



# PHOTROCITY:

Mass Violence and its Aftermaths  
in the Sovtfoto Archive



UNIVERSITY  
of MANITOBA | School of Art  
Gallery

Exhibition dates: July 7 through October 31, 2014

Curator: Dr. Adam Muller, Department of English,  
Film, and Theatre, University of Manitoba

Designer: John Stintzi



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

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# School of Art

Gallery



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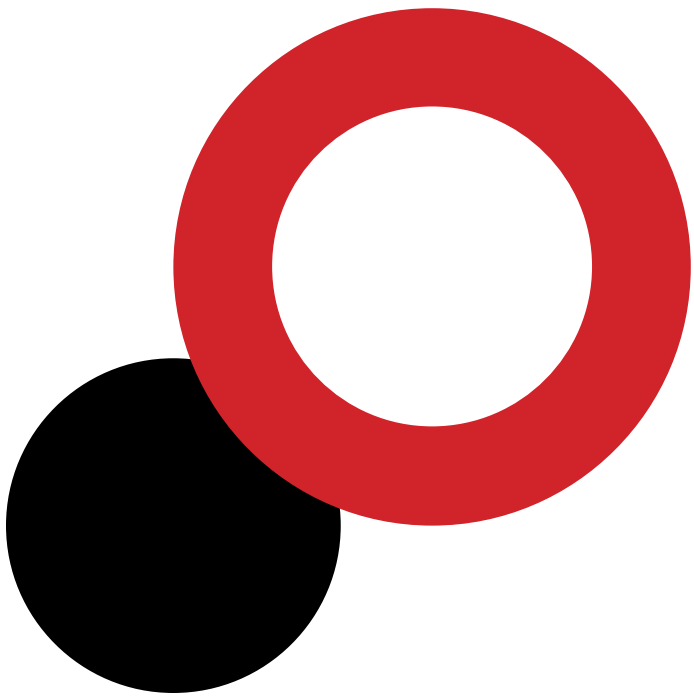
## THE SOVFOTO ARCHIVE AT THE MACLAREN ART CENTRE: Collection Description for *Photrocity*

The Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre comprises 23,116 vintage gelatin silver prints dating from 1936 to 1957, all originating from New York-based press agency Sovfoto/Eastfoto. This collection has a particular focus on World War II and its aftermath, as well as Soviet life in the pre-war and post-war periods. Far-reaching in scope, this archive includes series on rebuilding Soviet cities after the war, the emergence of collective farms, Soviet education, theatre and the arts and other diverse subjects.

Organized thematically as it was during its days as a working image archive, the majority of the photographs in *Photrocity* originate from Binders 19 (*Allied P.O.W.'s, Civilian Slaves, 63 photographs*), 24 (*Atrocities, 1944, 52 photographs*), 25 (*POW Parade/Moscow/1944/Nazi Dead, 55 photographs*), 26 (*Atrocities, 1941-2, 72 photographs*) and 28 (*Atrocities, 1943, 63 photographs*). The captions note that some images were taken from the bodies of German combatants; others were likely taken by soldiers and a few by embedded photojournalists. Attribution is spotty and none of the makers' rights were well protected under existing copyright laws.

Established in 1932, Sovfoto received state-sanctioned photographs from the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo) on consignment. Photographs were selected, often retouched, and appended with English captions, all before leaving the USSR. Sovfoto, in turn, sourced these images to a wide-ranging number of North American clients. These included major wire agencies that paid a subscription fee for this service, such as the Associated Press and the International News Services; illustrated magazines including *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*; and the USA State Department as well as various branches of the Armed Forces. These photographs were the only significant source of visual reportage of Soviet life after the iron curtain ended the free flow of information between the Soviet bloc and democratic nations. Sovfoto later became Sovfoto/Eastfoto, and continues to operate under that name as a major and growing stock photo agency of historical and contemporary photographs from China, Russia, and other former and current communist nations.

*Emily McKibbin*



# PHOTROCITY:

## Mass Violence and its Aftermaths in the Sovtfoto Archive

“Every image of barbarism...embraces its opposite. Every image of suffering says not only, ‘This is so,’ but also, by implication: ‘This must not be’; not only, ‘This goes on,’ but also, by implication: ‘This must stop.’ Documents of suffering are documents of protest: they show us what happens when we unmake the world.”

— Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance*

The photographs assembled in this exhibition serve as enduring testament to a time and a place ravaged by “total” war and torn viciously apart by ethnic hatred. They document the destruction and cruelty characteristic of life on the Eastern Front during World War Two, roughly from the time of the Nazis’ invasion of Soviet territory as part Operation Barbarossa in June, 1941, through to the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by Soviet troops late in January, 1945. During this period the Soviet Union was embroiled in a brutal struggle for its very survival against invading German and allied armies whose leaders sought first the enslavement and later the total annihilation of Jews and Slavs as part of their quest for “Lebensraum,” or “living space,” suitable for Aryan colonization.

The scale of the conflict on the Eastern Front was enormous, its intensity is difficult to grasp. To speak just of its human dimensions, Barbarossa and its aftermaths came to involve millions of combatants and resulted in tens of millions of military and civilian casualties. There was also massive destruction of physical infrastructure and military hardware. Whole cities and towns were leveled; entire populations were displaced, with some obliterated completely. Beatings, rapes, and summary executions were common on both sides of the front lines. P.O.W., concentration, and extermination camps were constructed and then fed by constant streams of inmates, most of whom died. So numerous were the atrocities committed by all those engaged in this conflict, but particularly by the Nazis during their commission of the Holocaust, that we are still engaged in properly counting and naming the dead.

I

Violence of this kind is what Theodor Adorno once called “the extremity that eludes the concept,” a kind of limit experience that can neither be imagined nor therefore adequately explained. More recently Deborah Britzman has termed this kind of experience “difficult knowledge” in order to indicate the profound challenges it presents, not just to our faculty of understanding but also to our means for expressing what we know. Atrocious violence traumatizes, it breaks apart

bodies, ruptures languages, and damages minds, rendering those who have experienced it, as well as those attempting to represent it afterwards, speechless and in disarray. Atrocities yield what the prophet Jeremiah once called a “grief ... beyond healing.” Accordingly, violence of this kind proves virtually impossible for those suffering through it to witness properly, to fully comprehend. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi understood this difficulty intimately, writing in *The Drowned and the Saved* that “We who survived the Camps are not true witnesses [...]. We, the survivors, are not only a tiny but also an anomalous minority. We are those who, through prevarication, skill or luck, never touched bottom. Those who have, and who have seen the face of the Gorgon, did not return, or returned wordless.” Likewise Giorgio Agamben identifies the living corpse known as the Muselmann as the perfect witness to atrocity, the one who undergoes the very worst of things on the downward slide to becoming “bare life.” For Agamben, it is paradoxically the Muselmann’s inability to formally represent his own condition (he has been rendered speechless, reduced to little more than the outward signs of his predicament) that allows him to bear the full meaning and explanatory weight of the horrors to which he has been exposed. He is the nightmare violence made flesh, its living testament.

A speechless testament to be sure, for the Muselmann has no words to express his own condition due to the severity of the trauma he has undergone. Traumatic experience is shocking and painful, and also im-

portantly tied to loss. For the Ancients trauma was a sign of spiritual and physical defeat. They thought that to be traumatized meant literally to be overcome. It is not easy dealing with this kind of overcoming, for at its core it involves the loss of selfhood and a decoupling from the world. It is loss of this kind that we witness in image #1884, which depicts Ivan Dudnik, a fifteen year-old Ukrainian boy who has, as the text on the back of the photograph explains, been driven mad by the horrors of Auschwitz. The three men carrying Dudnik seem very strong and healthy in comparison. Their bodies make Ivan seem even smaller than he is. But it is Dudnik’s body posture that serves as the photograph’s *punktum*, reaching out from the past of the image to pierce us emotionally in the viewing present. He seems even younger than his fifteen years, his gaze only half-comprehending, his expression a little unsure. But Dudnik’s vulnerability seems most fully expressed through the form of his body, its contraction into a fetal position, which is associated clinically with trauma, anxiety, and depression, and symbolically with innocence via its mimicry of an unborn (and therefore “unworldly”) child.

We know that the photographer, Mark Redkin (1908-1987), would have been very clear about what he wanted his image of Dudnik to say. A photojournalist working for the Soviet wire service TASS, Redkin, himself a Jew (as was about half of the Soviet press corps during the war), had been responsible for some of the



first published atrocity photographs to document the mass murder of Jews, specifically those from the city of Kerch in Crimea which was liberated by the Soviets in December, 1941. Kerch was the first occupied city with any sizeable Jewish population to get rid of its Nazi overlords, though they later returned; it introduced the Soviet public to an early form of the Holocaust. Redkin's Kerch photographs appeared in *Ogonek*, Russia's oldest weekly illustrated magazine, in February, 1942. *Ogonek*, it should be noted, had published its first atrocity photograph of the war on the Eastern Front on June 25th, 1941, only three days after start of Operation Barbarossa. The photograph was taken by a German soldier so that he could share his "work" with friends and relatives back home. David Shneer explains that the Soviets deliberately collected cameras from captured and dead German troops, later developing any film in the search for intelligence and evidence of atrocity.<sup>1</sup> Images #2635, which depicts a Nazi officer performing an execution, and #2489, which shows a soldier beating a civilian who has hoarded food, are of this kind. Their presence in this exhibition raises important questions about the photograph's simultaneous roles as entertainment, witness, and propaganda tool (the Soviets used images of atrocity to mobilize popular opinion), as well as about spectatorship. These were, after all, intended to be self-congratulatory images, celebrations of total triumph, "dark" touristic souvenirs. How do we now, in the twenty-first-century

viewing present, look at these images without becoming in some way trapped or complicit in their perspective, which belongs to the Nazi who took them? What must we do in order to prevent the perpetrator-photographer's very small window on the world from dominating and contaminating our own engagement with another person's suffering?

Redkin's immediate concerns, however, were with how to avoid the censorship of his images (all press photographs were subject to Soviet military and civilian oversight), and how to keep his content in tune with the shifting metanarrative about the war being crafted by the authorities. The Soviets didn't always want to send the same message about why they were fighting or who they were fighting against. The official story that photographs were intended to tell shifted significantly between 1941, when the Soviets found themselves defending against a Nazi surprise attack and at risk of defeat, and 1944, when Nazi forces were in full retreat across territory later to be claimed as Soviet spoils of war. We see this difference reflected in some of the earlier photographs in this exhibition such as #2590, #7587, and #2466, which may be clearly contrasted with Redkin's image of Dudnik's rescue. Images #2590 and #7587 both show instances of mourning and closely resemble "Grief," Dmitrii Baltermants' (1912-1990) now-famous photograph of women mourning at Kerch. Baltermants, who worked

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<sup>1</sup> Shneer's groundbreaking research into Soviet war time photography underpins much of my account here.

with Redkin and compatriot Israel Ozerskii (1904-1971) in Ukraine during the war, may even have been the photographer responsible for the two images shown here, which remain unattributed. They, and image #2466, which depicts the frozen corpse of a small boy, were used by the Soviets to convey something about the horrors being inflicted by the Nazis, most obviously their effects on defenseless women and children.

Images like these helped authorities early on to explain the Nazis' attack to the east as an attempt at total extermination by people indifferent to the welfare of noncombatants, the staving off of which would require extraordinary effort and sacrifice. Redkin's photograph of Dudnik, taken just after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Soviets in January, 1945, is by contrast not intended to horrify or to blame. Instead its purpose is to reinforce the viewer's appreciation of the palliative and humanitarian dimension to the Soviet presence in territory later to become the Eastern Bloc. Redkin tells us much less about Dudnik's experience of Auschwitz (he basically just confirms the text's claim that he has been incapacitated) than he does about the extraordinary attention the camp's survivors are receiving. Dudnik is shown being aided by three men, and the red cross worn by one of them stands out prominently in the photograph's foreground, signifying not just medical care but universal moral regard. By early 1945, the Soviets were anxious to diminish the public circulation of images that accused or blamed. With the war nearly over, and

though in no way anxious to excuse the guilty, they were reluctant to continue demonizing soon-to-be-subject populations and co-citizens. Given the photographer's emphasis on palliative care, it is worth noting that more explicitly horrific accounts of the liberation of Auschwitz than Redkin's barely registered publically in the U.S.S.R., and like reports from Majdanek earlier, accounts of the camp's liberation were initially dismissed in England and America as Soviet propaganda.

## II

The memory of atrocious events is often repressed, channeled deep below the surface of our psychic lives from whence it constantly strives to resurface. Our contemporary understanding of "trauma" is reflected in the term's roots in the Ancient Greek word for "wound," as well as in the German word for "dream." Trauma's unreality (or "constructedness," to adapt Jeffrey Alexander's term), along with its latency and belatedness – its unavailability in the moment of happening and later recurrence in nightmares, hallucinations, neuroses, etc. – prompts Cathy Caruth to label it "unclaimed experience." Caruth writes that "Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimensions of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness."

Of course not all aspects of traumatic experience are pathological or belated. Trauma is not just a state of mind, and not all of its facets (especially aspects of its causal history) remain totally hidden from view or alien to our understanding. Trauma is also importantly relational in the sense that it connects with (since it arises from) actual facts about the world. It results from actions taken against real people or groups, actions for which there may be profound moral and legal consequences. Atrocities involve those from a range of different groups: perpetrators, victims, and very often bystanders. A victim is entitled to recognition and if possible to restitution, in short to justice, while perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions. They need to be identified, judged, and punished according to law. Bystanders too must be addressed, and either educated or shamed into a richer appreciation of the virtues of human community.

However, none of this work can take place in a representational or conceptual vacuum, in the absence of some means of explaining what has happened, of documenting, depicting, and testifying to what requires punishment or correction. Atrocity demands witnessing, notwithstanding the challenge of doing so. Adorno well understood this tension between the vital need to represent atrocity and the inadequacy of any such representation. While on the one hand he acknowledges that “hardly anywhere else does suffering find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it,” he also writes that “The

abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting [...] that suffering—what Hegel called the awareness of affliction—also demands the existence of the very art it forbids.”

A central problem in art’s encounter with atrocity, not just for Adorno but for many others writing on representations of this kind, concerns artworks’ power to captivate and please. To derive pleasure from representations of death and violent suffering seems plainly wrong, since on its face it seems to require us to delight in others’ pain and misfortune. This is what philosophers since David Hume have labeled the “paradox of tragedy.” Pleasure arrived at in response to the depiction of another’s misery seems only possible as the result of interpretive error and accompanying failures of empathy. Significantly, these failures occur not just due to an error on the audience’s part, since audiences are initially invited to experience pleasure by the artist, who must also accept his or her share of the blame. But what else is the artist to do? Aren’t artworks successful precisely to the extent that they are formally pleasing and held to possess aesthetic merit? Must representations of atrocity necessarily themselves be aesthetically atrocious (or “uglifying” to use Susan Sontag’s term)? Should the list of their desirable effects be restricted to those resident within the original trauma they depict? Surely not. For is it not art’s job to transform reality somehow, thereby opening up new ways of understanding and entering into it? The philosopher Arthur Danto thinks so,

since on his view art revolves around what he calls the “transfiguration of the commonplace.”

These questions matter not just to our understanding of the creative arts, which result in imaginative works (however firmly grounded in facts), but to the way we think about non-fictional documentary works as well, including histories, legal texts, films, memoirs and photographs. These too rely on language and conventions, and are inflected by the social world, as well as marked by their authors’ aesthetic sensibilities. They are judged successful not just according to their veracity, but also in light of the merits of their style. A work of historical analysis or photojournalism doesn’t simply replicate reality; it is not a transparent window on the world. Instead it transforms and re-presents reality. This transformation makes people nervous, especially when the reality in question is atrocious, since it would seem to weaken the representation’s evidentiary authority. Susan Sontag for example observes that “Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems “aesthetic”; that is, too much like art.”

When does an atrocity photograph become too much like art? The question arises when viewing an image like #2621, which depicts a wounded Red Army soldier named Nikolai Golubyatnikov in July, 1943. The photograph is beautifully composed. Golubyatnikov is back-

lit, his face cast in shadow. This slows the viewer’s recognition of the trauma that has been done to it. The soft light behind him, like a halo, gives Golubyatnikov a saintly air, and casts shadows along his body, rounding its contours, intensifying our awareness of the crispness and cleanliness of the bedsheets. His eyes grip us, but signal a wary calm. It is only later that we notice the crookedness of Golubyatnikov’s nose, the abrasions at its tip. And it is still later, after this, when we try to look more deeply into the image perhaps in response to reading the text provided for it, that we notice Golubyatnikov’s missing ear. We can’t actually tell if both ears have been severed since only the left side of his head is visible, and then only partially. This is not a photograph that immediately or fully discloses itself, that seeks to shock and awe through the unmediated representation of brutal violence. Its aim is instead less direct, namely to get viewers to see the person before the victim, thereby intensifying our sense of the horror and tragedy of Golubyatnikov’s mutilation once it becomes apparent. The photograph is, for want of a better word, artful in its withholding, in much the same way as image #2338, which shows a man’s corpse lying transverse across the bodies of three comrades.

What is striking about this second image is its depiction of what seems to be a kind of rest or peacefulness in death. The man’s arms lie gently across his chest; he appears to be asleep. He wears no obvious

uniform, and with his curved body and feet crossed he resembles an Orthodox Christ (and therefore a paradigmatically innocent victim) recently removed from the cross. Here too the photograph's composition deliberately slows viewers' recognition of physical harms, permitting only what Ian Watt once called a "delayed decoding" of the image's meaning. Only belatedly do we begin to take in its manifestations of cruelty and pain: the emaciation of all four bodies, the thinness of their clothes, the wounded foot. How very different from viewing image #2463, which depicts twelve year-old Sima Malkina from a village near Moscow, and who is shown having suffered a frightful facial wound. There is no way not to see her shrapnel injury, since it has left a gaping hole in her face that occupies the very centre of the photograph's visual field. We are meant to see it first, and then note the way the shrapnel has torn and twisted Sima's face, leaving her mouth frozen in a perpetually sad grimace. The image is shocking in its directness and the injury, along with the pain for which it speaks, is difficult to take in. In a very different way to the aforementioned photographs viewers experience delayed decoding when looking at it too, only in this case what is delayed is our apprehension of Sima's posture, dress, and eyes, and through them indications of her humanity, most importantly her resilience, strength, and dignity. She is given to us as her wound first and most importantly. By doing so the camera aims for documentary objectivity, and as a result the

image remains unfeeling and Sima herself somewhat remote. It shows viewers what has been done to her but says virtually nothing about what she makes of her plight. What matters to the photographer is the crime of her injury; his photograph – like image #2361, which depicts partisans cutting down the corpse of a comrade executed by the Germans, or images #1916 and #2603, which respectively depict a chopping block and frozen severed human heads – is intended to serve as evidence.

### III

If art transfigures mundane reality, and the best documentary photographs are artful, then are there limits or restrictions we should place on this transfiguration when the reality in question is extraordinary? Is there a point beyond which particularly non-fictional representations of others' suffering should not be transformed or enhanced? These questions have their origin in longstanding debates over the relation of photography to painting, as well as to confusion over what atrocity photographs are for, and how to view them. For example, if they are to serve reliably as evidence, they must be truthful and so presumably as unaltered as possible. If they are intended for some other purpose, say to emotionally engage viewers and expose them to an atrocity's latent and more abstract truths, its inherent "difficulties" to return to Britzman's term, then presumably a straight descrip-

tion of things-as-they-are won't do. For as thinkers since Aristotle have argued, the merely historical and factual deals only with specific cases, while works of art afford more (and more varied) opportunities to deeply penetrate the varieties of human experience, not all of them tangible. But how much indirection may be permitted before an image becomes unreliable? To what extent should an atrocity's reality be changed to suit available technologies and the needs of an audience?

It is again helpful to remember the expressly political character of the more than twenty-thousand images comprising the Sovfoto Archive. The photographs reflect the world (and the U.S.S.R.) as Soviet authorities wanted it to be. And the Soviets, from very early on, became expert at augmenting and editing images and written texts in order to make them conform to the (ever-shifting, under Stalin) imperatives comprising the party line. One of the most widely discussed of these alterations involved Nikolai Yezhov (1895-1940), the so-called "Vanishing Commissar," who was retouched out of a widely circulated photograph with Stalin following his fall from grace and execution by the NKVD in 1940. By the start of Operation Barbarossa such alterations, photographic and otherwise, were a regular feature of all official Soviet discourse. They were also a topic of significant debates between early Soviet artists, especially students and teachers at INKhUK (the Institute for Artistic Culture),

in the early 1920s. Indeed the view that politics could be well served via the manipulation of images proved central to Soviet constructivist art practice, which saw artists like Gustav Klutsis (1895-1938) and Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), both influential photographers, readily add, change, and delete material in order to make photomontages.

And yet there remains something unsettling about those photographs in this exhibition in which this kind of retouching and reworking of atrocity is clearly evident. We find the heaviest hand at work in image #2477, which according to the supplied text depicts a Red Army soldier named Lobachev who survived capture and torture by the Nazis in April, 1942. Although almost certainly based on an actual photograph, the image of Lobachev has been strikingly, and clumsily, augmented. His wounds appear hand-drawn, his skin has been strangely textured, the sky behind him seems like it belongs in a painting or on a stage. It is difficult to know where the photograph ends and the painterly augmentation begins. A number of questions arise as a result, none of which the photograph readily answers. Was the augmentation ordered so as to minimize or maximize the effects of Lobachev's wounds? If the latter, then how do we reconcile this with other attempts to minimize the photograph's revelation of the damage done to Lobachev's body. The text provided for this image explains that he has had his right eye gouged out, his face slashed,

and his chest cut, yet all we are permitted to see is Lobachev's back. Is this because the severity of his wounds would have made the photograph of them unpublishable? Was it necessary for the authorities to protect Lobachev's dignity and spare him the humiliation of publically displaying his injuries (and the public the humiliation of having to acknowledge his defeat)? Or was it that the authorities simply cared more about Lobachev's back wound, which resulted from a clumsy attempt to carve a Soviet star into his back? The latter seems especially plausible since what this photograph foregrounds is the deeply and intractably ideological character of war on the Eastern Front. Lobachev's body has been turned by his abusers into a metaphor for the Soviet state, and by torturing him they were able to assert their total dominance over it. His is the body politic, politicized first by the Nazis as a promise, then later by the Soviets as a caution. This is certainly a warning that the authorities would have wanted convey to people at home and elsewhere in the world in order to create a domestic understanding of what was at stake in the war with Nazi Germany, and overseas so as to justify the continuing need for coordinated military action, and support for aid programs such as Lend-Lease which were proving vital to the Soviet war effort.

However, images #1890 and #1891 show a defter hand at work than the one apparent in the image of Lobachev. They offer a kind of Before and After per-

spective allowing viewers to see what has been added to the original photograph by Soviet retouchers. I want to claim that both images represent the same woman, but this doesn't have to be the case in order for my observations to matter. All that needs to be conceded is that two women at the centre of each frame strongly resemble one another. What their juxtaposition reveals is the Soviets' attempt to create a beautiful corpse. The woman in image #1891, a victim at Auschwitz, lies on the pile of bodies where she was placed, and her retracted lips and sunken eyes clearly indicate that she is dead. Image #1890 on the other hand has been retouched so that the woman in the center of the frame looks much more alive, her eyes glistening, a scream frozen in her mouth. Strikingly, her hair appears recently coiffed, and is pulled back from her forehead. Unlike in the other image, the woman in #1890 seems aware of her suffering, which appears more recent. The woman in #1891 looks by contrast to have taken a long time to die, a process acknowledged by the emaciated state of her body. The text on the back of the photograph suggests this by stating that the bodies in the photograph are all victims of torture, not execution. The question arises, of course, why do this? Why make the woman in #1890 seem like she died more recently and quickly, and why make her up? What are we supposed to take away from this attempted revivification? The photographs do not tell us, but it seems possible that the Soviets wanted to stress both the intractability of the Nazis'

evil (since a fresher corpse signifies the Nazis enduring willingness to murder notwithstanding the Soviet advance and their inevitable defeat) and the lingering humanity of their victims. Accordingly, image #1890 is intended to remind viewers that they need to care about the dead as individual people despite their degradation and the scale of their slaughter.

#### IV

Tension between the aesthetic and documentary functions of atrocity photographs lies at the heart of this exhibition, as it lies at the heart of all photography. Susan Sontag has observed that photographs have “the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity [are] inbuilt. Yet they always [have], necessarily, a point of view.” This tension is revealed not just in representations of the Nazis’ victims, it is also evident from photographs such as #2414, which depicts the corpse of a German soldier from the SS “Viking” Division who, we are told, has been shot by Soviet troops. Images like this raise a whole new set of questions concerning how to look at images depicting perpetrators who have somehow been “victimized.” It is worth remembering that the Viking Division was comprised of volunteers, citizens of Nordic countries as well as Estonia, the Netherlands, and Belgium under the command of German officers. These soldiers were true believers in the Nazi cause, and many were rabid antisemites and anticommu-

nists. This makes the date of the photograph, May 1942, significant since it was during May that the Viking Division saw action during the Second Battle of Kharkov, a Soviet defeat during which Russian forces lost nearly 300,000 men to the Germans’ 20,000.

In the wake of this catastrophe it would have been important for Soviet authorities to show the vulnerability of the most ardent and committed Nazi troops. They would have wanted viewers to derive hope and satisfaction from the sight of the German’s corpse. Today we also know that soldiers from the Viking Division, like many other German SS and Wehrmacht troops, committed war crimes while fighting in the east, particularly later in the war. Additionally, we know that SS doctor Josef Mengele was transferred to the Viking Division in January, 1942 before being wounded in June and reassigned to Auschwitz in early 1943. Acknowledgment of these facts complicates any attempt to enter into the photograph straightforwardly as a tragic representation, and to recognize the suffering of the young man lying dead before us. This is despite the fact that the image expressly invites our sympathies. The dead man does not appear to be armed, and this, along with his riding a motorcycle at the time of his death, means we can reasonably assume he was not a front-line combat soldier. Instead he appears to have been working as a courier, some kind of a messenger boy. This works against us viewing him as a genocidal killer and paragon of evil. His



clothes seem too big for him, and along with his clean-cut face we are made aware of his youthfulness. The dead man's wound is hidden; his features are peaceful. He looks vaguely asleep. Should we pity him? Should we wish that he had not been killed? How is the formal beauty of this image – its geometry, and suggestion of the vulnerability of flesh and bone to the mechanized ravages of modern war – supposed to make us feel?

At best the photographs collected in *Photrocitry* can only tell us how the Soviets wanted their viewers to feel. This is not insignificant information, and it helps us to understand both what the Soviets needed themselves and their antagonists to be, and also how this need evolved over the war's duration. Like all photographs, the Sovfoto images convey their messages explicitly, by showing what they show, as well as *implicitly*, through cultivated metaphorical associations and strategies of concealment. Most obviously hidden in these atrocity photographs is any acknowledgement of the Jewishness of the Nazis' victims. The Soviet Union is well known to have marginalized the Holocaust in its official collective memory of the Great Patriotic War, which officials wanted understood from the very beginning as having been directed primarily against the Soviet state. As David Shneer notes, "the Soviet Union had a harder time recognizing a specifically Jewish tragedy during the war precisely because Nazi atrocities and mass de-

struction took place extensively in the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union. The murder of 1.5 to 2 million Jews on Soviet soil could easily be absorbed into the staggering 25 to 30 million Soviet deaths overall." Although some of the text provided with the Sovfoto images mentions Jews, it is always alongside a list of other "nationalities" (e.g. Poles and Russians). Individual victims are sometimes given a name, but never a particular heritage.

By documenting specific atrocities, the crimes of distinct perpetrators, and the suffering of individual and collective victims, the photographs comprising this exhibition serve as crucial evidence of aspects of the Nazis' genocidal mindset. They also reveal key aspects of Soviet mentality, some but not all of it concerned with the war per se. These images help to show how Soviet authorities needed the U.S.S.R. and its sacrifices to be perceived and understood, both in the photographic present and afterward. Along the way they raise important questions concerning the aestheticization of genocidal violence, perpetrator suffering, and spectatorial ethics. However, the Sovfoto images themselves have very little to say about the experience of violence itself. Unlike the case with, say, the photographs by Don McCullin (b. 1935) of the Biafran War and its resulting famine, the photographs selected for inclusion in *Photrocitry* don't consistently draw viewers into the private particulars of human-engineered misery.

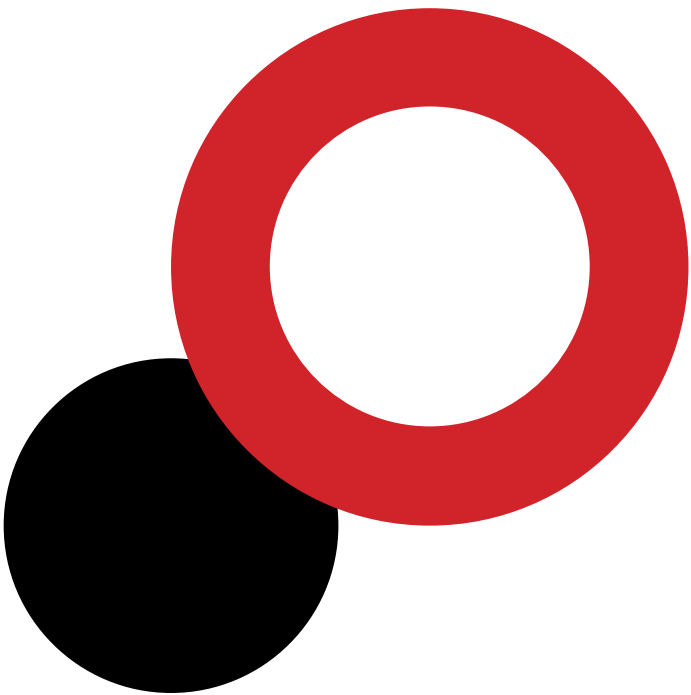
An exception here is image #2434, which depicts the body of Vitya Cherevichkin (incorrectly spelled “Cherevichny” in the Soviet text), a fifteen year-old boy from Rostov-on-Don in Russia who was killed, along with his pet pigeons, by the Germans in November, 1941. Cherevichkin, still very much a boy, has obviously been beaten before being shot (the text explains that he has been kicked in the face), and he is shown lying still holding a dead pigeon, a prized possession. The bird is also the reason for his execution. According to the Nazis, Cherevichkin was executed for using pigeons to send messages to Soviet forces during the Battle of Rostov. According to the Soviets, Cherevichkin was caught by the Nazis playing with his birds, and beaten and shot when he refused to give them up. The presence of the dead pigeon in the photograph, and most especially the photographer’s care to convey the loving gentleness of the attachment still linking bird to boy, make the Soviet account more plausible. Cherevichkin was actually photographed from several angles (other depictions show more blood), and images of his death circulated widely throughout the U.S.S.R.. They struck an emotional chord. There was a kind of poetry lying in the boy’s willingness to die rather than surrender his beloved birds, something especially vicious and unfeeling about the Nazis’ crime. During the war Cherevichkin became a popular hero and martyr, and today there is a statue of a boy clutching a bird to his breast in a park named after him in Rostov-on-Don.

However, what the photograph of Cherevichkin reveals about the depth of the boy’s inner life and attachments remains exceptional in the context of the Sovfoto atrocity images generally. Overall they do little to help us understand either why such brutality occurred or what it must have been like to live through it. They are not alone in this failure, though. Indeed the Sovfoto photographs succeed just about as well as any other representation of mass atrocity and violence at getting close to the *ding und sich* of genocide and total war. Susie Linfield argues that gazing upon these images “is necessary, but its only guarantee is failure. The closer one gets, the further a comprehensible world secedes; the more one knows, the less one understands.” Again, this kind of opacity is typical of all atrocity photographs. As Susan Sonntag correctly understood, “Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us.”

*Adam Muller*

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## **AUTHOR STATEMENT: Struan Sinclair**

These are difficult images to work with, hard to look at and hard to comprehend. Several of the photographs are staged, others are augmented by paint or caption; many lack specific production contexts and attributions. They are records, certainly, but they are also artworks, distinctively and carefully composed. As such they do not constitute mnemonics for general suffering; rather, each photograph speaks of and for itself. The accompanying text fragments, I hope, respond to those varied voices. The neat geometry of Ivan Dudnik's body in #1884 – folded into a series of triangles (legs, torso, left arm) within the triangle of men who hold him – is disturbed by his extraordinarily complex expression: he is blinking, bewildered, ingratiating, afraid. The boy seems to be supported gently, but a closer look reveals dents made by the attendant's fingers on his emaciated calf: he is at once cradled and barely restrained. The linked text focuses on this tension, the imminent collapse of the frame.

While some of the texts address their photographic

subject directly, others attend to the interplay between an image's content and its caption, or a peculiarity of background or composition, like the angles in #2338, or the twin shadows in #2635. One or two begin with me. My father's family emigrated from Russia and Ukraine. Their stories were never told to us as children. Why? This place was not that place. Who wants to live backwards? Better to forget. Now some of those stories are here.

Throughout this process I have worked from the photographs. I have looked and looked at them, occasionally at length and programmatically, working from left to right and top to bottom; sometimes by glances, quickly, to take them by surprise (one cannot take such photographs by surprise). Perhaps these texts are best read as alternative captions, related to but not always explaining the photographs they stand to one side of, a little obliquely but always attentively, trying but failing like Dudnik's tripod of burley helpers to contain that which is bound to escape them.

## NARRATIVE FRAGMENTS

### [Sovfoto #2590]

Any trench dug by the soon-to-be-dead is liable to be sloppy. Unsquare edges, overbite of turf, eight square feet of perfectly good volume lost due to the imprecise strike of the shovel held by a man starved sightless and with a rifle in his back. But bodies, like argon, will gaplessly fill most spaces, given time and weather.

The friendly soldier says, *Come sit by the grave and we will take your picture*. She agrees out of patriotism. He coaches her: *He is your father, your husband – think: He is my husband and now he is dead*, and because he too has a rifle and the trench, well, here it is, ready and waiting. So she does as he tells her, making believe that the husband she has not yet met is already dead, in a trench like this, on just such a plaid blanket, coat open, arms thrown back – by what? *The force of his fall*.

### [Sovfoto #7587]

In 1939 the town of Liozno boasted just under 4000 people, a Government school with instruction in Yiddish, and the grandparents of Marc Chagall. After the destruction of the town, liberating forces searched the ravine of the Adamenskaya dacha and found a grave sixteen meters long, six meters wide and four meters deep. Under the topsoil were 1500 corpses of men, women and children, shot at point-blank range. Liozno, from *liozney*, meaning alien.

As the fighting draws closer she makes a decision: the baby will not be born, will not enter this impossible world. Instead she will reabsorb it into herself; bone and tissue, blood and water, likeness. She begins with *lioz*, the foot.

**[Sovfoto #1916]**

They left Lvov in a hurry. The first leg was on foot, the second by horse cart because the train was dangerous and apt to be searched. He remembers nothing until the fishing boat whose gunwales sat scarcely above water by the time they set out, the only time he would ever be undersea. Foot, cart, boat, ship – like a parable.

Four years later, in the new world Sol, the second-oldest, will be given the birth certificate of his brother who died. Better to be born here than there. That brother, the first Sol, is born without a heart. Their mother, hands held to her throat in her purest gesture of despair, raves about the boy from Lvov who astounds his doctors by being born two-hearted. Later, in the hospital, dialysis unit humming by his bed, shadows whirling on the wall, Sol thinks: *He and I. He and finally I.*

**[Sovfoto #2603]**

It is not enough to speak of *frozen* in a frozen place. After all, one frozen thing is not necessarily much like another. Familiar objects and substances pivot on this quality, the instant that marks a change of state; where a clothed body spritzed with petrol reduces to ash, or where a liquid, say, blood or saliva, hardens to ice. Sounds too freeze in these extreme temperatures, though they will also travel further, producing the awkward scenario of the executioner hours later hearing for the first time the last cries of the men he left for dead. In the case of these frozen busts from Alexeyevka, extruded imperfectly from their moulds, a chorus fifty-nine men strong.

**[Sovfoto #2466]**

The pose speaks of struggle. Left arm and leg in motion, striding into death. His closed fist like a half-buried potato; even the wolves passed this one up. Over one eye a cataract of ice – who has found a way to melt the other one? Still he walks, still he looks up, not desolate but wistful: *And if not here, where?*

**[Sovfoto #2463]**

The soldiers harrow them into the cornfields. One of their bullets strikes her across the face. She lies, stunned and bleeding, the neighbour's boy hidden in her skirts. After they come to Canada, the child, my great-uncle, is sent by train clear across the prairies to a house on Niagara Street where he becomes the adopted son to four daughters. At first he cannot bear to have lights out. Then it is open spaces, nakedness, anything rustling, ravens, being touched (of that and him more later). On the back of the one surviving photograph of the woman who saved his life in the cornfields someone has written: *Jitka ??? (the one with the scar)*.

**[Sovfoto #2338]**

The man on top is different. White underclothes, hands folded, looking back and up like Michelangelo's *Pieta*, a trailing edge of bandage that leads to something unseen on the ground. Last to be shot, first to be uncovered.

**[Sovfoto #2621]**

Perhaps they ran out of punishments. It wasn't uncommon; one grew bored and soon enough invention returned. The work detail was a poor one, raggedy and sullen, the storehouse wall they were directed to fix was not merely shaky but rotten. Once too often a guard shouted *Listen, Jew!* or once too often Tadeusz heard it; either way, one of them found the time and a blade sharp enough to perform the amputation. Who, having heard the phrase *Listen, Jew!* shouted a thousand times, does not receive it as sound, ripples over fabric, vibrations through the floor? *Listen, Jew!* – without the auricle the listening apparatus is badly compromised, unable to amplify or filter frequencies or locate sound vertically. *Listen, Jew!*

What is left is a constant slow low *whoosh*, soothing and incomprehensible, like the sea misremembered by the sailor.



[Sovfoto #2477]

On the back of the dead man they perform cosmetic surgery: remove the star or recuperate it? Ink dries on skin at different speeds – dark colours more slowly than light – and this makes it difficult. One of the artists, a youth who has studied in Kiev, would like to paint a map. *But no one can think of a map. By the time they were finished with our Lobachev, this cartographer recalls, the dried paint made a case for the man.*

[Sovfoto #2434]

The boy's face is its background. White dust from the stones they carried on their boots. The bird he holds is also a mixture of grays and reds and whites. Pigeons of this sort know the worth of camouflage. Upon arriving in a place they will pluck their own feathers to fit the scheme. The Germans examined the ones they caught for coded messages then smashed them onto the stones.

*Where now?* the surviving birds must have asked, a final reconnoiter of their fallen comrades and the boy against the wall. *Where and what now?*

[Sovfoto #1891/1890]

Two photographs on the same subject. And the subjects too are identical, though differently arranged. Which is more horrifying? The first, with its starved bodies lying where they stopped or scattered where they were cast? The second with its bodies grouped in threes, painted-on shadows, black hair on the unshaved central figure shaped and full. He lies between two others caught in a last breath. Howling in the first photograph; singing in the second, while the old coquette, hand to her throat asks: *Who, me?*

[Sovfoto #2361]

Among the troops that cross the Pripet Marshes is a botanist, Ernst Maekl. There – to the left in the photograph, trailing the others. The poplar archway, snagged roots, rotten pulp of mud and reeds, startlingly cold water beneath. Mid-afternoon. *Go ahead!* says Maekl. Then he bends and searches the water for the flanged yellow flower he saw earlier that as a child he had collected by the hunting lodge at Baden. A kindly porter had given him a specimen jar, four inches long and cylindrical, the case from a cigar. That afternoon too was grey and damp and wintry, his yellow flower the last living thing.

When Maekl returns and sees the body, the brand-new hanging apparatus, reinforced, shimmed, load-bearing, a ladder built into the side, he wonders *Who but a madman takes the time to build a gallows by a forest of tall trees?*

[Sovfoto #2489]

Later, in Rostern, they live bewildered on a farm in a tall brown frame house fronting three outbuildings with roofs darned uncertainly onto their stavings, a wheezy staircase they were encouraged to use in pairs. Grandfather speaks through a straw in his throat. On Thursdays a gentile, of sound character but perhaps un-awed by heaven, comes to slaughter chickens. First he separates those with red collars. Then roosters, pullet hens, the strongest, the weak. After these calculations his ritual: wandering round the pen, hands in pockets to demonstrate his harmlessness, then moving in swiftly to scoop up the bird by the underbelly and the base of the neck, one sharp twist because arthritis limits his range of motion. As a special favour he rinses them under the tap. Checking the bird's lungs is the job of my great-uncle. *Clean*, he says. *Safe*.

### [Sovfoto #2635]

To shoot his painted victim the fascist hangman has taken off his gloves. Hand in his pocket, casual, nearly slouching, head and gun hand in one long fluid line, perpendicular, because that is how murderers and victims meet. Careful inspection reveals that both figures are floating: the soldier's right leg and the torso and head of his victim, a curious but ultimately authentic effect, the great *trompe l'oeil* of mass violence, when a saturated earth says *No room for you, no sanctuary*. Note also the impossible shadows, side by side: there, see? At least one other is watching. The hangman's foot square in his heart.

### [Sovfoto #2414]

How alike they are, soldier and motorcycle! His right leg and its front wheel; its rounded plastic seatback and his peaked helmet, the taped handlebar like an arm slung over his belly for protection, as if the hardest surface knows its duty to the soft. Another glance and it has replaced him, kickstand splayed, heart and lungs of its gas can. One eye, the lone gauge, zeroed.

In the rough outbuildings in the background someone must have said: *Yes, and I bet it still runs!*

### [Sovfoto #1884]

The safest means of transporting the insane is to bend them double. In this posture their ability to struggle is much reduced, the humours are more evenly distributed, disturbing visions fall away like scales. The boy soldier, retreating at Vitebsk, was struck by shrapnel that lodged in his skull behind his ear. Its removal left a cavity, a shaped channel like the mouth of a flute through which the world might pass. In wild weather he liked to find a high point and let the elements pierce him, until two or three fellows could be found to fold him back up and return him to the room and the bed he could no longer see or feel. Where the wound had been madness infiltrated.

Here the three men and fifteen year-old Ivan Dudnik make a six-pointed star. They hold him by their fingertips; he floats in air. The charged filament.

[Sovfoto #1920]

On the day she phoned long-distance Sonja told me the story of a childhood friend from their village who stayed behind when Sonja left for Minnesota. This girl's family was arrested; later her professor father disappeared. Friends gave word that the ghetto would be liquidated so they paid a farmer for the use of his stream where dogs could not track them. For three days the shooting lasted. For three days the mother sat in the stream among the rocks with her daughter on her lap so her head was above water. From her place among the rocks the girl's mother sang and dreamed food for them. On the first day she plucked bread from an imaginary oven. On the second day she saw wild mushrooms like primitive shelters on the banks. *Now we will live!* she cried. The next day the girl woke on the bank to find her mother gone. Slipped away – it was running water, after all.

This six year-old girl lived in the woods on vermin and insects and berries until the war was over.

In 1985, she visited Sonja in Scottsdale, AZ. She brought nothing with her, would not enter Sonja's house, refused all refreshment, denied involvement in any of Sonja's memories of their shared girlhood, sat on the steps sorting her pockets into freezer bags equipped with a window and space for the date. Emptying herself out, Sonja thought, to something unrepresentable. The girl who all Europe had a hand in making travelled four thousand miles and eighty-three years in order to lay her madness at the feet of the only person alive who remembered her.

*You are not Sonja Oster,* she said.

[Sovfoto #1934]

The dimensions of the canisters varied according to where they were made, and by whom. Inside the identical pale absorbent pellets, like fishtank gravel, that when moistened release cyanide gas. The cans contain a certainty: death, within twenty minutes, based on the number of bodies pressed into a given volume and breathing at the adult respiratory rate of once every 3-5 seconds, though this might be accelerated under the adverse conditions of a chamber where anywhere from 800 to 1200 victims might strain, climb, scour, claw (gas masks, of course, were not provided; the one pictured is a prop). So the canisters contain nothing and something, the last thing, the urge to breathe, the absolute requirement of breathlessness.

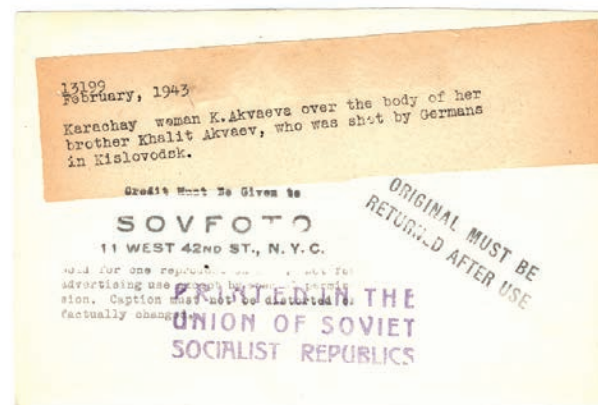
I show this photograph to my son who at the age of six has been assigned a picture-book about the *kindertransport*. In the book, pastel-coloured children board a train that sifts into the darkness like a length of smoke. He looks back and forth between picture and photograph, says: *One of these is real* –

*Struan Sinclair*

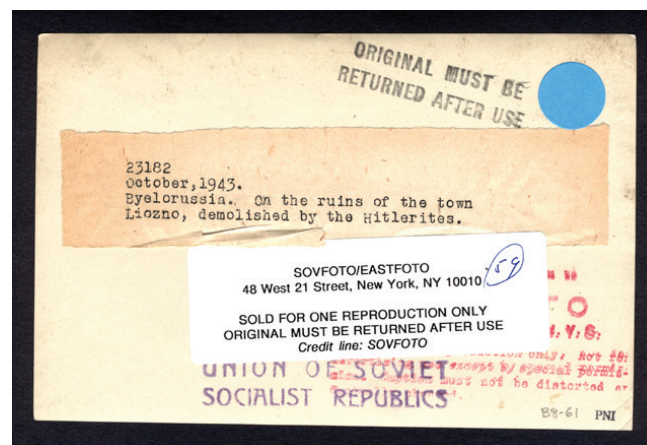
## EXHIBITION IMAGES & CAPTIONS



#2590



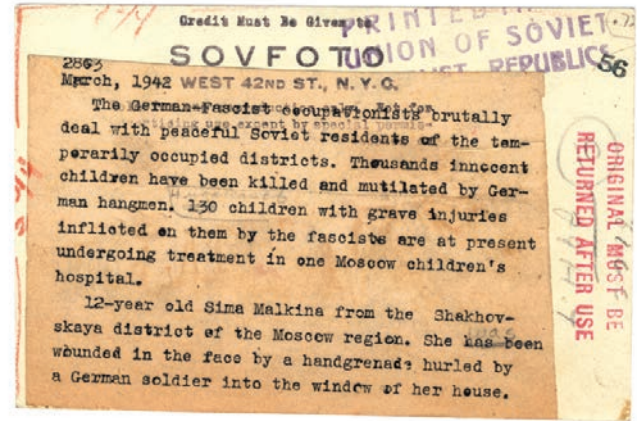
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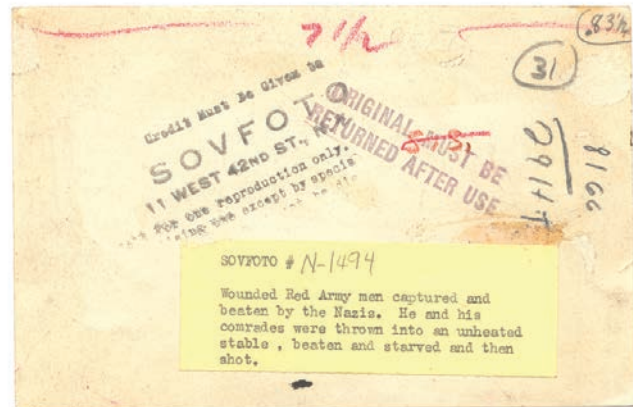




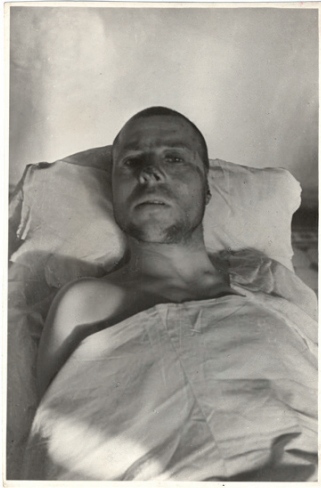
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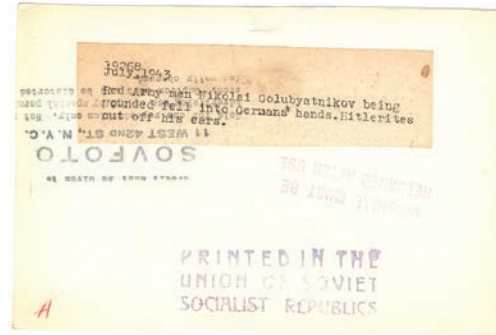
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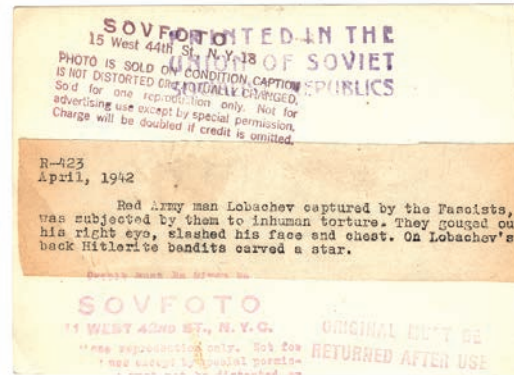




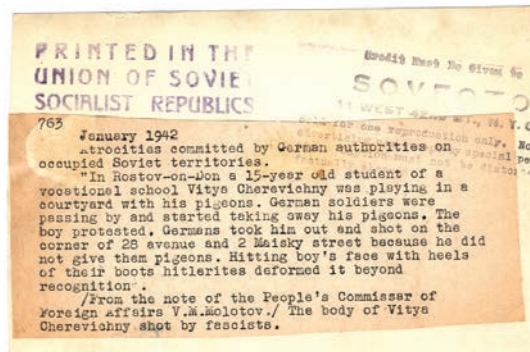
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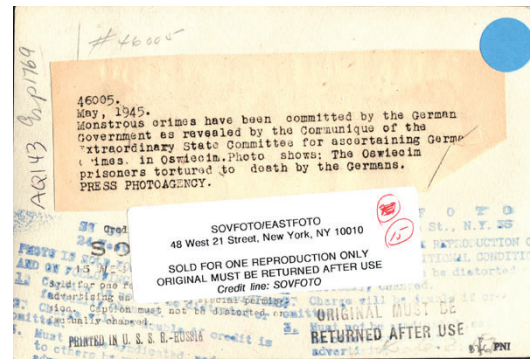


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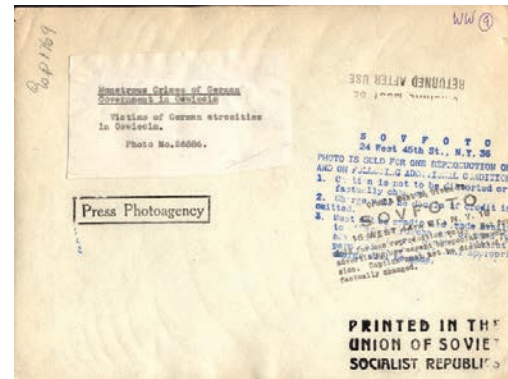




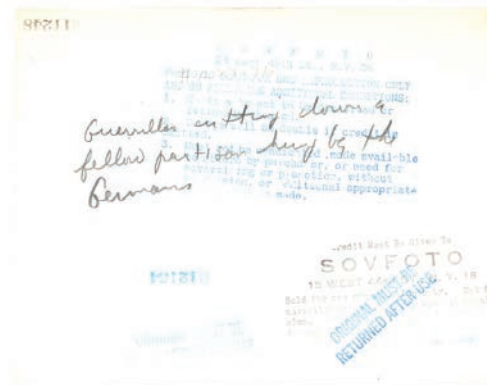
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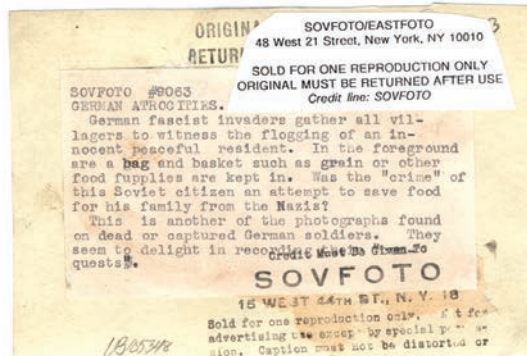


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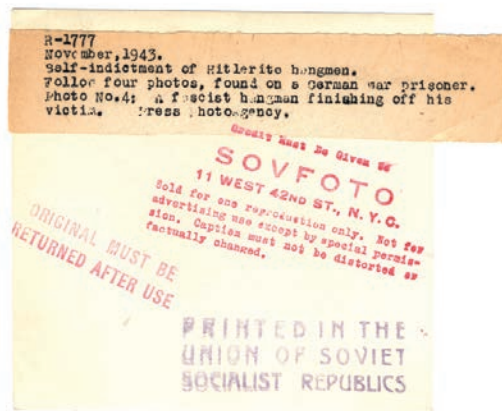




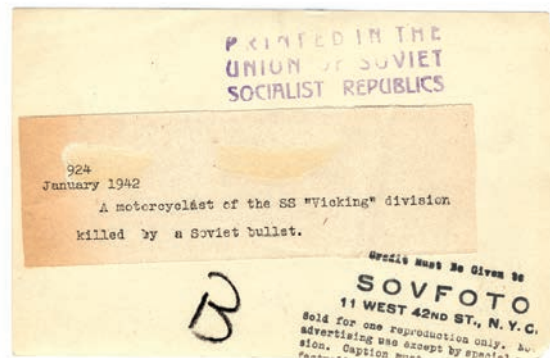
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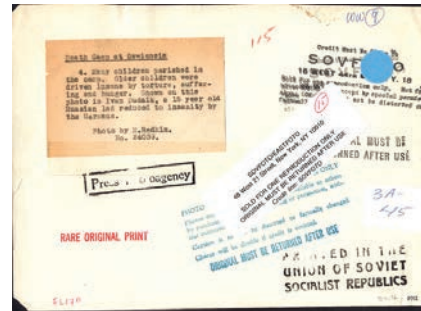


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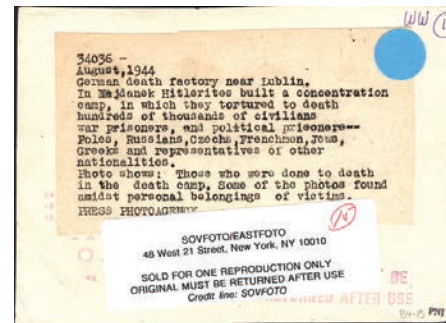




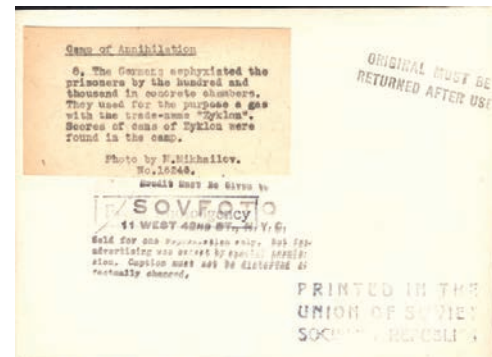
#1884



#1920



#1934



## CONTRIBUTORS:

**Dr. Adam Muller** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Film, and Theatre at the University of Manitoba. His research looks at the representation of mass violence across media, with special attention paid to photography and film. He regularly teaches courses on war representations, the Holocaust, human rights, and genocide. He is the coeditor of *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum* (2015) and *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War Across the Disciplines* (2012), as well as the editor of *Concepts of Culture: Art, Politics, and Society* (2006).

**Struan Sinclair's** fiction and new media work have been widely anthologized and have received critical acclaim and awards internationally. He is the author of *Strange Comforts* (Gutter), *Everything Breathed* (Granta) and *Automatic World* (Doubleday/Anchor), along with numerous short stories and installations.





