Fig. 01

Fig. 02

Fig. 03

Unpersons and Untruth: Reality, Photography, and the Manipulation of Stalinism

The above photo (fig.01) was taken on November 07, 1919, by Leo Ya Leonidov.[1] The image shows the celebrations of the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution in the Red Square. The central figure in the dark coat is Vladimir Lenin. To his right, Leon Trotsky and Lev Kamenev are visible. In a later version of the photo, (fig. 02, magnified inlay in fig.03) Kamenev and Trotsky have been airbrushed out and replaced by a blurry blob.[2] Around the same time of this manipulation, an unknown Soviet civilian defaced this portrait of Kamenev (fig. 04) using purple ink to obscure his name and likeness.[3] Implicit in these images is the reality crisis Stalin's regime faced.

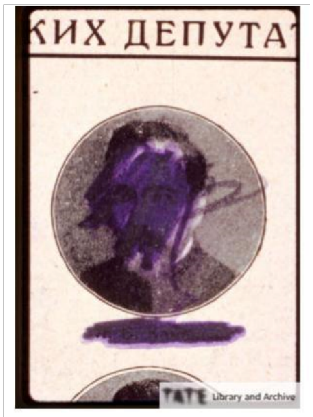

Fig. 04

Under Stalin, the state sought total control over the lives of its citizens in pursuit of its own survival. It pursued this goal through several means, most obviously the violent repression of any real or perceived dissent. More insidious, however, was the state's attempts at control through the rewriting of reality. The Soviet Union emerged from actions driven by idealism. As living conditions under Soviet rule only worsened, a strong sense of idealism was key to the fabric that unified the state and subdued uprisings from the people. The state fed this sense of optimism by projecting outward an unflawed persona. Doing so was necessary to the regime's continued rule, and perhaps, to the survival of the Soviet

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[1] Figure 01: *Image No. DK0671,* 1919, Leo Ya Leonidov. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archive 2016. [2]

Figure 02: *Image No. DK0673,* 1919, Leo Ya Leonidov. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archive 2016. Figure 03: *Image No. DK0674,* 1919, Leo Ya Leonidov. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archive 2016. [3]

Figure 04: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/51,* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archive 2016.

experiment. To accomplish such a goal, Stalin's regime relied on the power of a key tool in its arsenal: the photograph. As Stalin's Great Purge (1936-38) removed more and more leaders from office, so too it removed them from the visible record. Using airbrushing, cropping, and photomontage techniques, the state changed photographs to present a clean, idealized image to the public, one that was unblemished by denounced individuals. These images played into the larger mission of rewriting reality itself to portray the state in a utopian frame.

The state's mission of maintaining control over the population via maintaining control over reality was only possible, however, if the people subscribed to the new realities that were being disseminated. In other words, in order for the state to succeed and survive, it needed the people to publicly perform an acceptance of the alternate reality that the state fabricated, even if they privately did not believe it. In this way, the state's goal of controlling reality was intimately tied to the terror that Stalin's regime enacted: the threat of violence was used as an impetus to coerce the population into performing belief in the new constructed realities. This control was so absolute that civilians began to manipulate their personal images not only of denounced political leaders, but also those of family and friends who had been deemed enemies of the state, in accordance with the official version of reality. The methods of manipulation were different for private civilians than they were within the state, however. For a citizen, far less sophisticated methods of editing were available, which meant that those who defaced their own photographs did so using rudimentary means like cutting individuals out of images, scratching or blacking out their faces, or ripping parts of the photograph.

When examined in conversation with the images manipulated by the state, these photographs reveal what Leah Dickerman describes as a deep "anxiety about presence." [1] The state was concerned

[1] Dickerman, Leah. Review of *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* by David King, *The Art Bulletin*, Dec 1998, 02.

about the presence of denounced individuals tainting its public image and weakening the hold over the people and thus had to remove them. But the fact that the people acted similarly meant that the photographic manipulations of reality did not simply occur from the top-down. The civilians, too, had concerns about unwanted presences in their photographs. As a result, they also engaged in the practice of manipulating photographs, which put the state and the people in conversation with each other. The state initiated the dialog, certainly, but civilians were compelled to participate in it as well. This, in turn, further compelled the state to maintain their false narrative, thus continuing the conversation of true reality and false reality.

There is a certain level of absurdity to these practices of manipulation and erasure. Those whose likeness was damaged or erased still clearly existed, both in the real world and underneath the scribble on the photo. And yet, the civilians within the Soviet Union were forced to live in a bizarre mixed reality, one in which they knew the false narrative of the state was not real, and yet that narrative was the truth of the reality they were living in. Further, because this new narrative was one that the state was enforcing, it also became the narrative that the people themselves propagated, undertaking the same actions as the state, albeit in a much less sophisticated way. As a result, the civilians themselves contributed to the new irreality that clouded life under Stalin's rule. The state performed to the people, and the people mirrored back the state's actions in their own performance. In this dance, each actor was performing to the other side because, ultimately, the state and the people had the same goal: survival.

Such an argument naturally draws upon both semiotics and structuralist theory, as well as a Marxist theory. In their own way, these schools of thought both set forth the idea that images can shape reality. Marxist theorists have put forth the idea that images can shape not only opinions, but also history.[2] Of course, history shapes the way an image is viewed, but the image can also shape the way one views

[2] Goldstein, Philip. 1980. *The Politics of Literary Theory: An Introduction to Marxist Criticism.* Tallahassee: The Florida State University. Ghosh, Chilka. "Visual Art, Realism, and the Issue of Taste." *Social Scientist,* 41 (2013).
[6] Bal, Mieke, and Norman Bryson. 1991. "Semiotics and Art History." *The Art Bulletin,* 73 (2): 174–208. https://doi.org/10.2307/3045790.

history. In such an analysis, one must consider not only who the maker of an image is, but also the receiver. Structuralist theory poses similar philosophies, particularly the semiotic and linguistic discourses of the 1960s.[6] Under this framework, any primary text (language, images, etc.) is deliberately constructed to make meaning, both by the maker and the receiver. These two theoretical frameworks highlight just how unstable texts and images can be.

Two trends in Stalinist historiography make possible a new approach. Recent and ongoing work on Stalinism draws upon these theories to suggest that at the heart of Stalinism is a contorted relationship to reality.[7] Within this emerging subfield, however, there has yet to be any analysis on the part photographs played in creating a Stalinist reality. In fact, the historiography is relatively sparse in analyzing photography's role in the Soviet Union at all, though recent scholarship points towards an ongoing trend in this direction.[8] The books in this subfield individually probe into the role different genres of photographs played in Stalin's regime. However, there has yet to be any analysis which puts these types of images in conversation with each other. As the field sits today, these genres have been siloed.

What I aim to do in my analysis is to bridge this gap in the historiography by examining several subs genres of photography simultaneously through Marxist and structuralist lenses. I will look first at photographs that have been manipulated by the state, examining how the regime edited images to remove individuals that had been denounced. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the state attempted to rewrite the reality of the Soviet Union, idealizing the state to an unblemished form. I will then consider the way civilians reacted to these attempts. Focusing on both political and personal photographs that have been defaced by civilians, I will argue that civilians were performing belief in the state's false reality. In making my argument, I will draw primarily upon photographs. Visual evidence is certainly more open to interpretation than other forms of primary sources. However, these images are still compelling, even if they are not explicit in what they illustrate of the past. Ultimately, this analysis will demonstrate that

within the Soviet Union, the practice of manipulating photographs created a feedback loop of defacement between the state and the people, one in which the state created content which the people responded to,

[7] Brooks, Jeffrey. *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War.* (Princeton University Press, 2000). Ryan, James. *The Limits of Utopia: An Intellectual History of Soviet State Violence, 1917-1939* (Forthcoming). Ryan, James. "Keeping It Real. Or, What Was Stalinism, Exactly?" *History@Cardiff* (blog). 2024. https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/history-at-cardiff/keeping-it-real-or-what-was-stalinism-exactly/. [8] King, David. *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia,* (Metropolitan Books, 1997).. Skopin, Denis. *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia: Defacing the Enemy,* (Routledge, 2022). Shevchenko, Olga and Sarkisova, Oksana, *In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos,* (The MIT Press, 2023).

and the people's response fed back to the state. This process resulted in a society in which the concept of reality itself was multi-layered, contradictory, and unstable.

State Manipulation:

During the formation of the Soviet Union, developments in printing technology and photomechanical reproduction converged, so that by the time Stalin took power, a new mass media culture was primed to saturate society with photographic images.[3] Under Stalin's regime, the Soviet state sought to use this tool as a way to control reality. It did so by using photographs to gather knowledge, and by distributing photographs as propaganda to promote a particular version of reality to Soviet civilians. These two mechanisms can be thought of as the internal and external uses of photography. However, this compulsion of the state to create an unblemished image of itself extended much further than simply publicizing photos that depicted a particular narrative.

As the number of people who were deemed enemies of the state grew during Stalin's Great Purges, a new problem arose in the state's mission of maintaining this appearance of perfection. Photographic realities captured snapshots of the truth of the past, quite effectively sealing the close connection between leaders that had been denounced and those who were still in power. Thus, these images had to be manipulated to remove these denounced individuals' likeness, as part of a larger effort to

[3] Dickerman, Leah. "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography," *October,* 93 (2000), 03.

completely strike their existence from the record. Stalin's regime therefore included a group of photo retouchers and censors [4] whose responsibility was to use the tools at their disposal, particularly airbrushing, cropping, and photomontage, to alter photographs so it appeared as though these denounced individuals were never there. In this way, the manipulation of photography in Stalin's regime provided the basis for George Orwell's concept of an 'unperson' — a political enemy who was secretly murdered and then erased from society. [11] In Stalin's Russia, denounced individuals became literal unpersons, who existed in true reality, but did not exist within the living reality of Soviet society.

The phenomenon of state-edited photographs became well-known through David King's seminal work *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia.* Though relatively light on textual analysis, King's life-work of collecting photographs is masterfully arranged in this volume to illustrate a clear story of the photographic manipulation that took place within Stalin's regime. Little is known about who the individuals behind the most well-known edited photographs were. It is hypothesized that there was an industry or ministry which undertook such work, [12] though King disagrees with this theory. He argues that because these images were found originating from many locations, "photographic manipulation worked very much on an ad hoc basis." [13] In the system King puts forward, discreet conversations with editors at publishing houses provided the instructions to eliminate all traces of an unperson, no matter how important or well-known the figure had been before their denouncement.

Following such instructions, airbrushers, scissormen, and montagists did work to clean up outward facing photos for the most trivial of perceived offenses, including changing the text of political banners to fall in line with Stalinist thinking, or remove litter from the streets in front of major party leaders. Such use of photography also extended to far more grave manipulations; photos were a key piece of evidence in the regime's falsification of the Katyn massacre, for example. [14] All of these forms of manipulation are representative of this larger process of controlling reality as a means of survival and provide rich grounds

[4] Blakemore, Erin. "How Photos Became a Weapon in Stalin's Great Purge," *History,* (2022). https://www.history.com/news/josef-stalin-great-purge-photo-retouching

for further analysis. However, for the sake of this project, I will be restricting my analysis to one specific subsection of these edited photographs: those which were manipulated to remove denounced individuals.

Certainly, Stalin's regime was not the only one to attempt to erase political enemies from the record, nor was it the only one to do so using manipulated images. The most well-known instance of such

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[11] Orwell, George. *1984* (Secker & Warburg, 1949).

[12] Beichman, "Stalin's Photoshop: Cropping History in the U.S.S.R.".

[13] King, *The Commissar Vanishes,* 13.

[14] Chan, "Refractions of Katyn: Photography and Witnessing in Soviet Investigations of Mass Atrocities" *Slavic Review,* 83 (2024): 211-231. I'd like to offer particular thanks to Paula Chan for generously providing a copy of this article to me for use prior to publication.

action would be in Ancient Rome, where attempts by senators and emperors to remove the legacy of predecessors included the defacement of mosaics and statues of former figures. Such attempts to create historical unpersons led to the later coining of the Latin phrase *"damnatio memoriae,"* literally "damnation of memory," which refers to portraits that have been defaced in political attempts to create literal unpersons.[15] However, in other societies, these attempts to erase a person from historical reality were largely unsuccessful and incredibly rare, unlike under Stalin's rule, where they abounded and were strictly enforced. As a result of the Great Purge, there was an incredibly high number of denounced individuals who had to be removed from the record. Estimates place the number of individuals arrested by the NKVD, the Secret Police, during the Great Terror alone at around 1,575,000.[16] Stalin's regime was meticulous in using sophisticated techniques to remove all visual evidence of these unpersons. Doing so was paramount to the state's ultimate mission of maintaining control, upholding its untainted outward persona, and ensuring its own survival, and the state pursued its goal with complete totality. The extent to which civilians were involved in this process, and the cyclical nature of performance that resulted, were unique to the Soviet Union. Such methods of visual manipulation of reality were paired with extraordinary violence. Of those arrested during the Great Terror, at least 681,692 were executed.[17] This violence further differentiates the *damnatio memoriae* of Stalin's regime from other examples of edited or

defaced imagery. Within this regime, all of these factors combined to create a segmented, multilayered reality, one which was being constantly rewritten by both the people and the state. In this world, each side performed belief in the rewritten narrative of Soviet existence. Doing so reaffirmed the truth of the false reality.

While several examples of Stalinist *damnatio memoriae* are well-recognized, largely due to King's book, there remains little critical analysis on these images, or what they meant to the regime on a greater scale. In short, these images are well-known, but not well-explored. One such example, perhaps

[15] Other well-known examples include the Nazi party, which published manipulated photos as propaganda, and communist regimes in China and North Korea, both of which have utilized photo-editing technologies to alter the appearance of dictators. This phenomenon is also not isolated only to totalitarian rule. During the American Civil War, photos of Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln were edited to make the leaders look more heroic. [16] Courtois, Stephanie, et. al. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression,* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 190. [17] Ibid, 190.

the most explicit demonstration of the removal of individuals from state photographs, comes in the form of a series of five images, each a new iteration of the same initial photograph. [5]

Fig. 05

Fig. 06

Fig. 07

Fig. 08

Fig. 09

[5] Figure 05: *Image No. M04642,* 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archive 2016. Figure 06: *Image No. DK0683.* 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 07: *Image No. DK0663.* 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 08: *Image No. DK0667.* 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 09: *Image No. DK0670.* 1929, Isaak Brosky. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. [19] The final version of this image is actually an oil painting, a different type of manipulation best explored by Leah Dickerman in her article "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography."

The manipulation of this image is so dramatic that the image itself is transformed from a horizontal photograph to a vertical one. The original image, (fig. 05) taken by an unknown photographer in Leningrad in 1929, shows, from left to right, Nikolai Antipov, Joseph Stalin, Sergei Kirov, Nikolay Shvernik, and an unidentified man, celebrating the destruction of the anti-Stalin opposition led by Grigory Zinoviev. Each successive image removed one individual from the group, until, in the final version, (fig. 09) Stalin stands alone. [19] The first to be erased was the unnamed man in a copy from 1929, likely the initial published version of the image (fig. 06). The third version of the image was published in the book *History of the USSR* in Moscow in 1940 (fig. 07). By this time, Antipov had been expelled from the Communist party and executed and therefore was cropped out of existence.

In 1949, a fourth version of the image (fig. 08) appeared in the book *Joseph Stalin: A Short Biography*, published in Moscow. This iteration is different from its predecessors in it is the first to airbrush an individual out as opposed to simply cropping them out of frame. Upon close examination, the blurry shadows behind Kirov are a subtle signifier of this manipulation. [20] It is Shvernik who has been removed from this image, although not because he became an unperson. Indeed, Shvernik remained a political official loyal to Stalin until Stalin's death in 1953. He died of old age in 1970, and his urn was placed in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis, a high honor. Nevertheless, his presence is missing from the 1949 version of this photo. In the book this version appeared in, the image is included in a section describing the power struggle that ensued following Lenin's death. It is captioned "J. Stalin and S. Kirov. Leningrad 1926." [21] According to this caption, the image was taken three years earlier than it actually was, a ffact that when paired with the context of the surrounding text, suggests that Stalin and Kirov were close allies in the fight to take power over the Soviet Union. As Kirov was a well-known Bolshevik revolutionary and Soviet hero, such an image would have lent retrospective legitimacy to Stalin's rise to power. [22] Through Shvernik's removal, we begin to see a spectrum of the types of manipulation that were being done: he was removed not because his presence dirtied the remaining figures, but because his removal could help *elevate* the status of the remaining figures.

There is a wealth of other doctored images to draw upon as examples of this phenomenon, many of which utilize incredibly sophisticated techniques. This pair of images [23] are perhaps the most iconic of Stalin's manipulations, and for good reason. The original photo was taken in April 1937 by Soviet war correspondent Fedor Ivanovich Kislov (fig. 10.) It shows Kliment Voroshilov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin, and Nikolai Yezhov walking alongside the Moscow-Volga Canal. In the manipulated version following Yezhov's secret execution, Yezhov was removed (fig. 11). [6] The attention to detail in the retouched image is striking, and it is perhaps the most sophisticated example of Soviet *damnatio memoriae* known to date. Incredible focus was given to fill in the appearance of the railing, and to make the water appear seamless. In the invisible absence in this image, the anxiety about presence that the state was feeling becomes clear. Yezhov was not replaced with a blurry blob of airbrushing or cropped out if the image semi-awkwardly. He was painstakingly edited out and replaced in a way that is nearly flawless; if we did not have the original image for comparison, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to believe Yezhov was ever present in this image.

Above: Fig. 10
Below: Fig. 11

[20] In this image, too, the retouching to Stalin's face starts to become more apparent; his skin is unnaturally smooth. Indeed, the dictator was incredibly vain, and often had portraits edited to remove his pockmarks and wrinkles. Such manipulation, worthy of a book on its own, demonstrates a different way Stalin tried to alter reality.

[21] Author Unknown, *Joseph Stalin: A Short Biography,* (Foreign Languages Publishing House Moscow, 1949), 103.

[22] Similar manipulations were done to make it appear as though Stalin and Lenin had a much closer relationship than they did in reality, with the same goal of bolstering Stalin's legitimacy as a ruler. This idea is explored further in King's *The Commissar Vanishes,* and Dickerman's "Camera Obscura."

[23] Figure 10: *Image No. DK0736.* 1937, Fedor Kislov. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 11: *Image No. DK0737.* 1937, Fedor Kislov. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

[6] Yezhov has the posthumous honor of being among the best-known examples of an unperson. He was removed from so many official press images that he has gained the nickname "The Vanishing Commissar" among art historians.

The manipulation of these images was paramount to the state, because the removal of these denounced individuals was necessary to maintain the appearance of a flawless state. The regime's very survival hinged on its ability to maintain power, and for Stalin, a keyway of maintaining power was through public narrative. Photographs could be manipulated to legitimize that narrative, thus lending power to the state. And yet, in some instances, that narrative trapped the regime.[7] This group portrait was taken at the 14th Party Conference in April, 1925, by an unknown photographer (fig.12.) All of the men here are top Soviet politicians, military leaders, and party members. From left to right, it includes, Mikhail Lashevich, Mikhail Frunze, Ivan Nikitich Smirnov, Alexei Rykov, Kliment Voroshilov, Stalin, Nikolai Skrypnik, Andrei Bubnov, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, and Josef Unschlicht. In a version of the photo published in 1939, only four of these men remain: Frunze, Voroshilov, Stalin, and Ordzhonikidze (fig.13.) Of the ten men in the original image, only two died of natural causes. The other eight died due to execution, suicide, or under suspicious circumstances.

Above: Fig. 12
Below: Fig. 13

The manipulation in the 1939 version of this image is notable because of the advanced technique displayed in the removal of unpersons. Much like in figure 11, the editing done in this image was not simply a matter of cropping people out. Rather, individuals were moved closer to the center of the image and repositioned in front of the background. The shadows of the remaining men had to be corrected, and the shadows of the missing men had to be removed. Despite the complications of such manipulations, there is little to signify that the photograph has been edited when looking at the 1939 version in isolation, demonstrating the advanced methods and skill of Stalin's editors. The time and effort put into making such manipulations nearly invisible also goes to show the state's dedication to maintaining its unblemished image. Though the 1925 version of the image was likely published, great lengths were taken to make the

[7] Figure 12: *Image No. DK0877.* 1925, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.
Figure 13: *Image No. DK0878*. 1925, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

1939 image seem completely real, natural, and unedited. By publishing this new version, the state was visibly, publicly performing to the people that this rewritten reality was the only reality.

However, this image is also notable because of other choices made by the regime, particularly who is untouched in this image. Each removed individual had fallen out of Stalin's favor by 1939 and thus was forcibly removed from life and from the record by Stalin's regime. Yet Sergo Ordzhonikidze remains. Ordzhonikidze was a member of the Politburo, and, at the time of his death, was the People's Commissar of Heavy Industry. In the months leading up to his death in 1937, he disagreed with Stalin on a number of issues. The day before his death, the NKVD searched Ordzhonikidze's house, after which he had an argument with Stalin on the phone, and on February 18, 1937, Ordzhonikidze was dead. The actual cause of his death is suspicious - likely a gunshot wound, potentially suicide - but official reports stated that he died as the result of a heart attack.[8] This is because while Ordzhonikidze had fallen out of favor with Stalin internally, to the public, he was still a revered national leader; he had not been officially denounced and purged. As a result, the regime had to disguise not only Ordzhonikidze's true cause of death but also had to maintain his positive legacy publicly.[9]

This lie had a cost for the regime. Ordzhonikidze remains in the photograph in 1939, despite the fact that he had fallen out of favor with Stalin as early as 1936, because the state was trapped by its own need to maintain an unblemished appearance. In order to do so, the state had to knowingly uphold the lie of the heart attack. This broke the norm for the state; the regime was forced to preserve the image of Ordzhonikidze as a public hero, leaving him in the image, despite the fact that he had become an inner outcast who would usually have been removed and turned into an unperson. In this instance, it becomes clear the extent the state was willing to go to perform its manipulated reality to the public. Ordhonikidze's

[8] Krushchev's 'Secret Speech' was the first public declaration of Ordzhonikidze's death as a suicide. However, other recollections of the true nature of his demise differ significantly. For further details, please refer to Vladimir L. Bobrov's written remarks titled "The Mystery of Ordzhonikidze's Death."

[9] Khlevniuk, Oleg V, David J Nordlander, and Donald J Raleigh. *In Stalin's Shadow: Career of Sergo Ordzhonikidze*. (Routledge, 2015). Kotkin, Stephen. *Stalin, Volume II: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941.* (Penguin Books, 2018).

presence also implies that the civilians had an impact on the state. The regime believed that the people had acceded to its false narratives. That the people were defacing their own images to remove denounced individuals likely played a role in this. As a result, the state was forced to keep going with its own performances.

The complications of reality within this single image further underscores the constant excess of untruths that made life under Stalinism difficult to navigate. For a high-ranking member of the party, the very fact of Ordzhonikidze existed differently in different circles. Where the public was concerned, the late leader was a great man, who died tragically. When speaking in private circles, particularly in Stalin's presence, reality looked very different. The different versions of truth had to be carefully kept track of, in order to avoid any slip-ups, which could have had dastardly consequences regardless of which unreality was violated. This was a world in which people had to endure what Robert Conquest called a "continuous barrage of untruth."[10] Existing within and navigating these varying, contradicting, simultaneous realities must have had a profound psychological effect on those within the Soviet top-tier. In a state where literal reality was constantly being rewritten, it was likely often difficult to understand what reality itself meant, or what the truth was. It stands to reason, further, that for civilians without full knowledge of the actual truth, these unrealities were even more disorienting and surreal.

Civilian Manipulation:

Indeed, across the Soviet Union, the same phenomenon of unpersoning through photographic manipulation simultaneously was at work at the civilian level. In actions that almost directly mirrored those of the state, civilians too attempted to alter reality through editing photographs, marking up their albums of political leaders and even personal portraits of family and friends to erase denounced individuals. This activity is the focus of Denis Skopin's recent book *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia*.[11] In this groundbreaking work, Skopin explores the phenomenon of Soviet civilians defacing their

[10] Conquest, Robert. "Inside Stalin's Darkroom," review of *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia,* by David King. *Hoover Institution,* 1998, 01.
[11] Skopin, *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia.*

own private images, and the fears that motivated them to do so. What Skopin does not fully explore, however, is that such action, while certainly a method of self-preservation, was also incredibly performative. Civilians went through such lengths to manipulate these portraits — to rewrite historical and parasocial reality — because they believed that was what the state wanted. Particularly in cases of edited personal photographs, the individuals involved knew what the truth the photographs had captured was, anticipated the regime's reaction to such a truth, and acted accordingly. However, the methods of defacement serve not to obscure the truth wholly, but to highlight the falsity the civilian was attempting to create.

Doctoring images was generally safer than simply disposing of the entire page of a family photo book or political album (an anthology of photos of political leaders created and distributed for propaganda purposes) or burning the complete photograph. Keeping a photo of an enemy of the state was considered a serious crime under Stalin's regime. Starting in 1926, such an act was punishable by up to ten years imprisonment under Article 58.10, after which such offenders constituted over a quarter of the Gulag population. An individual who owned a political album that contained denounced former leaders was therefore in danger by keeping the portrait intact. However, in political albums, photos were printed onto both sides of the page. The page with the unperson itself likely contained other images of political leaders who had not been denounced. Under Article 58.10, damaging these leaders' portraits was an even more grave offense, punishable by imprisonment or even death.[30] For these reasons, a civilian would have chosen to erase a portrait of a single denounced leader through one of the methods above instead of removing the full page, because doing so allowed the civilian to balance the fine line of legality in this brutally repressive system. Such reasoning extended to personal photographs as well. The very survival of civilians could hinge on something as quotidian as a picture of a group of friends. In an interview conducted by Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevenko, for example, a man recalled his grandmother hiding a photograph of her with Chinese trainees at a Vladimir factory, due to the fact that "she could come into a lot of trouble for being in a picture" with foreigners, even ones from a 'friendly' socialist country.[31] Such action was necessary, even within the home, because in this world of terror and control, there was

no such thing as a truly private sphere. Rather, there was only a gradient of how public different spaces were.[32] As a result, the people turned to removing unpersons from their own images, using whatever crude methods were available to them.

The defacements explored below are incredibly visible: scribbles, swaths of black and colored ink, and sections of images cut out stand out clearly against the backdrop of the rest of the page. In a way, they highlight the disrupted presence of individuals, rather than removing it. As a result, the civilian succeeds even less than the state in rewriting reality. Rather, they succeed in demonstrating that they were *attempting* to obscure or rewrite reality. Even though these images were kept in the home, the act of defacing such portraits was done with the intention and assumption that there would be outside viewership of such manipulation. Through undertaking such manipulation, a civilian would have conveyed to outside viewers that they were aware of the deemed wrongdoing a denounced individual had committed, that the civilian agreed with the punishment the individual faced, and therefore, that the civilian deserved no punishment themself.

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[30] Skopin, *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia,* 16.

[31] Sarkisova and Shevenko, *In Visible Presence,* 206.

[32] Fitzpatrick, Sheila "Conversations and Listeners," in *Everyday Stalinism: Soviet Russia in the 1930s,* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Take, for example, this portrait of Lev Kamenev (fig.14). [12] While exact details of the origins of this photo is unknown, I have been able to determine that this portrait, as well as the others in this section, was initially printed alongside portraits of other political leaders in what was known as a 'political album.' Such an album would have been used to depict Soviet leaders as great heroic figures, propagating the narrative of the state as perfect. This inference is supported both by the information left in Tate archive holdings describing the images' cataloging, which list the photos as being sourced from political albums, and also by the fact that the same portrait was found multiple times across the Soviet Union by David King throughout his years collecting and cataloging Soviet materials. At some point following Kamenev's execution a civilian defaced this image, and later, the NKVD took the album this photo wasin as evidence. Based on the date of Kamenev's execution we can effectively date the defacement to have happened after August 1936, during the height of the Great Terror. The method of defacement is what indicates that it was a civilian who blacked out the portrait and name, and the fact that the album was found by King in secret police holdings indicate that the civilian was taken in for questioning and that suspect items from their personal belongings were collected as evidence.

Fig. 14

In this image, the facial features and the name appear to be colored over twice, first with a dark blue or purple crayon, and then again with a black one. The process of coloring over Kamenev's face and name was done quickly and inaccurately; some of Kamenev's features remain visible, and the markings are sloppy. The attack is focused on Kamenev's face, and not his entire figure, another indicator that the individual who defaced this image was in a rush to do so. The hasty process shown here is likely that of a panicked individual trying to expunge suspicion away from themself prior to an arrest. In short, this individual defaced this image in an attempt to erase Kamenev from the record, performing back to the state belief in its rewritten reality in order to try to secure personal safety.

[12] Figure 14: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/45*. Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

There is further evidence that it was indeed civilians who undertook such action and not state actors. Such defaced portraits have been found in high numbers — the David King Collection alone contains over 260 — suggesting how widespread these practices were. Furthermore, it is well-documented by actual civilians both that they defaced these images in these ways, and their reasoning behind doing so. In his documentary novel *Babi Yar,* Anatoly Kuznetsov recounts being instructed to mark out portraits in his textbooks. He recalls that "in class one day, we were ordered to open our textbooks at the page with a portrait of Postyshev on it and tear it out — Postyshev had turned out to be an enemy of the people."[13] While these instructions were shocking at first, "it immediately became a matter of routine, something quite ordinary and useful. Sometimes we would be ordered to tear out other pages, on other occasions to cross out certain sentences or names."[14] This recollection indicates that such instances of defacement were not driven solely from personal fears. Instead, in this memory, we see the power of the state being directly applied. Such lessons of how to manipulate historic reality were taught to children by their educators in school. These lessons were then brought home, to intertwine with the manipulations already occurring internally that were motivated by fear. In this way, Soviet children were indoctrinated to be more malleable, to believe such revisions of reality were a normal part of life, and to not question the attempts to remove entire individuals from public memory. Such lessons made it even easier for the state to create not simply the performance of belief in such narratives, but true subscription to the narratives of rewritten reality.

At the same time, civilians were taking such actions independently of such explicit state instruction. Instead, defacement was driven by fears of imminent arrest, as explored in the case of figure 14. These various motivations intertwined, leading to widespread instances of civilian defacement. As a result, other portraits found by King across the former Soviet Union tell similar stories to the portrait of Kamenev explored above. Figure 15 for example, is nearly identical to figure 14; it is the exact same portrait, found by King, defaced in the same way.[36] Quite similarly, figure 16 is a portrait of Trotsky, found

[13] Kuznetsov, Anatoli. *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel.* Translated by David Floyd. (New York Pocket Books, 1971), 116.
[14] Ibid, 116.

Fig 15

Fig. 16

in a different political album.[37] Though the text captioning this portrait is cut off, we can determine from what is visible that the page of this album is devoted to the October Revolution. Figure 17 differs slightly in its use of jet-black ink to erase the likeness of Dzhakhon Abidova, as well as her name.[38] The rest of the text, written in Uzbek Cyrillic, lists her former title, Deputy Chairman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. The black ink is more effective in obscuring Abidova's likeness than other mediums used here, but the nature of these attempts to create *damnatio memoriae* remain the same: civilians attempted to enforce the creation of unpersons by coloring over portraits of denounced individuals.

Fig. 17

Other methods of defacement were also common. Scratching out the likeness of a political offender was an effective way of defacement, as one could easily remove the entire likeness without worrying about features remaining visible through ink. Figure 18 shows a portrait of Trotsky reading *Pravda* (the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union).[39] In a different copy of the same portrait, Trotsky's face has been scratched out with some kind of sharp implement, so that his likeness is no longer visible (figure 19).[40] In this

Fig. 18

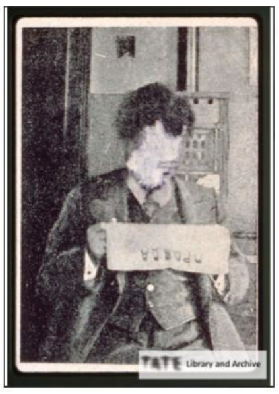

Fig. 19

36

Figure 15: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/40.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. 37

Figure 16: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/161.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. 38

Figure 17: *Image No. DK0337.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

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Figure 18: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/133.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. [40]

Figure 19: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/137.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King

by Tate
Archives 2016.

example, the civilian defacing the image took more care to remove Trotsky's features; the defacement is contained relatively neatly along the lines of his face and chin and even follow the swoop of Trotsky's hair along his forehead. It is likely that this individual was in less of a rush to remove this unperson from their political album than in other instances explored above, or even than the individual who scratched out Kamenev's likeness in figure 20.[15] Compared to figure 19, this image of Kamenev shows higher levels of panic. The scratching is not contained neatly within the lines of Kamenev's face or across his name. In some places, the individual has scratched with such force that the paper has nearly ripped — for example, on Kamenev's forehead, and the second part of his name, where the dark tone of the paper indicates that it has been nearly worn through. For these reasons, it is plausible to suggest that the individual who scratched out Trotsky's face in figure 19 was following Soviet protocol and going through their materials at home to remove all unpersons in an orderly fashion. The civilian behind the defacement of figure 20, on the other hand, was likely another panicked individual, hastily trying to lessen the implications of criminal activity. This gradient of implied fear suggests that it was not solely fear of violent repercussions that motivated individuals to deface images in this way. Rather, such fear only affected the execution of the defacement.

Fig. 20

Indeed, not all cases of defacement suggest an individual who, fearful of a potentially imminent arrest, was attempting to reduce their culpability in the eyes of the regime. In some cases, individuals made lazy attempts to expurgate denounced individuals' portraits in such ways that indicate that doing so was a purely performative action, done for no purpose other than to demonstrate to any outside viewer that the civilian had done it at all. Figure 21, for example, is yet another copy of Kamenev's portrait from our initial political album.[16] Indeed, the extent to which multiple copies of this same image have been found and defaced in similar ways implies the extent to which practices described above were

[15] Figure 20: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/56.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.
[16] Figure 21: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/35.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

widespread. But this copy has been defaced in a very different way than the others explored above. Kamenev's name

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

appears to have been colored over several times with different methods, including what looks to be ink and pencil, but none succeeded in actually hiding the name. Instead, the pale blue color highlights the name on the page. At some point, the owner of this book also made an attempt to scrawl over Kamenev's face with pencil, though the effort was lazily completed. In effect, Kamenev's likeness has not been removed from the page whatsoever.

Figure 22 underwent similar treatment with even less commitment to proper removal; the civilian who defaced this copy of the portrait didn't even bother to lightly scrawl over Kamenev's face.[17] In all the instances of defacement explored here, there is an element of the performative; such action was likely done under the assumption that an outsider would be viewing these portraits and expecting them to be defaced. But these last two examples truly highlight the purely demonstrative actions taken. The action taken was completely ineffective, and in no way conceals the likeness of these unpersons. As viewers, we are left to ask why someone would have taken such action. Was this defacement accidental? Did the individual think this would suffice as performed belief? Was this person's heart not in this action? Perhaps this civilian was simply in good standing with their local official? It seems as though the individual behind this defacement was not seriously concerned with actually removing Kamenev's likeness from the page. If they had been, surely, they would have at least used the blue ink to try to color over the face, if not a different, more effective method. Instead, the purpose of such action was more likely simply so that the civilian who owned this album could point to this defacement and show that they made an attempt to carry out the duties of a proper Soviet citizen by removing traitorous portraits, because this is defacement that

[17] Figure 22: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/43.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

doesn't actually deface. It is unlikely that we will ever truly know the motivations behind this defacement, but the halfhearted scribbling seems to be additional evidence of a performative motivation behind such action. This defacement also indicates that people were wrestling with the idea of what reality was in this world of untruths and unpersons.

Such manipulation was not only applied to portraits of well-known political figures. In many cases, civilians performed similar treatments on their personal photographs of family members and friends. It is in this sphere that the idea of the photograph as reality becomes even more important. For a private individual, a photograph serves as an affirmation of self-identity. A photo of a student on graduation day, diploma in hand, for example, affirms the identity of that person as a successful scholar. A photo of two friends standing arm-in-arm similarly cements that relationship as truth, and the act of taking and then keeping such an image would demonstrate the importance of that relationship to the owner of the photograph. [18]

It is easy to see, therefore, the dangers of keeping such a photo if one of the individuals was denounced and imprisoned for crimes against the state. Being close friends with such an individual was already enough to cast a civilian into suspicion themself. In his monumental work *The Gulag Archipelago,* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn likens arrests to an epidemic disease spread by contact. As he wrote, if an individual is "destined to confess tomorrow that you organized an underground group to poison the city's water supply, and if today I shake hands with you on the street, that means I, too, am doomed." [19] In this environment of contagious guilt, if one's house was searched, a photo affirming a close social relationship to an individual designated an enemy of the state would be damning. As a result, many private photographs received similar treatment to that which I described above with political portraits.

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[18] Skopin, *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia,* 60.
[19] Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (Vintage Classics, 2018), 29.

In their collection of Soviet photographs, anthropologist Olga Shevchenko and historian Oksana Sarkisova have a number of family photos from the Stalinist period which have been defaced. This image

by Tate
Archives 2016.

shows a group of soldiers (fig. 23).[20] In the center is a hole where several members of the group were cut out, likely following a purge, though the context of the photo is not given. It would be a gross overstatement to say that all or even most surviving family photos from this time bear such scars. Shevchenko and Sarkisova's book, *In Visible Presence,* contains hundreds of family photos from this period, many of which remain complete and unedited. And yet, much like the expurgation of political figures from photographs, the act of removing family members and friends from private photographs was widespread.

Fig. 23

Such actions are described by both Kuznetsov and Solzhenitsyn, despite the fact that these authors lived thousands of miles apart. Kuznetsov recounts helping his mother cut individuals out of their family photographs, writing:

> She put a cross on the faces of those people who had to be cut out, because they were enemies of the people, and I carefully cut 'round them. It seemed to me that we had a suspiciously large number of enemies of the people among our acquaintances. When I had finished the job, the photographs looked really very funny. There was, for example, a large group picture with rows of very stern-looking men and women with 'Teachers Conference 1935' written on it. But now, after my work with the scissors, the rows were full of empty holes in the shape of the human silhouette, as if they had not been people but ghosts. They had all turned out to be enemies of the people, and now they were no longer with us and had to be forgotten.[21]

In his recollection, Kuznetsov is clearly describing not only the methods behind the destruction of their family photographs (cutting) but also the reason why it had to be done. When someone was declared an

[20] Figure 23: *Untitled Image.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Collection of Olga Shevchenko and Oksana Sarkisova, New York Times.
[21] Kuznetsov, *Babi Yar,* 118.

enemy, the state mandated their removal from public memory in an attempt to reshape reality. That attempt in turn affected people lived realities. Kuznetsov describes how his mother was unable to sleep most nights, out of fear that she too would be arrested, like all her friends had been, despite the fact that she had committed no crimes. Her fear indicates that the destruction of those photographs was a precautionary measure, taken to try to protect herself and her family. However, such action also goes beyond simple precautions. This woman was taking offensive action to perform her innocence, almost as though she can use this edited photo book as proof that she is a good civilian. Despite her actions to uphold the narrative of a pure Soviet Union, individual memory preserved a different reality: neither Kuznetsov nor his mother actually forgot the people they had excised from the photographs. As this quote implies, a forced forgetting is impossible to achieve. The action of trying to cut an individual out of both an individual and memory means pondering them. And yet, such an experience was strange. Kuznetsov's choice of words like 'ghosts,' photos that looked 'really quite funny,' and people that 'had to be forgotten' indicate a gap between the reality envisioned by the state, the fearful reality lived by the people, and the reality that existed within individuals' memories.

In his book, Solzhenitsyn describes the same phenomenon from the other side of removal. He recounts the story of a man who returned to his hometown upon release from the gulag to find that those who used to be his close friends before imprisonment now ignored him. One old friend finally invited him over for tea. During this visit, Solzhenitsyn writes,

> Avenir asked to see some old photographs and his friend got out the albums for him. The friend had forgotten – and was surprised when Avenir suddenly rose and left without waiting for the samovar. Imagine Avenir's feelings when he saw his own face inked out in all the photographs! [22]

Solzhenitsyn is unable to explain the emotional state of the man upon discovering his own face

[22] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago,* 447.

defaced in the images, only asking the reader to imagine his reaction, and hinting at feelings of shock and betrayal. Nevertheless, these two books serve to further underscore the extent to which civilians across the Soviet Union undertook such actions, turning not only their own political portraits, but also personal photos into *damnatio memoriae.*

It is, of course, impossible to accurately estimate the amount to which civilians truly bought into this revised narrative of reality. For one thing, the Soviet Union was a diverse conglomerate of ethnicities and states across a vast geographical scope. For another, human individuality limits the amount to which one can define the beliefs of any group of people. Still, there are some primary source recollections which can provide insight into this difficult question. In a note added following the initial publication of his book in 1966, Kuznetsov argues that nobody in Ukraine was unaware of the lies and crimes of Stalin's regime, nor were they surprised by the information revealed in Krushchev's 'Secret Speech.' Kuznetsov goes so far as to call anyone who claimed otherwise liars and hypocrites, stating that "they all knew and understood perfectly well everything that was going on. Only a person who *did not want to know* (emphasis original) remained 'unaware,'" likening these individuals to Nazis who declared themselves unaware of the atrocities of the Holocaust following the death of Hitler.[23] Contrarily, there is a rich body of literature which discusses the serious challenges people faced when attempting to come to terms with the process of destalinization, that demonstrates that, for many, Stalin was a truly great leader. Timur Dadabaev's case study into Uzbek civilians reveals the true complexity of uncovering civilian belief in Stalinist projects. Drawing upon interviews he conducted with individuals who had lived through Stalin's regime, Dadabaev includes quotes which show a strong belief in Stalin and his mission, as well as quotes from individuals who deeply despised the leader and did not believe in anything the state promoted as fact or ideology.[24]

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[23] Kuznetsov, *Babi Yar,* 121.
[24] Dadabaev, "The Death of Stalin: Time of Despair and Hope" in *Identity and Memory in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Uzbekistan's Soviet Past.* (Routledge, 2015).

Ultimately, however, the actual internal beliefs of civilians are less significant than the fact that, whether individuals truly subscribed to the altered realities the state enforced or not, many made a point to *perform* subscription. The rudimentary *damnatio memoriae* the civilians created were reactions to pressures from above. Yet these actions also forced the state to stand by their own lies, as the case of Ordzhonikidze demonstrates, creating a cycle of performing allegiance to invented realities between the state and the people. The state and the people were not acting in a vacuum, nor were their motivations unique, despite the differences in the two sides. At the core of these actions, we see the same mentalities at play. These actions of rewriting reality were mirrored because each side was performing to the other in order to survive, and each side believed that reality had to be rewritten to make survival possible. These parallels fed off each other, creating a bizarre, murky world of untruth, one where multiple truth could be real simultaneously.

Concluding thoughts:

Such a world is difficult to comprehend today, as it likely was then. The very idea of such a complex, layered existence is surreal and disorienting. It is difficult to imagine such a dance between the government and the people occurring today. Certainly, the creation of unpersons through manipulated images was one that was deeply linked with Stalin's regime. Indeed, as repressive pressure from the state began to relax following Stalin's death, such manipulation similarly slowed. Many who had been arrested for such crimes were eventually rehabilitated. [25]

And yet, such cases seem strikingly relevant to us today. In October 2022, Denis Skopin was removed from his position as an associate professor at St. Petersburg State University. The official reason for his removal was due to "an immoral act incompatible with educational functions," [26] allegedly because Skopin had taken part in an unsanctioned protest of the draft to fight in the war in Ukraine. It is

[25] Skopin, *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia,* 49.
[26] Rosenberg, "Ukraine war: Russia's uncertain future a product of its past." *BBC News,* (2022): https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63471505

likely, however, that his then-recently published book exploring the terror of the Stalinist state played a role in his termination. In an interview with the BBC, Skopin noted current parallels to the defacement his book explored. St. Petersburg State University had been in partnership with Bard College, a liberal arts college in America. In 2021, Bard College was declared an 'undesirable organization' in Russia, and the faculty at Skopin's university broke the partnership. Following this break, Skopin mused, "the Bard College name was removed from the stands displayed in the corridors of our faculty using exactly black ink. In the same way as in Stalin's Russia."[27] His remarks capture the high degree of cynicism that pervades Putin's

Russia. Like many of his colleagues, Skopin left Russia in 2023, and is now a scholar in exile in Berlin.

Despite these similarities, there is something unique about Stalin's Russia which differentiates it from the events of today, and from other totalitarian regimes. The use of propaganda permeates every political system, and a number of other regimes have been repressive. But the parallel manipulations of photographs from the state and the civilians prompts us to reinterpret Stalinism and conclude that it is Stalinism's relationship to reality that differentiates it. Defaced images like the ones explored above suggest that at the very heart of Stalinism was a contorted relationship to reality. This was not something on the fringes of the way the state ran, or the way the people experienced the Soviet Union. Survival in Stalin's regime hinged on the existence of multiple, contradictory, simultaneous realities. These alternate realities were initiated by the state, but performed belief from the people fueled their continuance. This reality was further underpinned by prevalent idealism. The incredibly visionary, utopian projection of the state put pressure on citizens, and, ultimately, placed an incredible strain on the idea of reality itself within the Soviet Union.

[27] Rosenberg, "Ukraine war: Russia's uncertain future a product of its past." *BBC News,* (2022): https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63471505

List of Images

Figure 12: *Image No. DK0877.* 1925, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

Figure 13: *Image No. DK0878*. 1925, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

Figure 14: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/45*. Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

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Figure 23: *Untitled Image.* Unknown date, unknown artist. Collection of Olga Shevchenko and Oksana Sarkisova, New York Times.

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