

Photographic images should not be relied upon, but even falsified photographs can be illuminating for students of History

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INTRODUCTION: History students are schooled in the critical appreciation of sources but the emphasis is upon written documents. David King opens the lid on Soviet pictorial censorship and how doctored images, nevertheless, provide an additional and alternative route to the real History of Soviet Russia.

1984

ONE NIGHT IN 1984, I made my way up Kirov Street, which was ill-lit even by Moscow standards, to the studio of Alexander Rodchenko. An archway led into a claustrophobic courtyard hemmed in by several tenement blocks. The studio was situated on the ninth floor of one of these, and there was no lift. I began the long climb up.

Rodchenko was one of the heroes of Russian art, design and photography from the avant-garde period at the time of the Revolution until the late 1930s. He was married to the equally gifted artist and designer Varvara Stepanova. During the 1920s their studio served as the editorial offices of *Lef* magazine, an arts journal under the editorship of the revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Rodchenko died in 1956. Three generations of his family continue to reside in the apartment, and by 1984 very little had changed. Paintings by the master leaned against the walls as if he had just finished working on them. The dim light of naked bulbs cast dense shadows from tall cupboards and bookcases. The same dust, Rodchenko's dust, occupied the same crevices and the tops of the same books. I was there to see the books - strangely, the first person to have asked to see them.

Rodchenko had divided his working life in the 1930s between photography and his remarkable output of book and magazine design. Huge photographic albums, with titles like *First Cavalry* and *Red Army*, lined the bookshelves of the Kirov Street studio, side by side with pioneering photographs for special issues of the famous magazine *USSR in Construction*. But one book stood out from the others. It was called *Ten Years of Uzbekistan*.

Looking inside Rodchenko's copy of *Ten Years of Uzbekistan* was like opening the door onto the scene of a terrible crime. A major purge of the Uzbek leadership by Stalin in 1937, three years after the book's publication, meant that many of the official portraits of party functionaries in the album had to be destroyed. The concept of 'personal responsibility' had been forced on the whole country by the Stalinists during a vast campaign of vigilance against the regime's enemies. The names of those who had been arrested or had 'disappeared' could no longer be mentioned, nor could their pictures be kept without the greatest risk of arrest. Petty informers were everywhere. The walls really did have ears.

Rodchenko's response in brush and ink came close to

creating a new art form, a graphic reflection of the real fate of the victims. The face of the notorious secret police torturer Yakov Peters, for example, was veiled in ink.

This defacing, forced upon Rodchenko, is only one example among thousands of similar actions from the Great Terror and beyond. The libraries of the former Soviet Union still bear these scars of 'vigilant' political vandalism. Many volumes - political, cultural, or scientific - published in the first two decades of Soviet rule had whole chapters ripped out by the censors. Reproductions of photographs of future 'enemies of the people' were attacked with disturbing violence. In schools across the country, children were actively engaged by their teachers in the 'creative' removal of the denounced from their textbooks. A collective paranoia stretched right through the period of Soviet rule.

Soviet censorship

Huge numbers of publications were banned from the bookshelves altogether. For example, one directive, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist party on 7 March, 1935, ordered the removal of Leon Trotsky's works from libraries throughout the Soviet Union. This ban continued until the late 1980s, but sometime in between it was toughened up to include even some anti-Trotsky material. Publications with titles like *Trotskyists: Enemies of the People* and *Trotskyist-Bukharinist Bandits* also became proscribed reading.

The censors published an extraordinary volume entitled *Summary List of Books Not Available in Libraries and the Book Trade Network*. It contained hundreds of pages in small print, 'for official use only', listing alphabetically the publications that were banned. A friend of mine, the manager of an antiquarian bookshop in Leningrad in the 1960s, told me that he remembered well the twice-monthly visits of a matronly lady from the censorship bureau, who spent hours rifling through the thousands of books on his shelves, checking them against her latest copy of the *Summary List* (which was always being updated). Those volumes found to be unacceptable were put in a special garbage can at the back of the store.

There were three possible destinations for this 'garbage'. The happiest one was when rare and interesting volumes found their way quietly into the many fabulous private libraries assembled, sometimes at great personal risk, by bibliophiles or lovers of history. The unhappiest destination was the shredder. So many beautifully produced books and rare manuscripts ended up there during the 1960s because of the boorish campaign of *Makulatura* (book pulping). Ostensibly due to a shortage of newsprint, a system was introduced whereby old books and papers would be weighed and exchanged at a fixed rate for a few rubles or, say, a new copy of an



The photograph as it appeared in V.I. Lenin in the Art of Photography, Moscow, 1967. Trotsky and Kamenev have been airbrushed out, as also Khalatov (bearded, in front of the child and Trotsky in the original), one-time Commissar of publishing, eliminated in the 1937 purge

an *ad hoc* basis. Orders were followed, quietly. A word in an editor's ear or a discreet telephone conversation from a 'higher authority' was sufficient to eliminate all further reference, visual or literal, to a victim, no matter how famous she or he had been.

Faking photographs was probably considered one of the more enjoyable tasks for the art department of publishing houses during those times. It was certainly much subtler than the 'slash-and-burn' approach of the censors. For example, with a sharp scalpel, an incision could be made along the leading edge of the image of the person or object adjacent to the one who had to be removed. With the help of some glue, the first could simply be stuck down on top of the second. A little paint or ink was then carefully brushed around the cut edges and background of the picture to hide the joins. Likewise, two or more photographs could be cannibalised into one using the same method. Alternatively, an airbrush (an ink-jet gun powered by a cylinder of compressed air) could be used to spray clouds of ink or paint onto the unfortunate victim in the picture. The hazy edges achieved by the spray made the elimination of the subject less noticeable than crude knifework.

Many photographic deletions were not the result of retouching at all but of straightforward cropping. Art departments have always cropped photographs on aesthetic grounds, but in the Soviet Union cropping was also used with political objectives in mind. The subtraction of Stalin's enemies, and even some of his friends, was one problem, but for the General Secretary, addition - the addition of himself - was another. From the time of his birth in 1879 until he was appointed General Secretary in 1922, there probably exist fewer than a dozen photo-

graphs of him. For a man who claimed to be the standard-bearer of the Communist movement, this caused grave embarrassment, which could only be overcome by painting and sculpture. Impressionism, expressionism, abstraction - for Stalin, none of these artistic movements was capable of showing his image properly. So he made realism - socialist realism - the central foundation of the Stalin cult. A whole art industry painted Stalin into places and events where he had never been, glorifying him, mythologising him. Sculpture worked well for him, too. The bronze Stalin, the marble Stalin, were invulnerable to the bullets of the 'Zinovievite bandits'. The flesh and blood Stalin could safely stay out of the public gaze. Sculpture became the real Stalin - heavy, ponderous, immortal.

The range of photographic falsification

Skilful photographic retouching for reproduction depended, like any craft before the advent of computer technology, on the skill of the person carrying out the task and the time she or he had to complete it. But why was the standard of retouching in Soviet books and journals often so crude? Did the Stalinists want their readers to see that elimination had taken place, as a fearful and ominous warning? Or could the slightest trace of an almost vanished commissar, deliberately left behind by the retoucher, become a ghostly reminder that the repressed might yet return?

David King is the author of *The Commissar Vanishes*, Canongate Books, 1997 (ISBN 0 86241 724 4). This article is adapted from the Introduction to that volume and published here with the permission of the author. The David King Collection includes some 250,000 images of Russia, 1900-60.