Apollo 11 by Mario De Biasi. The Prague Spring dramatically presented by Joseph Koudelka. African portraits by Leni Riefenstahl. The victims of Pol Pot, by Alberto Bevilacqua. Claus Bjorn Larsen in Kosovo, and the new social journalism of Sebastiao Salgado.

Quite a journey from the Ur-Leica, beautifully illustrated without favor or fear.

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