Panopticizing Stalinism: Foucault and Photographic Manipulation in the Soviet Union

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Under Stalin, the Soviet Union, in pursuit of its own survival, sought total control over the lives of its citizens. The State pursued this goal through several means, most obviously the violent repression of any real or perceived dissent. More insidious, however, were 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 facade. Doing so was necessary to the regime's continued rule, and perhaps, to the very survival of the Soviet experiment. To accomplish such a goal, Stalin's regime relied on the power of a key tool in its arsenal: photography. As Stalin's Great Purge (1936-38) removed more and more leaders from office, it also removed them from the visible record. Using airbrushing, cropping, and photomontage techniques, the State altered 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 as a utopia.

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, or at least pretended to do so. In other words, in order for the State to succeed and survive, it needed the people to accept publicly 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 newly 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 were 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 for 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. These parallel manipulations ultimately resulted in a murky, multi-layered experience of reality itself.

I. Foucault, Epistemes, and the Panopticon

Politics and control are the basis of Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*.[1] This is perhaps the most influential of the thinker's works, primarily due to his idea of panopticism. The panopticon was originally an idea by Jeremy Bentham for a building, functionally a prison, which holds prisoners in isolation, making it easy to examine and control them. As Bentham's title suggests, the key feature of the building was that it would be designed in a way to make the inmates visible at all times, thus allowing those policing to be all-seeing. The architecture was designed to do the work of enforcement, shifting the State's mode of control to be non-coercive. In the design, a central tower would exist, from which a guard could see all the cells at once. However, the prisoners would not be able to tell if there was someone in the tower and would, as a result, theoretically become controllable because their fear of possible, assumed observation would lead them to police their own actions. Foucault applied this architecture as a metaphor for a new style of power that emerged following sovereign power. As modes of control shifted, and police forces were created, the State gained new power to observe. With that observation came documentation, creating knowledge for the State. The State could then use the knowledge it gathered to control the population. The people's internalization of

the State's observation led them to act in certain ways, subsequently obeying the will of the State. In Stalin's USSR, the secret police became part of a panoptic system. Paranoia took root in the people. Unsure of who may be reporting what, civilians engaged in certain actions not because of direct orders, but because they assumed that others would be watching and expecting particular behaviors.

Foucault also discusses the idea of truth as a function of geographic and temporal location. What functions as true in one place and time is not necessarily true at another. Foucault called these functional truths epistemes. In his argument, power operates based on particular epistemes, and during particular discourses. If the regime controlled the discourse, and made certain truths seem implausible, it would become possible to control knowledge. Thus, in the context of a control-oriented State such as Stalin's, the regime's propaganda would attempt to create a particular worldview. Their goal was to circumscribe the epistemological possibilities within the State. For these reasons, power is productive. It produces new, perhaps limited, realities. The creation of an idealized myth that people subscribed to meant that the people were no longer forced to obey. They obeyed willingly, because they believed in the truths of the State.

These theoretical frameworks highlight how unstable texts and images can be. Images can be easily changed for the purpose of controlling the population. These frameworks suggest that by creating an idealized image, the population would theoretically follow the will of the State without resistance, due to their own belief in the State's mission. Their belief could be paired with the creation of panoptic paranoia. The resulting fears of constant surveillance would theoretically also provide new levels of control, as civilians would begin to self-police their own actions. In the Soviet Union, Stalin's regime utilized each of these methods, ultimately resulting in an unstable reality.

II. Photographic Manipulation Under Stalin

During the formation of the Soviet Union, developments in printing technology and photomechanical reproduction converged. By the time Stalin took power, a new mass media culture was primed to saturate society with photographic images.[2] Under Stalin's regime, the Soviet State sought to use this tool as a way to control reality.

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 completely strike their existence from the record. Stalin's regime therefore included a group of photo retouchers and censors 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.[3]

Following discrete, off-the-record instructions from Stalin, 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 removing 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.[4] All these forms of manipulation are representative of this larger process of controlling reality as a means of survival and provide rich grounds for further analysis. However, in this essay, I restrict my analysis to one specific subsection of these edited photographs: those which were manipulated to remove denounced individuals.

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 during the Great Terror alone at around 1,575,000.[5] 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 the visual manipulation of reality were paired with extraordinary violence. Of those arrested during the Great Terror, at

least 681,692 were executed.[6] Within this regime, all 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 David King's book *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (1997), 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 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.[7] 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 (figure 1), 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, all 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 (figure 5), Stalin stands alone.[8] The first to be erased was the unnamed man in a copy from 1929, likely the initial published version of the image (figure 2). The third version of the image was published in the book *History of the USSR* in Moscow in 1940 (figure 3). By this time, Antipov had been expelled from the Communist party and executed and therefore was also cropped out of existence.

In 1949, a fourth version of the image appeared in the book *Joseph Stalin: A Short Biography*, published in Moscow (Figure 4). This iteration is different from its predecessors in that this image 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.[9] It is Shvernik who was 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, which was 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."[10] According to this caption, the image was taken three years earlier than it was, a fact 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.[11] 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. Through the repetitive removal exemplified in these successive images, we begin to grasp the lengths the State went to rewrite reality in an idealized sense.

Across the Soviet Union, the same phenomenon of unpersoning through photographic manipulation simultaneously was at work at the governmental level and 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.*[12] In this groundbreaking work, Skopin explores the phenomenon of Soviet civilians defacing their 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 performative. Here, I use the term "performative" in the most literal sense: individual civilians acted with the understanding that others would view their actions and expect them to act in such a way. Not acting in the expected fashion could result in imprisonment, exile, or death for the civilian. In short, this was the performance of the panopticon.

Figure 6 is a portrait of Lev Kamenev.[13] Kamenev was a prominent Bolshevik figure leading up to and during the Russian Revolution of 1917. During the scramble for power following Lenin's death, he briefly aligned with Stalin to prevent Leon Trotsky from assuming full power, but once Stalin had secured his position as ruler, he turned against Kamenev, ultimately having him arrested

and executed. Because of his importance in the Revolution and early State, Kamenev's portrait was frequently included in political albums. The high-profile nature of his demise made him one of the most frequent victims of defacement among surviving civilian *damnatio memoriae.*

While exact details of the origins of this photo are unknown, the image's cataloging, which lists the photo as being sourced from a political album and notes that the album was found in NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) holdings, provides some clues as to its provenance. This note indicates that, at some point following Kamenev's execution, this image was defaced by a civilian, and later, the whole photo album was taken in as evidence by the NKVD. Based on the date of Kamenev's execution we can effectively date the defacement to have happened sometime 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 indicates that the civilian was taken in for questioning and that suspicious items from their personal belongings were collected as evidence.

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. From the nature of this defacement, several conclusions can be drawn. One is that the process shown here is that of a panicked individual hastily trying to expunge suspicion away from themself prior to an arrest.

This individual may have defaced this image in an attempt to erase Kamenev from the record, performing back to the State its own rewritten reality to try to secure personal safety. It is also possible that the individual here was acting out of indifference, perhaps thinking that they could not come under suspicion. In this case, the civilian may have undertaken this action out of a sense of performative completion, doing it because it was the expected action, but not completing the task with high attention to detail.

Similar defaced portraits have been found in high numbers across the former Soviet Union. When examined as a pattern, these

defacements indicate that people were wrestling with the idea of reality in this world of untruths and unpersons. The evidence explored above indicates that Soviet civilians were forced to remove people, pretend they never existed, and even attempt to completely forget them. The defacements demonstrate, too, that the people were taking the time to follow through on upholding the idea of a perfect State, often at the cost of at least some time and effort. Possibly, these actions were their way of trying to improve the State themselves. Such action may also have simply been a matter of survival. Either way, it meant that the people contributed to the fractured idea of reality under Stalinism.

III.   The Civilian Experience of Stalin's Panopticon

Navigating the multiple truths and untruths of reality surely placed incredible strain on individuals. It would be easy to accuse the masses of being sheep who mindlessly followed the propaganda of the State, and in these examples, there is some confirmation of the people caving to the State's iron rule. But the people were not mindless. These actions of erasure, as bizarre as they may seem, were necessary for survival, and it is possible that some, or even many, were perfectly aware of what audience they were playing to and what was required of them. This bizarre experience is described in Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir *Hope Against Hope*.[14] In this memoir, Mandelstam documents her life with her husband Osip Mandelstam, a significant Russian poet. While the memoir touches on the entirety of the couple's nineteen years together, the focus is on the period between Osip's arrests and their exile from 1934 to 1938, when Osip was arrested a second time and then died of typhoid fever in a transit camp. The memoir discusses a variety of topics, and is organized into short chapters, each focusing on a specific recollection or moment, which illuminates the profound struggles of an intellectually driven, isolated couple in the repressive society of the Stalinist era. In her recollection, Mandelstam explains how alluring the revolutionary vision of a utopian State was:

> [That] vision of the world had such a sweeping, unitary quality that it was very seductive. In the pre-revolutionary era there had already been this craving for an all-embracing idea which would explain everything in the world and bring about universal harmony at one go. That

> is why people so willingly closed their eyes and followed
> their leader, not allowing themselves to compare words
> with deeds, or to weigh the consequences of their actions.
> This explained the *progressive loss of reality* (emphasis
> added).[15]

Despite bing written long after the end of Stalin's rule (the first copy
of Mandelstam's memoir was published in 1970), this quote still
contains a startling level of self-awareness and an impressive
understanding of the society she lived in, particularly in reflection of
a time period so defined by secrecy, falsity, and suspicion.
Mandelstam clearly describes the desire the people had to live in an
idealist utopia, a desire that predated the revolution and Stalin's
regime.

Research done by historian Sheila Fitzpatrick supports
Mandelstam's claim. Her chapter "Palaces on Monday" in *Everyday
Stalinism: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* details the utopian vision of the
1930s, arguing that a sense of idealism pervaded the minds of
Soviets[16] Since this vision of a utopian society was so prevalent and
predated the regime, it was easy for the State to capitalize on this
desire. Thus, using this recollection from Mandelstam, we start to
see implications of why the State played up its idealist image so
much: this was yet another instance in which the State was being
influenced by the people. Put another way, this recollection
indicates that the State's false projection was an attempt to
demonstrate to the people that the State was what they hoped for it
to be, and that the initial impetus for this action was, at least in part,
sparked by the people themselves. Through this, we see another
layer added to the cycle of performance and false reality taking place
in the Soviet State.

This quote also helps to shed light on why the people played
along with the State's false narrative. In addition to the very real fear
for their own survival, Mandelstam makes it clear that the utopian
version of the State presented by Stalin's propaganda was very much
a reality the people themselves wanted to live in. Here we see
suggestions of Foucault's theories of epistemes playing out further.
In Foucault's theory, truth is a function that is geographically and
temporally specific; what functions as true can change according to
place and time, and power can function on the basis of these limited
truths. A control-oriented State, according to Foucault, could limit

certain epistemes, or truths, to control knowledge, and therefore, control the population. Within Stalin's Soviet Union, the belief, however limited, in the truths of the regime meant that the people willingly obeyed the State. As a result, Mandelstam states that the Soviet Union was left dealing with a "progressive loss of reality." This single line implies that the complicated, fractured, multi-layered reality of the time was tangible to the people, even as they were living in it.

In these practices, we see Foucault's theory of disciplinary power in operation.[17] The Soviet Union rose at a time when new technologies and policing techniques gave the regime unprecedented abilities to observe and to collect knowledge that it then used to control the population. Within the people, suspicion and anxiety thrived. Uncertainty about who may report what led to self-policing of their own actions by the people. Civilians engaged in certain actions not because of direct orders, but because there was the assumption that others would be looking, and expecting particular behavior, which is primarily what led to the people's creation of *damnatio memoriae*. The State also created functional truths, utilizing photographs as propaganda to disseminate a particular worldview that idealized it as a socialist utopia. The creation of this new worldview and its accompanying limited realities was another form of control. The people no longer had to be forced to obey. They obeyed willingly because they believed in the truths of the State. Two methods of control—the panopticon through which the State could observe everything and the episteme or functional truth—in conjunction ensured that the State's task of survival was as simple as possible, and ultimately, resulted in a fractured reality for the people.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Notes

[1] Foucault. *Discipline and Punish.*

[2] Dickerman. "Camera Obscura," 138-153.

[3] Blakemore. "How Photos Became a Weapon."

[4] Chan. "Refractions of Katyn," 211-231. I would like to offer particular thanks to Paula Chan for generously providing a copy of this article to me for use prior to publication.

[5] Courtois et. al. *The Black Book of Communism,* 190.

[6] Ibid, 190.

[7] Figure 1: *Image No. M04642,* 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archive 2016. Figure 2: *Image No. DK0683*. 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 3: *Image No. DK0663*. 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 4: *Image No. DK0667*. 1929, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016. Figure 5: *Image No. DK0670*. 1929, Isaak Brosky. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

[8] 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."

[9] In this image, too, the retouching to Stalin's face becomes 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.

[10] N.A. *Joseph Stalin,* 103.

[11] Similar manipulations were done to make it appear as though Stalin and Lenin had a much closer relationship than they did, 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."

[12] Skopin. *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin's Russia.*

[13] Figure 3.03: *Image No. TGA 20172/1/3/3/4/1/45*. Unknown date, unknown artist. Tate, Purchased from David King by Tate Archives 2016.

[14] Mandelstam. *Hope against Hope.*

[15] Ibid, 162.

[16] Fitzpatrick. *Everyday Stalinism,* 67-88.

[17] Foucault. *Discipline and Punish.*

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