



WORLD WITHOUT MINES

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NEWSLETTER

BACKGROUND



Album photo (anonymous), *The Mine Test. From the Donets to the Don 1942, No. 74, Reiner Moneth Archive, Norden*

What is a person worth?

150 years after the Geneva Convention was signed and 17 years after the launch of the Ottawa Treaty, every two hours someone still falls victim to the most perfidious of all weapons. By Christian Schmidt

The woman even gathers up her skirt. So that it does not get wet or filthy in the dirty water. Does she not know, does she not suspect, that she does not have long to live? Or is she paying attention to her skirt because she is hoping for a miracle, like everyone does when faced with death?

The picture, „The Mine Test”, portrays an almost bucolic mood. It was taken in 1942, when a unit of the German army was advancing on the Caucasus. They were in what is now eastern Ukraine, between the Donets and Don rivers.

The photographer whose identity, like that of the woman, is unknown is looking down onto a ford from an elevated

position. The soldiers have to cross the river with their vehicles, but they are afraid of mines. So, they are using a „mine detector 42”. The expression „mine detector 42” is a euphemism beyond compare. The commander’s order exposes the reality: „Since mines are to be expected, a sufficient number of mine detectors 42 (Jews or captured partisans [...]) must be provided.”

Whether the woman reached the other side or not is not known. The other photographs showing vehicles crossing the ford would suggest so. The final picture, however, is of a destroyed vehicle. So, there had been a mine somewhere after all. The fact that the woman had not trodden on it, deliberately or by chance, is likely to have cost her her life.

The photo, „The Mine Test”, shows with exceptional clarity just what an insidious weapon mines are. They were developed with a perfidiousness that is unparalleled: invisible and maintenance-free, they are capable of going off at any time, even decades later. Had one of the army’s vehicles not exploded in the ford, the mine might still have been lying

there to this day.

In 2014, we are celebrating 150 years of the Geneva Convention, which is being marked, among other things, by a special exhibition at the Henry Dunant Museum in Heiden entitled: „What is a person worth?“ The woman in the river provides the answer: Nothing. In spite of the Geneva Convention, despite the Ottawa Treaty and other treaties, every two hours someone in the world steps on a mine, and three quarters of the victims are civilians. Only around 60 percent of all minefields are actually known about. 100 million mines continue to feature in the arsenals of armies, and mines are still being laid, as is the case right now in the Crimea. In India as well, terrorists have begun using mines for attacks – a new use never seen before. And the latest generations of these weapons are built in such a way that if a single mine is destroyed the surrounding mines automatically close the gap created: they can jump. „Self-healing minefields“ is the name the inventors have given to their innovation. Another euphemism.

The efforts to eradicate mines are ultimately merely an admission that humanity is unable to find a fundamental solution to the issue of war. The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters counted 14,513 wars in the past five thousand years. These killed more than 3.5 billion people. Despite two world wars in the 20th century, the number of conflicts worldwide is increasing. It is as though this planet is not big enough for everyone. Wars will only cease to be when we no longer want them, Kurt Tucholsky once said logically. But as long as there are wars, there will also be mines.

The Foundation World Without Mines is therefore forging

its own path. It only operates in areas where all conflict has finally ended but the civilian population is still suffering the consequences: mines, unexploded bombs and remnants of war. We are actively engaged in places that nobody is watching anymore, where the people affected have been abandoned.

Since its formation, World Without Mines has demined around six million square metres of land and in so doing has made a decisive contribution towards enabling farmers to cultivate this area again, children to return to school, life to go on and a home to be a home once more.

Every mine cleared makes the world a little better than it is.



Album photo (anonymous),
Wreckage. From the Donets to the Don 1942, No. 77
Reiner Moneth Archive, Norden