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Ella Maillart’s Black-and-White Stories

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“Photo Elysée presents a selection of photographs taken by Ella Maillart during her travels in Asia in the 1930s,” states the press release. The information is incomplete. Maillart also travelled through the European part of the USSR, including Moscow, as her photographs attest. But I will not look for political undertones in this, shall we say, omission, particularly just a few days before the vote on Swiss neutrality. I would rather tell you about the exhibition.

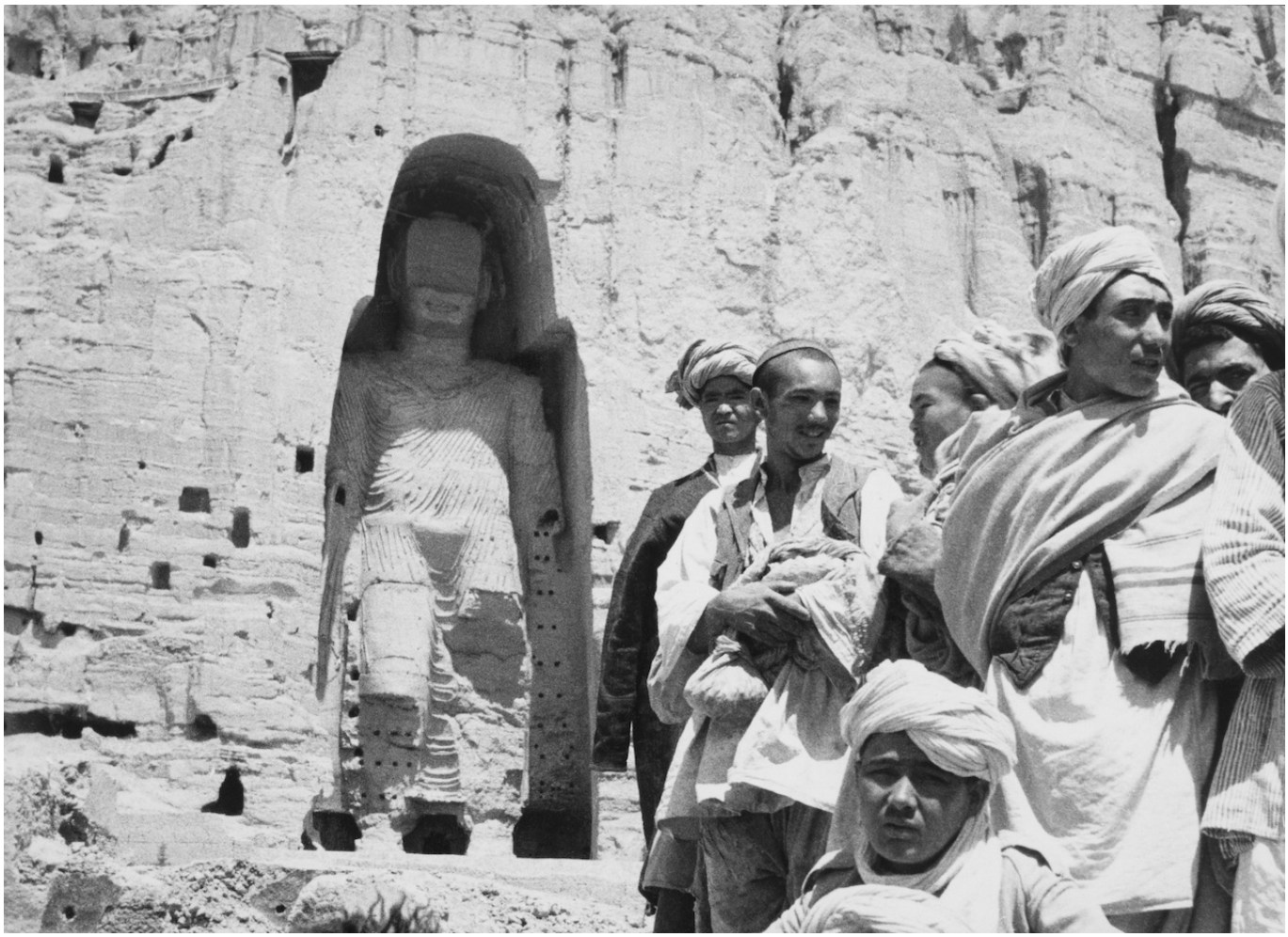
Ella Maillart hardly fits within the confines of the famous “three Ks”: children, kitchen and church (*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*), to which the role of women, including Swiss women, was still largely restricted in her day. She is known as a traveller, photographer and writer. But it is worth remembering that, long before any of this, she was a passionate reader, devouring

the novels of Jack London, Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville and Robert Louis Stevenson from an early age, then poring over maps as she followed in the footsteps of their heroes. It is in this love of reading that I feel a kinship with this remarkable woman, born in Switzerland and free to travel, unlike me, who was reading those very same books behind the Iron Curtain. But even I could dream of travelling. The words of Ella Maillart that greet visitors to the exhibition, “Now I know with absolute certainty why we travel: to find ourselves,” apply, for me, just as much to reading: every book is a journey into a new world, one we measure against our own in order to understand our own better.

Ella Maillart (1903–1997). © Keystone-ATS

It is amusing, incidentally, that many of the “exotic” places that attracted Ella Maillart lay on my side of the Iron Curtain and that, decades after her, I too was able to visit them while still living in the USSR. And later, others. Almost all of them, in fact, with the exception of Afghanistan, where today, I suspect, even an adventurer as intrepid as Ella Maillart would not venture.

“From the gallery carved into the cliff at the height of the head there were seen remains of frescoes on walls and ceiling. Horses and figures, sun, moon, tiaras and pearls... a brand new buttress of masonry supported a cracked part of the cliff just by the side of the sculpture of Buddha... so often damaged by zealous Muhammadans,” she writes in *The Cruel Way*. Alas, the gigantic 55- and 38-metre Buddhas of Bamiyan are no more: the Taliban destroyed them in March 2001. Maillart saw and photographed them long before UNESCO placed the monuments of the Bamiyan Valley under its protection: the “Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley” was not inscribed on the World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger until 2003, after the statues had been destroyed. UNESCO was too late: today, it protects two empty niches.



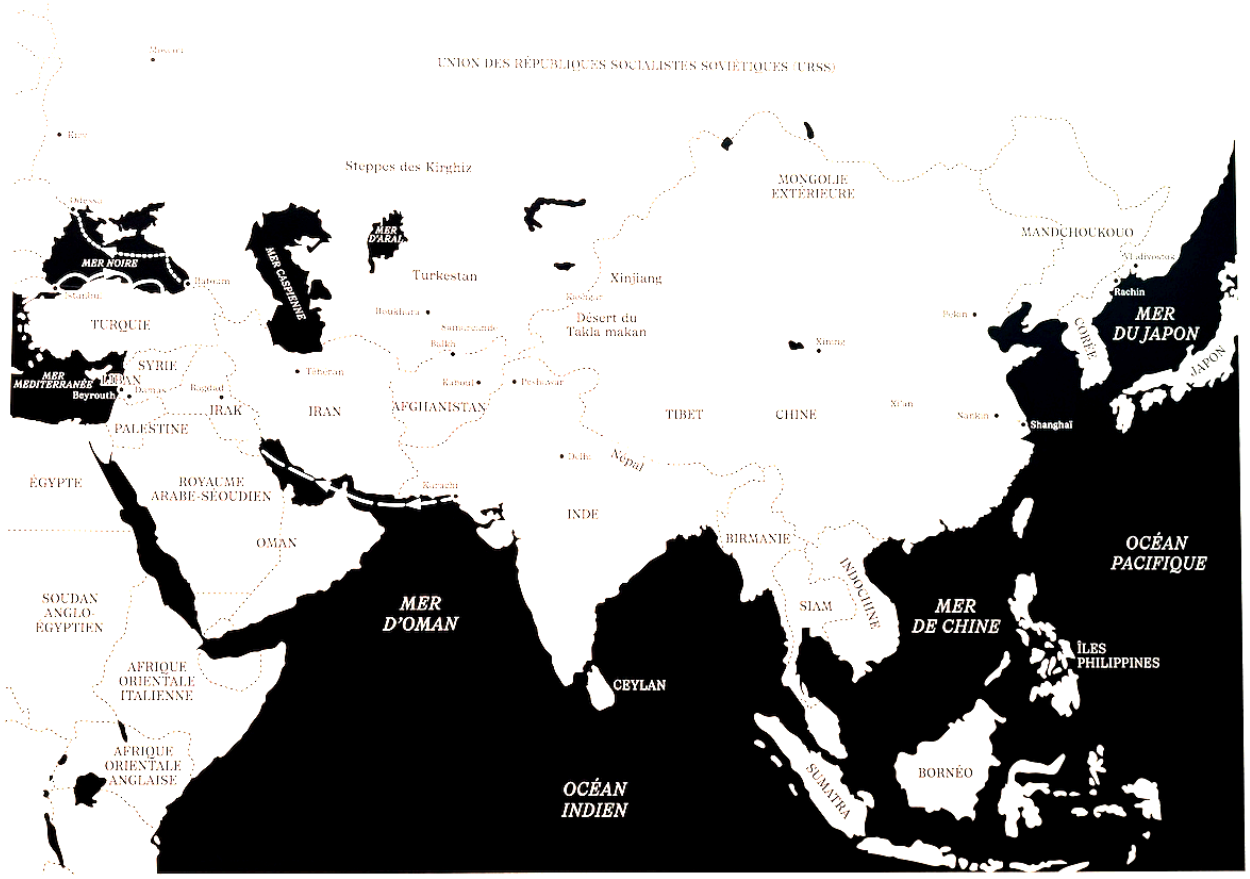
“Untitled”, 1939. Bamiyan, Kingdom of Afghanistan. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

In the first room of the exhibition, Ella Maillart’s life is presented as a straight line, with events from her personal life and Swiss *faits divers* above it, and below, events unfolding far from Geneva, where she was born in 1903, that have since become history. This chronological presentation allows us to view her 94 years of life from different perspectives, as though refocusing a camera lens at each stage, now pulling back, now moving in closer. Take the years from 1914 to 1917. Above the line are the very young Ellen Maillart’s first

attempts at handling a sailing boat at Creux-de-Genthod, near Geneva, with her beloved friend Hermine de Saussure, nicknamed “Miette”. Below are listed the outbreak of the First World War; the brief restoration of imperial rule in China, followed by a return to the republic; the beginning of the Basmachi revolt in Central Asia, first against Tsarist rule and then against Soviet power; the Russian Revolution, Lenin’s rise to power and the beginning of the Civil War. The difference in scale speaks for itself.

Against the backdrop of the First World War, Ella Maillart founds the Champel Hockey Club in Geneva, the first women’s field hockey club in French-speaking Switzerland; in 1924, the year Lenin dies, she represents Switzerland in the sailing competition at the Paris Olympic Games; as Stalin consolidates his power in the USSR, amid collectivisation and mass famine, she sets off for Moscow and the Caucasus. In 1939, she travels by car from Geneva to Kabul with another friend, Annemarie Schwarzenbach, before spending the Second World War years in India. She returned from her journeys with hundreds of photographs and material for newspaper articles and books. *Parmi la jeunesse russe* recounts her journey through Soviet Russia in 1930; *Turkestan Solo* captures her impressions of Soviet Turkestan in 1932; while *The Cruel Way*, in a more literary form, recounts her journey with Annemarie Schwarzenbach from Geneva to Afghanistan.

The last of these books appeared in 1952, after which Ella Maillart’s timeline, as presented by the Lausanne museum, breaks off for 36 years. In 1988, she entrusted her entire photographic archive to Photo Elysée, and in 1997 she died peacefully in Chandolin, a picturesque village in the Val d’Anniviers, in the canton of Valais, at an altitude of around 2,000 metres.



Political map, 1939. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

At this point, with a reverent sigh for this remarkable woman, we move on to the next exhibit: perhaps the most unusual map of the USSR I have ever seen. It is not the enormous red blotch in the middle of a conventional world map, but only the lower part of the country, with no capital and indeed none of its European territory, only the “Kirghiz steppes” and the Asian republics. Yet this extraordinary map, tracing Ella Maillart’s journeys between 1930 and 1939 and reflecting the geopolitical situation in 1939, features the *Royaume arabo-saoudien*, although it had already been proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, as well as *Afrique orientale anglaise*, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Burma and Siam, renamed Thailand on 24 June that very year.

I understand what attracted Ella Maillart to Russia at the time: its novelty and mystery. It is no coincidence that she compares it to a laboratory in *Parmi la jeunesse russe*: “In Moscow, I’d promised myself not to write about modern Russia; I was overwhelmed by too many conflicting impressions, lost in a different world that I found fascinating. ... In this country, this new testing ground, nothing is fixed, everything is changing. What’s true one month may no longer be true the next.”

Her assessment of the volatility of the situation was spot on. And it is rather nice, you must admit, to be able to peer into the “laboratory”, see what is going on, click away with a camera and... move on. How many other equally curious foreigners have come to the country where I was born in search of new impressions and powerful emotions? And still they keep coming.

“Train to Magnitogorsk”, 1932. Urals, Turkestan, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

In Moscow, Ella Maillart met, among others, the celebrated film directors Dziga Vertov and Vsevolod Pudovkin. Pudovkin’s film *Storm over Asia* and the writer Sergei Tretyakov’s impassioned accounts of the Caucasus largely determined the routes of her subsequent journeys. Tretyakov, one of the first translators of Bertolt Brecht into Russian, was executed in 1937 and rehabilitated in 1956.

Ella Maillart’s photographs are magnificent. Their technical quality is undeniable, but it is her eye for detail that makes them particularly striking. If you go to the exhibition, I sincerely recommend taking your time over it. These photographs, taken almost a century ago, invite us to compare that era with our own and arrive at a surprising conclusion: some things have changed radically, while others hardly at all.

“My Street – Ostozhenka”, 1930. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

I am looking at a series of photographs of Moscow taken on the eve of the disappearance of much of the old cityscape. Ostozhenka, of course, has changed enormously. Today it is one of the most expensive streets in Moscow and a symbol of the capital’s luxury. This is probably where Ella Maillart was staying in 1930: one photograph is captioned “My Street”. She would have seen the broken roadway with its perennial puddles, horse-drawn carts, a shoe-shiner, a cooperative shop… And do you see the dome topped by a cross in the distance on the right? I wondered which church it was and came to the conclusion that it was most probably the Church of the Resurrection of the Word on Ostozhenka. It stood on Ostozhenka itself, where 1st Zachatievsky Lane meets the street, roughly on the site of

today’s No. 15. It was closed in the late 1920s, but was not demolished until early 1935.

“‘Spissok’. List of residents of house No. 5 on Tchertolskom Street, which contains eleven flats”, 1930. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

I lingered for a long time over a photograph bearing this caption: “Spissok. Liste des habitants, maison N° 5 de la rue Tchertolskom dans laquelle il y a onze appartements, 1930, Moscou, République socialiste fédérative soviétique de Russie, URSS.” (“Spissok. List of residents of No. 5 Tchertolskom Street, which contains eleven flats. 1930, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, USSR.”) Yes, that is exactly how it appears, with the Russian word *Spissok*, meaning “list”, transcribed into Latin characters. The street name is not quite right: this is almost certainly Tchertolsky Lane, which still bears the name it was given in 1922. The address survived too: No. 5 Tchertolsky Lane. But how many of the residents of those eleven flats, whose names can be seen in the photograph, survived the 1930s?

“Ukrainian Knife-Grinder”, 1930. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne

I wonder how Ella Maillart knew that the knife-grinder in a cap, carrying his portable grinding wheel on his back, was Ukrainian. Did she ask him?

As for the women, clothes apart, many of them can still be seen today standing in queues, waiting at bus stops and tinkering with car engines, while others have to take on the hardest jobs, working in the sewers, for example.

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“Sewer works”, 1930. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

The difference is that in Moscow today, the heaviest manual work is often done by women who have come from elsewhere, including those same former Asian republics that Ella Maillart also visited. In 1932, she took several rare photographs of the trial of Basmachis in Samarkand. The captions describe them as “nationalist rebels”. Notice the bust of Lenin on the right.

A brief explanation for those whose memories of school history lessons are a little hazy. The Soviet authorities used the term “Basmachis” for those who took part in armed resistance in Central Asia. They did not, however, constitute a single movement with a common leadership and ideology: they included opponents of Sovietisation, supporters of national independence, religious forces and simply local armed groups. The word “Basmachi” itself, derived from a Turkic verb meaning “to attack, to raid”, became firmly associated with “bandit” in Soviet historiography. Yet in August 2021, the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan rehabilitated 115 participants in the anti-Soviet resistance who had been repressed in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by another 161 in May 2026. So in the “laboratory” Maillart wrote about, it was not only the present that proved volatile, but history itself: ninety years later, the “Basmachis” had gone from “bandits” condemned by the Soviet authorities to officially rehabilitated fighters for national independence.

“Lenin on the judges’ table at the trial of the Basmachis [nationalist rebels]”, 1932. Samarkand, Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

Ella Maillart also preserved for history the image of Kazakhs who found themselves at the Uzbek railway station of Chardjui in 1932, against the backdrop of the mass flight from famine-stricken Kazakhstan into Uzbekistan and the beginning of the forced return of the refugees. In her caption, Maillart describes them as “deportees”, which is not exact.

My children and I travelled in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and they often recall the delicious *plov*, the *chaikhanas*, the colourful markets, falconry, and the sheep grazing peacefully before, as the children joked, their eventual transformation into *shashlik*. Little has changed since Ella Maillart’s day, although the restored madrasas look considerably smarter now.

“The former Khan’s palace has become a ‘Pedagogical Technical School’ (the Latinised alphabet can be seen; in 1942 it was replaced by Cyrillic)”, 1932. Khiva, Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

But look at the 1932 photograph “A Kara-Kirghiz in Chinese spectacles”. You can still encounter a horseman like this in Kyrgyzstan today, with a falcon perched on his arm. But why Chinese spectacles? I did some digging and came across an interesting detail. Large Chinese-made spectacles really were common in Central Asia at the time and, it seems, could serve not only to correct one’s vision but also as a status symbol. Maillart herself writes about this in*Turkestan Solo*. Describing the bazaar in Karakol, she notices a high-ranking Kirghiz “with enormous yellow Chinese spectacles on his nose” buying a dagger. Chinese goods were already crossing borders and reaching the remotest parts of Central Asia even then: globalisation did not begin yesterday.

“A Kara-Kirghiz in Chinese spectacles”, 1932. Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, USSR. © Succession Ella Maillart et Photo Elysée, Lausanne.

The exhibition in Lausanne runs until 1 November 2026. I hope you will have time to see it.

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