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**Research Abstract**

I began my research by comparing two periodicals: *Sovetskoe Foto*, a trade journal for photojournalists and photography enthusiasts, and *Ogonyok*, a popular illustrated magazine akin to *Life* magazine in the United States. My dissertation examines Soviet photojournalism and photographic aesthetics of the 1950s and 1960s, specifically between the year 1956, the year Khrushchev delivered his "Secret Speech" and 1968, the year of the Prague Spring. It is my assertion that the relative openness of this period offered a forum in which photojournalists could discuss their craft and reconceptualized their work in ways that had been impossible in previous decades. In this manner, Soviet photographers who worked for illustrated journals were able to challenge the notion that photography was simply an ideological tool, promote aesthetic interest in photography, and advocated techniques that drew upon the avant-garde of the 1920s which had been discredited by Stalin years earlier.

**Research Goals**

In response to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, it is my assertion that the boundaries of viable visual representation were shifting, and that a previously outcast artistic movement could be reexamined as a way for photojournalists and photographers to demonstrate photography's aesthetic properties. Thus, my project provides a more nuanced explanation of post-Stalinist Socialist Realism, in that it demonstrates its potential flexibility: visual culture,

photography in particular, contributed to the modification of socialist realism and pushed the conventions of visuality beyond its former limits.

Upon receiving my Title VIII Independent Scholar Fellowship, I composed a set of key questions that I sought to answer while working in the archives of the Russian Federation. First, in what ways did the unique political context of the Khrushchev era alter the landscape of viable visual representation, and what techniques did photographers use to expand or contract the boundaries of this terrain? Second, what was the relationship between Soviet government agencies (including illustrated journals as a branch of government, as they were published through either government or party publishing houses), individual professional photographers (photojournalists), and photographic aesthetics? And finally, what was the relationship between illustrated journals, professional photojournalists, and amateur photographers? These questions served as the focus for my research.

### **Research Activities**

My research is composed of critical analysis of illustrated journals as well as archival sources such as those of S. Yevgenov, the former editor and frequent contributor to *Sovetskoe Foto* and records of the Soviet Ministry of Culture. These sources are necessary to understanding both how photojournalists talked about their own images and reflect how various groups (the government, the party, the public etc.) responded to photojournalists' images after 1953. Close analysis of visual documents is also tied to this methodology, which deviates from standard historical analysis. My project investigates how photojournalists were able to replicate avant-garde abstraction, lines, and light in photographs, albeit less radically than their avant-garde predecessors. This in particular is crucial to establishing the similarities between the work of photographers in the 1920s and those of the 1950s. Visual analysis also reveals the permeation of

more westernized styles into Soviet press and exhibition photography, particularly Neo-Realism. The visual aspect of history is imperative to understanding what photographers wanted to be seen, viewed and remembered about the era, and how it was to be shown.

In terms of Soviet photography, socially constructed identities and the manipulation of historical narratives was coupled with the task of visualizing these identities as well as promoting viewers to see themselves as a part of this reality, either imagined or real. For photojournalists, this involved the incorporation and categorization of identities into images in which readers and viewers would comprehend their place in Soviet society and history. It is my assertion that this project was most successful in the Thaw era, due in part to a relaxation of restrictions on photographic aesthetics but also a shift in how the government and mass media related to their readers, or for photojournalists, viewers. Of equal importance, however, is an overlap of Khrushchev's attempted revitalization of Soviet society, coupled with his active interest in utilizing the press to achieve that goal.

Foucault's theory of governmentality is an important theoretical component of my project. Though he generally applied this idea to de-centralized, neoliberal societies, it is applicable to this period as the Soviet press was the most viable and visible apparatus used to disseminate information about Soviet society in the 1950's and 1960's. For Foucault, government can be described as the manner in which power manifests itself in culture and society and in the Soviet Union, press agencies were the main source of disseminating visual information about and documentation of all aspects of the cultural, political and social terrain. Mitchell Dean expands on Foucault's conception of governmentality by incorporating technologies of power, of which the Soviet press and photojournalism can be included. As an arm of the Soviet government, the press was responsible for participating in the creation and

construction of particular identities. Similarly, as an organ of the government, the press had the ability to promote citizens as having particular capacities, qualities and statuses despite, or in spite of reality. As de-Stalinization gained momentum, the press was galvanized to define post-Stalinist Soviet identities, and photographers possessed the technology with the greatest potential to visualize these changes. They would envision and project a form of person whose thoughts and actions would embody the socialist project; journalists would become technologies of the self, tasked with discovering who the Soviet person was, and what society and culture was to look like once socialism was achieved.

In order to achieve my research goals, I conducted research at three archives, and two libraries in Moscow: The Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), The State Library of the Russian Federation, and the State Public Historical Library. Each of these archives and libraries provided me access to different types of primary documents. The State Library of the Russian Federation and the State Public Historical Library holdings include primary sources in the way of visual documents. My comparative study of the illustrated journals *Ogonyok* and *Sovetskoe Foto* necessitated my access to the photographs printed in these journals, in which point both libraries proved incredibly useful. At RGANI, I intended to investigate the records of the Soviet Ministry of Culture, the government agency responsible for the publication of both journals. GARF, on the other hand, holds records of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), which employed a number of prominent photojournalists of the Khrushchev era, and was responsible for the majority of images that were published in Soviet periodicals, magazines and journals. GARF also holds the fonds of the Photo Section of the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries,

responsible for the coordination of photography exhibitions in the Soviet Union and abroad. Finally, the personal fonds of various photojournalists and prominent photographers are located at RGALI.

### **Important Research Findings**

For photographers and photojournalists in the Soviet Union the dominance of socialist realism and the institutional hierarchies set in place during the early 1930s made it difficult for photojournalists to make their voices heard when it came to determining the standards of aesthetics within the established, or unionized, Soviet artistic community. Under Stalin, photography was clearly placed at the bottom of the Soviet Union's creative hierarchy, a point that was made clear when he removed photographers from the Artist's Union in the mid-1930's, shut down a number of photography journals and arrested prominent photographers such as Gustav Klutssis. Within the context of the Thaw, however, the shift away from Stalinism encouraged all Soviet citizens to question his legacy. Although the avant-garde had been discredited by Stalin, the fact that it had been forcibly abandoned made it a useful tool for distancing photojournalists from Stalinist aesthetics and elevating photographic standards. A return to the avant-garde in photography was a reaction to the measures of the previous regime, a choice made by contemporary photographers to actively rebuild and redefine aesthetics on their own terms.

The relationship between the photographer-artists and the photographer-journalist is complicated not only by cultural authorities who neglected to recognize any form of photography as 'high' art, but also by photographers themselves, many of whom embraced both roles. This continues to the present day, where images of prominent press photographers such as Georgi Zelma and Yakov Ryumkin are displayed in art galleries and museum shows, not in their original format (the magazine photograph), but as art objects. The return then, or rather colloquialization,

of avant-garde aesthetics in the 1950s and 1960s begs the question: in what ways did the unique political context of the Khrushchev era alter the landscape of viable visual representation, and what techniques did photographers use to expand or contract the boundaries of this terrain? What political events or contexts generate these changes? What was the relationship between aesthetics, historical events, and mass culture as mediated by photography? And finally what was the relationship between mass culture, official culture and high culture?

Party records of the press and photography reveal that photographers, while not esteemed as artists, played an invaluable role in the dissemination of party information and the formation of post-Stalinist Soviet identities and memories. Even more notably, Soviet press photographers became essentially international documentary agents: for the first time since the 1930s, they were encouraged to travel not as documentary soldiers as they had been during the war, but as professionals piecing together a picture of the rest of the world for the Soviet public, many of whom had not, nor ever would travel outside of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. During the Khrushchev era, the government actively encouraged photographers to go forth and document. New styles, modes and ideas about photography, particularly Italian Neorealism, resonated with Soviet photographers who incorporated them into their own work, subverting official culture.

Documents about the publication of illustrated journals reveal that while publishers were keenly aware that there were visual styles appropriate to press publication versus publication in illustrated journals, the line between the two was blurred by the fact that journals such as *Sovetskoe Foto* were concerned equally with aesthetics and illustrated news about press photography, photography exhibitions, and foreign photojournalists and photographers. In the past months these ambiguities have become especially apparent in my research, as government agencies attempted to regulate visual culture, without the particular knowledge or skill necessary

to provide coherent guidelines to editors and photojournalists themselves. As a result, the aesthetics of press photography varied widely from publication to publication.

In my final months and weeks, I spent time researching the records of the Ministry of Culture, as they pertain to the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), as well as the Photography section of the Department for Friendship and Foreign Relations. Research into photography about this second Soviet institution has revealed to me a variety of information: First, that the Soviet government placed some importance on cultural exchange through photography. Many local photography organizations, particularly in Great Britain, requested photographs from Soviet photojournalists and amateur photographers for small exhibitions, and samples from photography exhibitions held in the Soviet Union. By and large, these requests were granted without much hesitation. Similarly, photography exhibitions held in the Soviet Union were reorganized in Eastern and Western Europe. Though the late 1950s and early 1960s are often recognized as an era of cultural exchange, the sheer volume of requests and information received and sent to and from the Photography Section of the Department for Friendship and Foreign Relations, and their willingness to provide examples of Soviet amateur and professional photography, indicates that the government and party placed some importance on the role of photography in portraying the Soviet Union, apart from official journals and magazines. Too, with the understanding that photography amateurs outside of the Soviet Union would form their own interpretations of these photo documents, despite the Department's attempts to regulate ideas about aesthetics within the boundaries of the Soviet Union itself.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

In recent years, art and censorship remain relevant issues in contemporary Russian politics. Curators Andrei Yerofeev and Yuri Samodurov, of Moscow's "Forbidden Art"

exhibition held in March 2007, faced three year jail sentences for their participation in the project. In July 2010, both men were found guilty, and charged heavy fines for their devotion to avant-garde art and artists. Yerofeev was presented with a similar fine five years ago for his participation in the exhibition of “Caution, Religion.” Outrage at both exhibits came from radical supporters of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as nationalist groups in Russia who appealed to prosecutors to pursue an investigation. Rather than a trial about religious beliefs or art in particular, the guilty verdict is symptomatic of the rise of radical nationalist and religious groups in the Russian government that threaten Democracy in Russia, and demonstrate the continued importance of studying censorship as it relates to artistic expression. Like any culture adjusting in the wake of an oppressive government, or still living within a country where censorship remains tied to visual art, Soviet photojournalists during the 1950s and 1960s were testing the boundaries of art and culture, much like Samodurov and Yerofeev.

Even more inflammatory, especially in the United States and Western Europe, was the trial and continued imprisonment of Pussy Riot, journalists, and politicians who choose to take a visible stance against political decisions made within the Russian government. The suppression of these critical voices points to the similarities experienced by artists and photographers in the Soviet Union. Studies about conservative backlash against freedom of artistic and aesthetic representation are still quite relevant to the current political scene in Russia, a situation that is unlikely to change overnight. It seems to me, however, that policy makers should take into account the rather distinct path of twentieth century Russian history, and how much it varied from that of the United States when considering political action and compromise. Democracy, repression, and censorship are defined quite differently in the Russian Federation than they are in the United States, and my dissertation provides a backdrop though the lens of visual cultural

studies, for explaining why the differences in these definitions continue to lead to clashes between the United States and Russia.

### **Co-Curricular Activity**

My co-curricular activities while on fellowship have included lectures offered by the Lumiere Brothers Center for Photography and other galleries around Moscow. Of particular interest was a lecture I attended about photographer and journalist Yakov Riymkin and photographic aesthetics in of World War II and the post-war period. In my time in Moscow I also contacted and corresponded with photographer Pavel Cmertin, who works for various periodicals in Moscow.

I have also had the opportunity to meet with various State Department colleagues and discuss the prospect of working for the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in the future. Most importantly, however, was the opportunity to meet and discuss my project with fellow graduate students and professors, exchange research methods, and learn from their experiences working in Russian archives.

### **Conclusions**

During the Thaw, all Soviet citizens encountered a culture in flux, a state of limbo in which the boundaries of a repressive society were being tested. Yet, the aesthetic experimentation of photojournalism, which made possible a colloquialization of avant-garde culture, occurred without posing a challenge to socialist realism's domination of the art world. As such, my project points to tension between institutional structures and individuality in aesthetic choice. While Soviet photojournalists were attempting to assert their own aesthetic agenda, they were forced to comply with, and work within, the same structures that had existed under Stalin. Though the Thaw offered opportunities for photojournalists to experiment, the

fundamental structures that had existed under Stalin, remained intact. And yet, my research indicates that photographers, as well as the Ministry of Culture and other government structures were engaged in serious debate about photographic aesthetics, though photographs themselves demonstrate that what was deemed 'appropriate' differed greatly from image to image, thus altering the range of visual acceptable photographs, and thus, socialist realism itself.

### **Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications**

In the future, the research I conducted in Moscow in the past months will lead to a number of presentation and publication opportunities. On the one hand, the wealth of information I collected about Soviet amateur photographers and aesthetics, will provide the opportunity for me to present a paper on the subject at the 2014 ASEEES conference. Additionally, I will submit my first dissertation chapter for publication when it is completed, presumably by the end of 2013.

Upon the completion of my PhD, I plan to submit my dissertation to an academic publishing house. My research, however, provides other publication opportunities that would reach a wider, non-academic audience. Despite the quality of the photographs and the skill of Soviet photographers, they are rarely known outside of Russia. A compilation of the best images into an illustrated volume would showcase the talent of Soviet photographers of the era.