

Willi Ruge and Fotoaktuell: Adventures for the Press

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I believe that a photo illustrator or press photographer must first and foremost be a journalist, and only then a photographer and businessman.

—Kurt Hahne, *Die Illustrations-Photographie*, 1914

In 1930 the *Hackebeils Illustrierte Zeitung* paid tribute to photojournalist Willi Ruge for his work over the past seventeen years. Ruge, then, must have begun publishing photographs in the illustrated press in 1913, at age twenty-one.¹ He would later recall, “I was very lucky to be able to pursue my career from around 1909 onwards, and I truly experienced the most turbulent decades at first hand.”² Willi Ernst Karl Ruge was born in Berlin in 1892, the son of Ernst Karl Ruge and Emma Später. He grew up and went to junior high school in Berlin and at age fifteen began an apprenticeship as an optician before training as a photographer.³ He was interested in aviation technology as a teenager and apparently had hoped to become a professional pilot.⁴ It is not surprising that he turned to photojournalism: photography,

like aviation, required technical knowledge, and work for the press promised both mobility and danger.

It was an auspicious time and place to choose such a career. The first German magazines were launched in Berlin, which had been the capital of the German Reich since 1871. The *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Die Woche*, both based in the city, were the best-selling magazines at the turn of the century, and Berlin would become the center of German publishing after World War I.⁵ Developments in half-tone printing and rotogravure at the end of the nineteenth century, combined with phototechnical advances that allowed for hand-held cameras and reduced exposure times, opened this industry up for photographers, creating a new field of work: photojournalism. As photographs replaced the engraved images that had hitherto been standard in print, press illustrators’ studios gradually shut down and photographers took over. It was the custom around the turn of the century for press photographers to work independently, submitting their photos to a variety of publishers



fig. 1 Willi Ruge. French troops in Essen, Germany, during their occupation of the Ruhr Valley, 1923. Ullstein Bild/The Granger Collection, New York. © The Granger Collection Ltd.



fig. 2 Willi Ruge. The high-jumper Alfred Lehninger in Berlin. 1924. Ullstein Bild/ The Granger Collection, New York. © The Granger Collection Ltd.

and illustration agencies or distributors. A number of brochures and other publications, widely available in Berlin, dispensed practical hints as well as cautionary advice to those flocking to the burgeoning profession early in the century.⁶ In a 1913 handbook for aspiring press photographers, Paul Dobert, editor-in-chief of *Die Woche*, wrote, “Thousands of professional photographers and tens of thousands of amateur photographers worldwide are eager to be part of the illustrated press. They are tempted by money and fame, and it seems easy to become a contributor; all you have to do is ‘take a shot,’ develop it, copy it, and then send off the finished photo. Usually, however, the photo will be returned to the newcomer, and he will quickly notice that it is not so easy to deliver perfect photographs to the press.”⁷

No work by Ruge has been found in publications before the late 1910s, but it is likely that he began attempting to sell single images to the press before that time. During World War I, both at the front and as an air gunner he took photos under dangerous conditions, developing the technical expertise and adventurous spirit that would be so useful

in his future activities. Later, after the war, he witnessed the virulent political upheavals in Berlin and beyond. Preserved are some very early photographs of battles in the Scheunenviertel neighborhood of Berlin, uprisings in Upper Silesia around 1920, and the French occupation of the Ruhr area in 1923 (fig. 1), including the burial of the thirteen Krupp workers shot by French soldiers in Essen that year.⁸

In the late 1910s, Ruge established the press-photo agency Fotoaktuell to distribute his photographs. The business was founded as “Fotoaktuell, Willi Ruge Inh.” (proprietor Willi Ruge). Over the years, it took different names, spellings, and logos: for example, Presse-Illustrations-Verlag and Presseverlag Fotoaktuell GmbH in the 1920s and 1930s; then Luftberichterstattung Bildberichterstatter (Schriftleiter IRDP/Reichsverband der Deutschen Presse) Großreportagen in the late 1930s. The first press agencies had been founded in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. After 1900 the number of press photographers increased considerably, leading to the formation of the Verband Deutscher Illustrations-Photographen (Association of German illustration photographers) in 1910. Its mission was to safeguard and settle the conditions under which the growing business of photographic images operated. Because it had become difficult to enter the market as an individual (negotiating for copyright, payment, and publication rights), many photographers—including Wilhelm Braemer, Alfred Groß, Robert Sennecke, and Willi Römer—set up their own companies and agencies to arrange the distribution and sale of their work.⁹ Like Ruge, they had photographed the revolutionary battles in Berlin in 1918 and 1919; many of their documentary photos were also sold as postcards.

The great many subjects shown in the extant prints of Ruge’s work indicate that Fotoaktuell’s archive must have been quite substantial by the end of the 1920s. Photos of sporting events predominated in the early years: Ruge trained his eye for the perfect snapshot during tennis matches, high-jump competitions (fig. 2), motor races, and events at Luna Park, the popular Berlin amusement park. The archive also includes journalistic portraits and photos of trade fairs, art exhibitions, and conventions, as well as the annual carnival celebration in Cologne. The titles for Ruge’s reportages, provided on the backs of the photographs, are diverse: *Photographed Fun (Das fotografierte Vergnügen)*, *Can Astrology Be Taken Seriously? (Ob an der Astrologie was dran ist?)*, *The Moon Shot Will Come (Der Mondflug kommt)*, *The Caged Woman (Die Frau im Käfig)*, *Whims of Nature (Launen der Natur)*, *New Challenges for the Unemployed (Neue Aufgaben für Arbeitslose)*, and *Laughter, Man’s Safety Valve (Lachen, das Sicherheitsventil des Menschen)*. The wide range of subject matter—from scientific developments to politics to entertainment—accords generally with the variety of photographic material in demand in the expanding illustrated-magazine market in this period.¹⁰

The *Hackeböils Illustrierte Zeitung* article from 1930 celebrated the “heroes of the camera” who braved the dangers of bodily harm, arrest by the authorities, and damage to their equipment. Ruge is respectfully cited as “one of the most daring contemporary press photographers.”¹¹ Acrobatic flying performances were all the rage, and Ruge’s fascination with airplanes and the public’s interest in aerial artistry had led to many photo reportages on the subject. In spring 1922, Franz Hailer became the first German pilot to successfully land his airplane on an alpine plateau, touching down below the Zugspitze, the highest peak in Germany; Ruge accompanied him in the air and documented the feat. That same year he collaborated with Deutsche Luft-Reederei, a precursor of Lufthansa, to produce the 35mm documentary film *Aeolus, The Song of Songs of Flying* (*Aeolus, das hohe Lied der Fliegerei*). He contributed to other aviation films of the early 1920s and worked for the German aviation industry—the manufacturer Rumpel, for example. He also attended competition flights in Germany and abroad and flew with daredevil stunt pilots, such as Ernst Udet.¹²

Udet, a well-known World War I flying ace, had, in 1918, been among the earliest pilots to successfully parachute from a disabled aircraft. Ruge accompanied Udet on a stunt flight at an air show, and the resulting reportage, bearing the title *I Fly with Udet* (*Ich fliege mit Udet*), was published in several magazines in 1931 and 1932.¹³ The rather abstract photographs are infinitely more dramatic than the conventional press photographs of the day. Created through long exposure times in conjunction with the speed of flight, they show the marveling audience as a floating mass, as a fleeing flock, and as traced on film while the airplane rotated through space, in scenes whose drama is emphasized by a more prosaic portrait of pilot and plane on terra firma. Cleverly mixing Ruge’s circular and horizontal compositions, the editorial staff at the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* arranged the photos into a coherent whole, conveying a feeling of suspense that mirrors the physical experience of the body in flight. This and other aerial photo series by Ruge were published nationally and internationally in the early 1930s—the Udet reportage in Paris, for example, and “An Aerial ‘Pullman’ in Flight: Amenities of Modern Travel” (about the Junkers G.38 “flying hotel”) in London.¹⁴

By the late 1920s, the press in Germany had attracted many young photographers, largely untrained, who, like Ruge, were enthusiastic about the possibilities the illustrated magazine offered for visual expression. As the number of photographs in the pages of magazines increased, so did the importance of creative layout techniques. New page-design concepts were developed in editorial offices through teamwork among copywriters, photo editors, and graphic designers. Photographs, regarded as raw material, were shaped, processed, and mixed into entertaining stories that often combined the

work of several image makers—techniques that were also harnessed in new, photo-based advertising for magazines themselves. Photo reportages promoted the “new” photographic medium and associated it with speed: for example, *Sasha Stone*’s reportage *The Hundred-Horsepower Office—It’s No Utopia* (*Die 100pferdige Büro—keine Utopie*), published in *UHU* in 1926, devoted to the increasing rationalization of office labor, and . . . *And Everything Happened in 1/100 of a Second* (*... und Alles geschah in 1/100 Sekunde*), by a photographer named Joffe, in the *Weltspiegel* in 1929.¹⁵ Along with this, as their status grew, photographers were increasingly given bylines for their reportages, a privilege formerly reserved for writers. The news photographer *Erich Salomon* covered international and political negotiations; Alfred Eisenstaedt and *André Kertész* monitored the urban scene; *Umbo* and *Martin Munkácsi* produced pictures recognizable for their innovative compositions; and Stone interested himself in a variety of subjects and fields of photography. *Felix H. Man* was one of the busiest photographers in the Weimar Republic. Yet none of them had formal visual art training, with the exception of Stone and of Umbo, who had studied at the *Bauhaus*. They found new perspectives on familiar objects and situations, discovered views hitherto unseen, developed the series as a working method, formulated their own individual styles, and quickly became competitors in the flourishing magazine market.

Fotoaktuell delivered material that was less topical than other press photography agencies. In some series Ruge tried to find an equivalent to the radical realism and formal experimentation of the *Neues Sehen* (New Vision) movement, as exemplified in *Fantasy of Small Things* (*Phantastik der kleinen Dinge*) and its photos of everyday items (fig. 3). In 1927, six of these pictures were printed in the magazine *Die Woche* under the title *The Fickleness of the*



fig. 3 Willi Ruge. From the series *Fantasy of Small Things* (*Phantastik der kleinen Dinge*). Late 1920s. © Keystone/IBA-Archiv/Willi Ruge

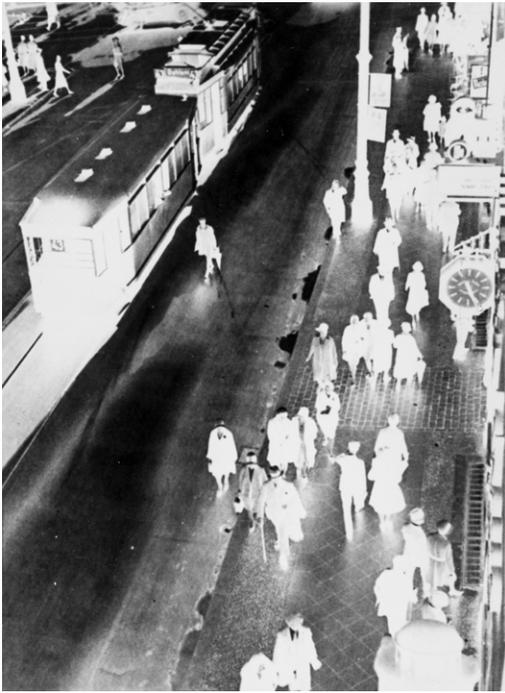


fig. 4 Willi Ruge. From the series *Negative Objectivity* (*Negative Objektivität*). Late 1920s. © Keystone/IBA-Archiv/Willi Ruge

Lens (*Die Tücke des Objektivs*).¹⁶ Werner Gräff included three of these photos, which mirror the effect of the wide-angle lens, in his 1929 book *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Here comes the new photographer!).¹⁷ This publication accompanied the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition *Film und Foto*, the poster for which featured a photograph by Ruge, though neither Ruge nor his company were represented in the show.¹⁸ The poster pictures a man (presumably Ruge's colleague Arno Böttcher) holding a large-format reporter's camera, seen from a worm's-eye view. Photos by Ruge with even more distorted perspectives were printed in the *Bilder-Courier* in 1927.¹⁹ The works in that series of six enlarged negative prints — called *Negative Objectivity* (*Negative Objektivität*) — are almost all urban traffic scenes (fig. 4). With their aerial viewpoint they are reminiscent of similar images of Berlin by Stone and of *Moscow* by Aleksandr Rodchenko. (Ruge was very much aware of the potential the darkroom offered for enlargement and other techniques; he had tested montage in his World War I aviation photos.)²⁰

As an adventurer endowed with an extraordinary sense of photographic timing, Ruge was in a position to supply all the types of pictures required by the market in the mid-1920s. However, after 1926, as illustrated magazines proliferated, competition increased, and the photographer's distinct individual view and thematic approach became the decisive selection factors for

editorial staff. One observer reported, "Considering the abundance of magazines on the market, each publication is obviously anxious to present distinctive features and to assert its position through the quality of either content or photographic material and, if possible, to widen the circle of its readers."²¹

Ruge responded to the new climate in his own manner, performing chemical experiments with photos from his own archive and creating stagelike settings in front of the camera. *Fantasy of Small Things*, mentioned above, exemplifies his studio work with objects. For *The Man behind the Camera* (*Der Mann hinter der Kamera*), a nine-part series from the early 1930s, Ruge may have used his own existing, unpublished photos; the "man" is Ruge himself. Two identical pictures — one an enlarged negative — show a photographer with his head hidden beneath the traditional dark cloth. The viewer looks into the lens of the large-format camera, and all that is visible of the operator is his straddled legs (fig. 5). In the seven photos that follow, Ruge gestures expressively, playing the part of the observing and animating photographer, with the studio camera always visible. Was the photojournalist caricaturing traditional studio photography,



fig. 5 Willi Ruge. From the series *The Man behind the Camera* (*Der Mann hinter der Kamera*). Early 1930s. © Keystone/IBA-Archiv/Willi Ruge



or was he trying to prove that he could be a studio photographer as well? Another series from the early 1930s, *A Beerological Study (Eine bierologische Studie)*, comprises twenty photos taken from the same distance and the same perspective and showing the same two men (fig. 6). The man on the right is Ruge. Both men are smoking and drinking; they begin a conversation, and their glasses are emptied and refilled. They have a somewhat sad air until they start to argue, after which they embrace each other, exchange kisses, and eventually collapse, exhausted.

These photographs express a certain humor and irony, but they also demonstrate Ruge's tendency to cultivate his own image, which is evident in his reportages as well. He made sure that photos were taken of him during his assignments, with one or more cameras (in addition to a Contax 35mm camera, he used a 6-by-9-centimeter [2 3/8-by-3 1/16-inch] medium-format camera or a larger camera, 13 by 18 centimeters [5 1/8 by 7 1/8 inches]). The first-person narrative style of Ruge's reportages, unusual at the time, may have been a contribution of his editors or it may have been his own idea. In any case, the name Willi Ruge certainly developed a significance and evocative power of its own.

As reflected in the competitive market for illustrated magazines, public interest in photography reached a high point around 1930. Magazines and newspapers promoted photo reportages, countless articles introduced the "New Photography," competitions were held, and exhibitions and photo books received attention and reviews outside the

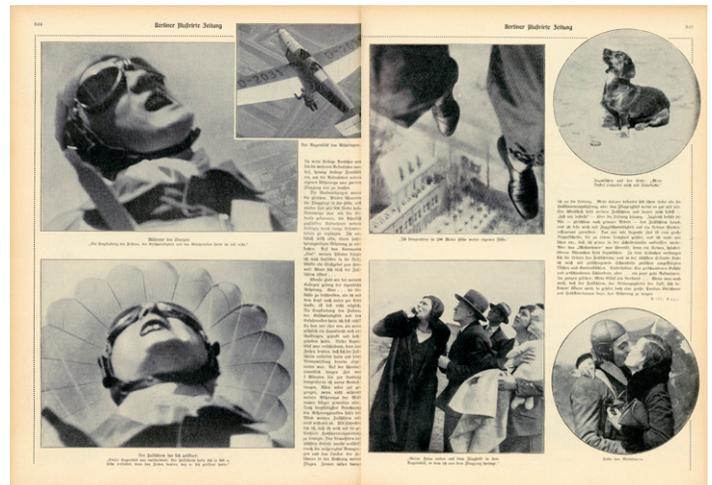


fig. 6 Willi Ruge. From the series *A Beerological Study (Eine bierologische Studie)*. Early 1930s. © Keystone/IBA-Archiv/Willi Ruge

fig. 7 Willi Ruge. "Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm" (I photograph myself during a parachute jump). *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 21 (May 24, 1931). Ullstein Bild. © Axel Springer SE

specialist trade press.²² Inscriptions on the backs of extant photographs (in archives in Berlin and Zurich)²³ indicate just how successful Fotoaktuell was during this period, at the beginning of the Great Depression and after a short period of economic stabilization: quite a number of prints bear indications that publishers used them several times.

The sprightly reporter married the much younger Frieda Wenzel in December 1930, and their son, Armin Dagobert, was born the same month. However, starting a family did not change Ruge's love of adventure. In 1931 he produced two sensational reportages: *On the Avus with Caracciola (Mit Caracciola über die Avus)* and *I Photograph Myself during a Parachute Jump (Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm; fig. 7)*. In both, the photographer slipped into the subject's position, seeking to capture his own experiences with speed and danger for the printed page.

In the first series, Ruge accompanied the famous driver Rudolf Caracciola in a race in Berlin, on the Avus, the first European motor racetrack. From his perspective as copilot, Ruge photographed details of the race cars, portraits of the drivers, and passing objects at high speed (fig. 8). The extreme sense of movement creates the illusion that Ruge has switched roles; no longer the documenting photojournalist, he is in the midst of the action himself—an interpreter of speed. Objectifying representation has been transposed onto subjective experience, seemingly captured by chance.

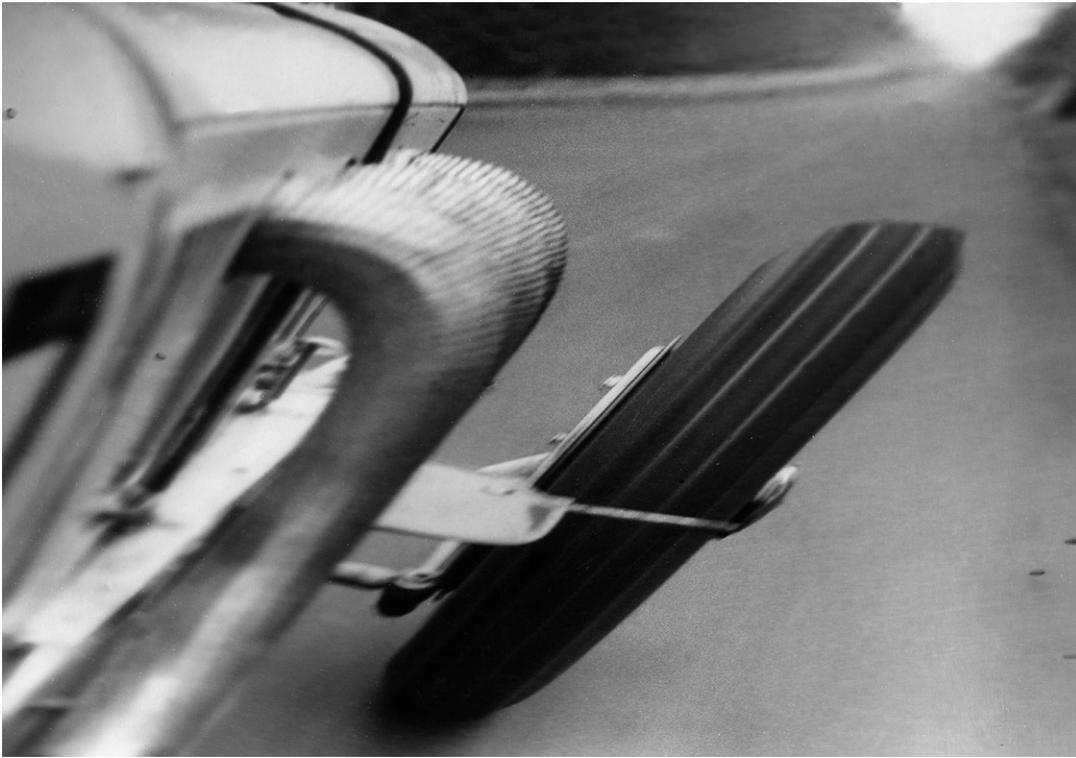


fig. 8 Willi Ruge. From the series *On the Avus with Caracciola (Mit Caracciola über die Avus)*. 1931. Ullstein Bild/The Granger Collection, New York. © The Granger Collection Ltd.

Ruge adopted an even more radical position in his parachuting reportage, which appeared in 1931—first in Berlin, in May, and then in London a month later. We can assume that the coverage included around twenty photographs, fourteen of which are in the Walther Collection. Sixteen pictures in this series are known to be extant; five of the published images have not been located to date. The quality of the prints is that of most press photos of the time, which were either produced by the photographers themselves in multiples, directly from the negative, and then sent to various newspapers and magazines, or reproduced and enlarged by partner agencies for further circulation.²⁴ Ruge's parachuting reportage was his greatest success. It was published as a three-page article in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, then printed the same year in the *Illustrated London News* and in three American magazines—and the photos were still being sold and printed as a sensational reportage in the mid-1930s.²⁵ Thanks to the accompanying text (written by Ruge for the Berlin magazine) and the captions on the backs of the photographs, it is possible to reconstruct the shooting sequence. In his text, Ruge also refers to the difficulties he faced in getting permission for his adventure, first in being allowed to take the required training course: "The director of the parachute factory was interested in our plan, but also somewhat

skeptical. He only agreed when I assured him that, as an experienced pilot, I possessed sufficient aeronautical expertise."²⁶ By this time Ruge had been working as a press photographer for twenty years, and he did not pass up the opportunity to document every aspect of a highly original subject. A series of eight photographs by Ruge on the correct handling of a parachute, now in the Keystone Archive in Zurich (figs. 9, 10), was likely taken during the training course—a context particularly apparent in the photo showing a graphic sequence of jumps.

Ruge's concept for the daring reportage included the depiction of both hero and audience. He planned the project together with Böttcher, who, Ruge reported, had also completed the jump training, taken his test jump, and injured himself in doing so. In addition, "My colleague Fernstädt pitched in to photograph my own jump from the vantage point of the second airplane," Ruge wrote. His and Böttcher's equipment comprised "a small-gauge film camera with an automatic release trigger that we customized ourselves, while the accompanying colleague in the second airplane was equipped with a standard press camera."²⁷ Altogether, nine of the preserved photographs were taken by someone other than Ruge. In the published sequence, these scenes add emotion and drama to the adventure: showing, for example, Ruge's wife, holding their

newborn son and gazing up at the sky among other amazed onlookers (fig. 11) and, most significantly, the various phases of Ruge's jump as photographed from the second airplane (figs. 12, 13). These photos, most likely taken based on Ruge's advice and specification, convey a sense of space and height; the article also includes three highly dramatic images captured by Ruge himself (figs. 14, 16, 17). "It is simply impossible for me to describe the feeling as I looked down to the earth below, head down," he wrote. "I hardly had the sensation of falling, of speed and danger. During the seemingly eternal time of seven minutes until I landed, I photographed what I saw."²⁸ The object of Ruge's observation was his own body. Despite his paralyzed expression, the self-portrait taken from below, with the structure of the parachute in the background, conveys a feeling of relief—the parachute had opened. Figure 14 shows Ruge with his mouth wide open, his piercing cry almost audible. The experiment is more disturbing in two further images: in one (fig. 15), Ruge falls toward the earth headfirst, tense hands outstretched; in the other (fig. 17), his legs, isolated from

his body, obstruct our view of the houses of the city below: "I am photographing my own feet at a height of two hundred meters," the caption reads. As he attempted to land, a power pole got in the way. He concluded, "A scratched face and shattered shinbone, but... a couple good shots. All in all: more luck than good sense."²⁹ The happy ending is, of course, also captured—his wife's welcoming kiss and the congratulations of the spectators (fig. 18). With this highly dramatic collection of images, the almost forty-year-old photographer succeeded in definitively positioning himself as an adventurous modern photo-journalist—and that same year he produced several other large reportages.

Ruge's adventurous approach to photography also took him behind the scenes of a gynecology clinic. His comprehensive and very detailed work on a hospital delivery room was a cover story for the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* in 1931.³⁰ Reportages in Argentina and in Egypt and other African countries ensued during the 1930s, but he still continued to follow local events.



fig. 9 Willi Ruge. From the series... *It Opened After All (...und er entfaltet sich doch)*. c. 1930. © Keystone/IBA-Archiv/Willi Ruge

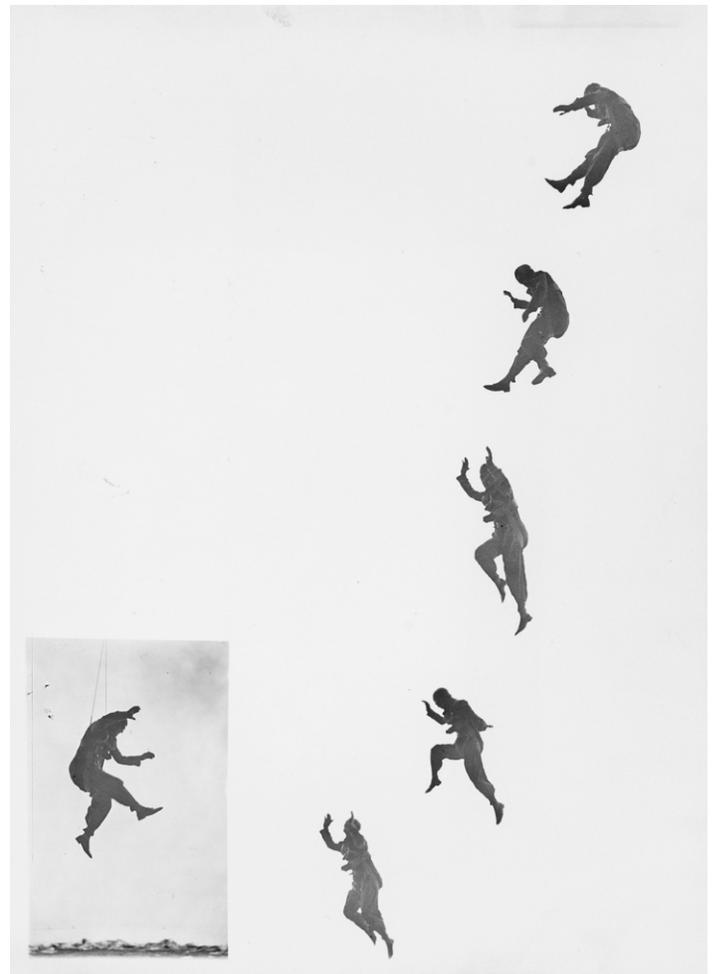


fig. 10 Willi Ruge. From the series... *It Opened After All (...und er entfaltet sich doch)*. c. 1930. © Keystone/IBA-Archiv/Willi Ruge



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Willi Ruge. From the series *I Photograph Myself during a Parachute Jump (Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm)*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther

fig. 11 *Meanwhile, on the Ground . . . (Unterdessen auf der Erde . . .)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 5 ⁹/₁₆ × 8 ¹/₁₆" (14.2 × 20.4 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.3](#)

fig. 12 *The Moment of the Jump (Der Moment des Absprungs)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 5 ⁹/₁₆ × 8 ¹/₁₆" (14.2 × 20.4 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.5](#)

fig. 13 *I Decided to Jump Headfirst (Ich entschloss mich zu einem hechtsprungartigen Absprung)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 8 ¹/₁₆ × 5 ⁹/₁₆" (20.4 × 14.2 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.6](#)

fig. 14 *Photo of Myself at the Moment of My Jump (Selbstfoto im Moment des Absprungs)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 5 ⁹/₁₆ × 8 ¹/₁₆" (14.2 × 20.4 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.8](#)

fig. 15 *With My Head Hanging Down before the Parachute Opened . . . (Mit dem Kopf nach unten hängend, bei ungeöffnetem Fallschirm . . .)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 5 ¹/₂ × 8" (14 × 20.3 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.9](#)



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fig. 16 *This Moment Was Decisive... (Dieser Augenblick war entscheidend...)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 7 $\frac{15}{16}$ " (13,7 × 20,1 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.10](#)

fig. 17 *Seconds before Landing (Sekunden vor der Landung)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 8 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 5 $\frac{9}{16}$ " (20,4 × 14,1 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.11](#)

fig. 18 *A Snapshot by My Colleague (Ein Schnappschuss meines Kollegen)*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 5 $\frac{9}{16}$ × 8" (14,1 × 20,3 cm). MoMA [1849.2001.1](#)

In 1933, in accordance with the *Reichskulturkammergesetz* (Reich chamber of culture law), professionals in the fields of theater, art, music, broadcasting, film, journalism, and literature were obliged to join a designated trade organization—a means of regulating professional activity that was, in practice, a political move to exclude Jews and Communists and other leftists. “Prior to the consolidation of all professional bodies concerned with the production and distribution of political publications into the *Reichspressekammer* [Reich press chamber],” Bernd Weise has written, “all hitherto private-law professional organizations of press photographers . . . were on June 14 preliminarily merged into the ‘*Reichsverband Deutscher Bildberichterstatter e.V.*’—in short, the RDB.”³¹ Munkácsi’s reportage *On the Day of National Work* (*Zum Tag der nationalen Arbeit*) was printed, as planned, in a special issue of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* appearing on May 1, 1933, but as a Jew Munkácsi was unable to continue to practice his profession under the Nazi dictatorship. He was forced to emigrate, like many other photographers, editors, and agency heads. Some were able to continue their careers in England and the United States, often very successfully; others were not so lucky. Salomon fled to Holland, but he could not escape the Nazis. He was deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt and died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1944.

Ruge found a way to come to terms with the new political regime, and from the mid-1930s on he mostly worked on military subjects. The stamp on the reverse of several works from this era bears his name and the legend *Bildberichterstatter (Schriftleiter I.R.D.P.)* (Press photographer [Editor I.R.D.P.]), documenting his affiliation with the *Reichsverband der Deutschen Presse*. Udet joined the newly formed air force as a colonel in 1935, and he and others among Ruge’s aviation contacts most likely smoothed the way for the photographer’s reportages during the war.³² Ruge photographed the spring maneuver of the German armed forces on the Baltic Sea in 1934; photographic reportages of alpine troops and soldiers on motorcycles followed in 1935. In 1936 the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* printed Ruge’s reportage *In the Air with Our Combat Pilots* (*Mit unseren Kampffliegern in der Luft*), photographed during the fall maneuver, as a cover story (fig. 19).³³ The same year, the magazine—which had been taken over by the Nazis in 1934—honored the photographer with a four-page spread showing thirteen of his photographs. Titled *25 Years of Current Events—25 Years as a Photojournalist* (*25 Jahre Zeitgeschehen—25 Jahre Bildberichter*), it consisted mainly of photographs of political events, accompanied by ideologically correct captions: Ruge’s photographs from revolutionary times retroactively became documents “from the most dismal days of the Reich’s capital city,” and an



fig. 19 Willi Ruge. From the series *In the Air with Our Combat Pilots* (*Mit unseren Kampffliegern in der Luft*). 1936. Ullstein Bild/The Granger Collection, New York. © The Granger Collection Ltd.

image of a gathering of the Nazis in 1924 is labeled the “campaign to awaken Germany.” Ruge’s aeronautical expertise is also documented, and in one photograph we see him helping a female parachutist into her equipment.³⁴ His reportages on military exercises and his detailed documentation of the training of soldiers in the military flying school in Neuruppin led to a job as a war correspondent in 1939, first in the Spanish Civil War and then at various sites of German aggression. However, Ruge also still supplied magazines with entertaining stories, and it is not surprising that they featured daring and sensational feats: aerial acrobatics, for example, which he photographed not only from the ground but also at eye level.³⁵

Ruge belonged to the group of photographers and journalists who accepted Nazi ideology and directly or indirectly supported it with their work. They profited from the fact that the fascists had either forced their most able colleagues to emigrate or had sent them to concentration camps. After the war, Ruge did not have to wait long until he could work again. In 1946 he received certification from the Press Control Officer of the American military government that allowed him to take photographs for the American-controlled news agency Deutsche Allgemeine Nachrichtenagentur in Berlin.³⁶ Soon after, he began working for the newly founded magazines *Weltbild* and *Quick* in Munich.

In 1953, with his second wife, Elly Snita, Ruge moved from Munich to Offenburg, in southern Germany, where he met the publisher Franz Burda, a like-minded aviation enthusiast. That same year Burda published *Fünfzig Jahre Motorflug* (Fifty years of engine-powered flight), a historical account of aviation, and Ruge’s name may be found on the list of contributors as creative director and “aeronautic consultant.” Though the book emphasizes the daring and courage of pioneering aviators, Burda did not miss the opportunity—so soon after the war—to make some critical remarks. In his preface he wrote, “Lest we forget, this photo book wishes to draw attention to something else as well: initially the dream of humankind, flying was to become a blessing for all—but it turned out to be a gruesome Greek gift! The more perfect the airplane, the more dreadful it was when employed as a tool of destruction in modern total warfare, sowing ruin and death.”³⁷ However, the book—largely made up of press and reportage photos, including numerous images by Ruge—is more than anything a passionate appreciation of flying, technology, adventure, and incidentally photography; aside from Burda’s brief remarks, it does not engage meaningfully with the destructive power of the machines it celebrates. Here, as elsewhere, the meaning of the photographs is shaped by their captions and the context of their use.

From the beginning, photojournalism was regarded as a demanding career with the potential for exhilarating adventure (perhaps not coincidentally, even today it is an occupation in which women are a minority). And, as early as 1919, the press journalist was subject to criticism for

this very fact. Countering accusations from the public that its photographers were merely “seeking the sensational” and “hunting for trophy photos,” the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* argued that “the photographer travels around the world for you, in order to bring it back to you... so that you learn to see all aspects and manifestations of our world from the outside and from within. In the process of seeing, you become aware of it.”³⁸

Editors had come to understand that the photograph was the future of the press, and pioneers in visual art soon recognized this trend as well. Writing in *Das Kunstblatt*, painter Johannes Molzahn argued, “The photo [is] a pace-maker of both time and progress; the endless series of optical sensations forces the continuous assimilation of the eye and psyche... No longer reading, but seeing! This will be the credo of the daily newspaper... We need the determined visual producers, men of the second, flexible and always ready to take action.”³⁹ Molzahn made this appeal in 1928, prior to *Film und Foto* and another international photo exhibition, *Fotografie der Gegenwart* (Photography of the present),⁴⁰ evidence of the widespread fascination with the medium. The illustrated press inspired many contemporary artists, and it served as a rich repository for their pictorial montages. Molzahn’s euphoric perception of photography as a technical medium—its reproducibility together with its ability to reach a mass audience—is a clear expression of the fetishistic importance given to the element of speed inherent in a photo as a readily consumable message. (Interestingly, Molzahn only regarded male photographers as capable of coping with the race of time.)

Ruge’s love of sport, flying, and motor racing made him an ideal press photographer in this era of “optical sensation” and speed. He did not belong to the group of photographers who started working as photojournalists when the magazine market began to boom around 1930, but rather enjoyed recognition as early as the mid-1920s. In an autobiographical letter sent to an editor of the journal *Weltbild* in 1951, Ruge called himself the “doyen of the photojournalists,” and he stressed that “the most formidable inventions, the most stunning political experiments, and the greatest social changes fell into the years of my career, explaining why I spiced up a large part of my work with a certain amount of ‘sensation.’”⁴¹ He did not spell out just how large this part was, but there is no doubt that Fotoaktuell successfully responded to the demands of the very competitive market with its wide variety of topics. The distinctive features of Ruge’s work are most manifest in those reportages in which he pursued his fascination for the adventurous nature of his profession. His parachuting series, the most daring document of his career, is truly a one-of-a-kind reportage, inimitable in its planning and execution. Of it, in a phrase that could describe Ruge’s approach to his career as a whole, he wrote, “I click where I can click—and although I wear a safety belt, I can’t get rid of the feeling that I might plunge out of the airplane at any moment.”⁴²

The aim of the illustrated newspaper is the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus. They record the spatial impressions of people, conditions, and events from every possible perspective. Their method corresponds to that of the weekly newsreel, which is nothing but a collection of photographs.

—Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," 1927

EPILOGUE

Willi Ruge's archive was destroyed on November 22, 1943, during an air raid on Berlin. In 1944 he compiled a list of the equipment he had lost, representing the period of thirty years he had spent as a press photographer: one 18-by-24-centimeter (7 1/8-by-9 7/16-inch) camera; three 13-by-18-centimeter (5 1/8-by-7 1/8-inch) cameras; one 6-by-9-centimeter (2 3/8-by-3 9/16-inch) camera, and three Contax 35mm cameras.⁴³

Sometime in the late 1940s Ruge published an appeal titled "*Ich suche meine Bilder*" (I am looking for my pictures), followed by "*Ich fand meine Bilder—Ich bin glücklich*" (I found my pictures—I am happy), attempts to trace his remaining pictures and also promote himself as a photojournalist in Berlin.⁴⁴ Postwar correspondence in the estate of Diethart

Kerbs documents Ruge's attempts to activate old contacts. From former colleagues and editors who were again able to work in Germany and from emigrants such as Kurt Safranski, Ernest Mayer, and Kurt Kornfeld he received many encouraging responses.

A comprehensive portfolio of Ruge's photographs, apparently sold to Christoph Netzle's Vertrieb für Pressefotos in Switzerland in the mid-1930s, is distributed (but not owned) by the Keystone Archive in Zurich. The 1931 parachuting reportage was taken out of this collection in 1989 and sold at Christie's. Around 600 photographs by Ruge are held by Ullstein Bild in Berlin. In 2002, 253 Ruge photographs were anonymously donated to the Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto.

In 1972, Tim Gidal became the first critic to draw attention to Ruge's work since World War II.⁴⁵ More detailed information on Ruge's oeuvre may be found in two essays by Kerbs: "*Die Epoche der Bildagenturen*" (The era of photo agencies, 1983) and "*Die Fotografen der Revolution*" (The photographers of the revolution, 1989).⁴⁶ The small number of extant written documents by Ruge are held in Kerbs's estate.

Translated from the German by Ariane Kossack

NOTES

- EPIGRAPHS. Essay: Kurt Hahne, *Die Illustrations-Photographie* (Bunzlau: Neudecker, 1914), p. 3. Epilogue: Siegfried Kracauer, "Die Photographie," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, October 28, 1927. Repr. as "Photography," in Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 57–58.
- "Helden der Kamera," *Hackebeils Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 39 (September 25, 1930):1037.
 - Willi Ruge, letter to Dietrich Kenneweg at *Weltbild*, 1951. In the letter, Ruge refers to a planned book about his career. Estate of Diethart Kerbs.
 - Department of Military Archives, Freiburg, Military Service Dossier 6/296440.
 - Ruge and anon., "Willi Ruge erzählt," unpublished ms., n.d. Estate of Diethart Kerbs.
 - For more information about the development of publishing in Germany, see Bernd Weise, *Illustrierte Zeitschriften in Deutschland, 1883–1923* (Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 1991).
 - See, for example, Paul Knoll, *Die Photographie im Dienste der Presse* (Halle: Wilhelm Knapp, 1913), and Hahne, *Die Illustrations-Photographie* (Bunzlau: Neudecker, 1908, 1912, 1914).
 - Paul Dobert, preface to Knoll, *Die Photographie im Dienste der Presse*, n.p.
 - Ruge's archive in Berlin-Schöneberg was destroyed during an air raid in 1943. A list of all items lost is held in the Estate of Diethart Kerbs. See Epilogue for more information about extant prints.
 - See Andreas Hallen and Diethart Kerbs, *Revolution und Fotografie: Berlin, 1918/19* (Berlin: D. Nishen, 1989).
 - This variety is well demonstrated by the many vintage prints by Ruge held by Ullstein Bild, Berlin, and the Keystone Archive, Zurich. See Epilogue for more information about these collections.
 - "Helden der Kamera." Other "heroes" mentioned include Georg Pahl, Robert Hartmann, Alfred Groß, and Wilhelm Braemer.
 - At the time, air shows were spectacular public events attended by audiences of up to 10,000.
 - In *Das Magazin* (Berlin) no. 77 (January 1931); *Beyers für Alle* (Leipzig), February 28, 1931; *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 21 (May 24, 1931); and *Le Miroir du monde* (Paris), March 26, 1932.
 - "An Aerial 'Pullman' in Flight: Amenities of Modern Travel," *Illustrated London News*, August 22, 1931. This reportage documented the newly established
 - flight connection between Berlin and London. The Junkers G.38 was introduced in 1929.
 - "Die 100pferdige Büro—keine Utopie," *UHU* no. 7 (1926):52–59; "... und Alles geschah in 1/100 Sekunde," *Weltspiegel* no. 30 (1929):5.
 - "Die Tücke des Objektivs," *Die Woche* no. 33 (August 13, 1927).
 - Werner Gräff, *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Berlin: Hermann Reckendorf, 1929), pp. 58–60.
 - Film und Foto: Internationale Ausstellung*, organized by the Deutscher Werkbund, was mounted at the Ausstellungshallen Stuttgart, May 18–July 7, 1929. The exhibition toured in Germany and abroad. For a discussion of *Film und Foto*, see Oliver Lugon, "Photography and Exhibition in Germany around 1930," in Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hamburg, eds., *Object:Photo*.

Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909-1949 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

19. "Photographische Karrikaturen," *Bilder-Courier* no. 30 (July 24, 1927). The *Bilder-Courier* was the illustrated supplement to the Berlin *Börsen-Courier*.
20. In his essay "Die Epoche der Bildagenturen," Kerbs points out that "the best of [Ruge's] photos of aerial battle were created by negative sandwiching and other tricks." In Kerbs, Walter Uka, and Brigitte Walz-Richter, eds., *Die Gleichschaltung der Bilder. Zur Geschichte der Pressefotografie, 1930-1936* (Berlin: Frölich and Kaufmann, 1983), p. 43.
21. Marianne Busesmeyer, *Deutsche Illustrierte Presse. Ein soziologischer Versuch*, PhD diss., Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg, 1930, p. 45.
22. For more information about press photography in this period, see Ute Eskildsen, *Fotografien in deutschen Zeitschriften, 1924-1933* (Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 1982).
23. See n. 8.
24. The dramatic self-portraits (MoMA [1849.2001.8](#), [1849.2001.9](#), [1849.2001.10](#), and [1849.2001.11](#)) are the most frequently printed images in this reportage; compared to other prints in the series, they feature extremely stark contrasts and characteristic spots.

25. "Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 21 (May 24, 1931), pp. 843-45; "Amazing photographs of parachutists jumping," *Illustrated London News* no. 4810 (June 27, 1931); "How Parachutists Look," *Time* (New York), August 17, 1931, p. 26; "Parachute Jumper Photographs Himself While Falling," *Popular Science Monthly* (USA), October 1931, pp. 44-45; "Photographs Self During Chute Jump," *Modern Mechanix, Yesterday's Tomorrow Today* (USA), November 1931, p. 105. Later publications: *Weekly Illustrated* (London), April 1935; *Koralle* (Berlin) no. 9 (1936); *Fünfzig Jahre Motorflug* (Offenburg: Burda Verlag, 1953), p. 201.
26. "Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm," p. 843.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., pp. 844-45.
30. One picture from the series appeared on the cover of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 19 (1931); more pictures were published later that year, in issue no. 24.
31. Weise, "Pressefotografie als Medium der Propaganda im Presselenkungssystem des Dritten Reiches," in Kerbs, Uka, and Walz-Richter, *Die Gleichschaltung der Bilder*, p. 144.

32. Documents in the federal archives in Berlin detail Ernst Udet's employment at the Reich broadcasting services in Stuttgart beginning in February 1938 and assignments as a war correspondent with the air force from August 23, 1939. From 1939 onward, Udet was the air force's director-general of equipment, in charge of aircraft development.
33. "Mit unseren Kampffliegern in der Luft," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 2 (January 9, 1936), pp. 36-37.
34. "25 Jahre Zeitgeschehen—25 Jahre Bildberichter," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 44 (October 29, 1936):1700-1703.
35. "Einmalig auf dem Seil," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 23 (1942).
36. From 1945 to 1949, laws enacted by the military government sought to control public opinion, and the establishment of new organs of the press was subject to license. In the Potsdam Agreement of 1945, the occupying powers argued for granting freedom of the press. However, it was restricted until 1955, when the Occupation Statute was revoked. If the safety of the Allies were at risk, a ban on printed products could be imposed.
37. Franz Burda, preface to *Fünfzig Jahre Motorflug*, n.p.

38. "Der Photograph als Journalist. Eine Lanze für den Illustrationsphotographen," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 50 (December 14, 1919):523.
39. Johannes Molzahn, "Nicht mehr lesen! Sehen!" *Das Kunstblatt* 12, no. 3 (1928):79-81.
40. *Fotografie der Gegenwart*, organized by Kurt Wilhelm-Kästner, was mounted at the Museum Folkwang, Essen, January 20-February 17, 1929. It toured to Hannover, Berlin, Dresden, and Magdeburg.
41. Ruge, letter to Kenneweg, 1951.
42. "Ich fotografiere mich beim Absturz mit dem Fallschirm," p. 843.
43. Estate of Diethart Kerbs.
44. Dates and venues of publication are not known. The individual printed pages, without publication information, are in the Estate of Diethart Kerbs.
45. See Tim Gidal, *Deutschland: Beginn des modernen Photojournalismus*, Bibliothek der Photographie, vol. 1 (Lucerne and Frankfurt: C. J. Bucher, 1972).
46. For "Die Epoche der Bildagenturen," see n. 20. "Die Fotografen der Revolution" appears in Hallen and Kerbs, *Revolution und Fotografie*, pp. 135-54.

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