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SOVIET PHOTO AND THE SEARCH FOR PROLETARIAN PHOTOGRAPHY, 1926–1937

BY

EMILY JOYCE EVANS

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Assistant Professor Terri Weissman, Chair
Associate Professor David O’Brien
Assistant Professor Kristin Romberg
Professor Mark Steinberg
Associate Professor Jordana Mendelson, New York University
ABSTRACT

Soviet Photo and the Search for Proletarian Photography, 1926–1937

Emily Joyce Evans

This dissertation examines the history of the journal Soviet Photo (Sovetskoe foto; called Proletarskoe foto 1931–33) from its founding in 1926 through 1937, reading its photographs and theoretical and political discourse in order to analyze how it defined, and sought to create, a truly Soviet, proletarian photography. Soviet Photo was the USSR’s most-printed and longest-lived periodical devoted to the discussion and instruction of photography. It was also the only one that attempted to address the entire public, from beginning amateurs to worker-correspondents, established photojournalists, and professional photographers. While Soviet Photo eventually became the state’s organ for Socialist Realism in photography, its early years were characterized by stylistic diversity. It played a major role as a forum for the discussion of “proletarian” art during the cultural revolution (ca. 1928–32) and in the formation of the ideas and practices that contributed to the Socialist Realist method.

Chapter One explores Soviet Photo’s project to unify the USSR’s photographers and their work, which it sought to realize by fully integrating amateurs into institutional structures and reforming the style and content of people still working along pre-Revolutionary lines. Chapter Two considers the attempt to redirect all photographers’ work to the movement of worker- and peasant correspondents as a way of increasing their presence in the press, and the reasons why this attempt could not succeed. Chapter Three is devoted to Soviet Photo’s reception of the Soviet photographic avant-garde, specifically, the interrelationship between that journal, the journal Novyi lef, and the October group. Chapter Four examines the changes to this relationship and to these groups’ status during the cultural revolution’s aesthetic debates and after the 1932 “restructuring decree” that
dissolved all independent arts organizations. Chapter Five considers the ways that *Soviet Photo* applied the major tenets of Socialist Realism to photography and participated in the further development of Socialist Realism as a method and style after its official instatement in 1934. As a whole, this dissertation addresses how photography was supposed to fulfill certain ideological goals in the early Soviet Union and the related question of how *Soviet Photo* shifted from focusing on mass photographic production to advocating a practice whose mass character was in name only.
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I am indebted to many people whose guidance, assistance, and patience made the completion of this project possible. Jordana Mendelson encouraged me to keep exploring until I found exactly the right topic and has continued to advise me from afar for many years. Back when her *Documenting Spain* came out, she wrote a message in the cover of my copy asking if my project would be “Documenting the USSR.” At the time I wanted to do something else, and anyways, it seemed impossible. Later I rediscovered her inscription and realized how far I’d come, and that, in a way, Jordana was right.

Terri Weissman has been no less important to this project. It must have taken a lot of trust to accept as an advisee someone she had never even met but was already a PhD candidate. I would have liked to spend time on campus together. Her insights, questions, criticism, and genuine belief in this project have motivated me through the research and writing stages, and her editing is invaluable. After I’d already spent time away from university and lived abroad for more than five years straight, speaking with Terri has helped bring me back to where I came from, at least mentally.

Mark Steinberg was instrumental in helping me learn Russian and Soviet history, culture, and art. His patience and openness made me feel at home in a new field at the same time as his high standards and vast knowledge keep me on my toes. I’m grateful for his generosity, his responsiveness, and for the time he has spent advising me on this project.

David O’Brien provided advice that I haven’t forgotten at a few key points during my graduate study even though our fields are far apart, and I also wish to thank him for my first exhibition experience because it made all the difference. Kristin Romberg offers much-appreciated expertise on the Soviet avant-garde.

My graduate studies and initial research were generously funded by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Graduate College, the Art History Program, and the Russian, East
European, and Eurasian Center. A Library Research Grant from the Getty Research Institute in the summer of 2008 gave me the opportunity to explore materials on El Lissitzky that changed my thinking, even if they do not appear here.

I conducted the bulk of my research at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz—the impressive Berlin State Library. Librarians in the Eastern Europe Department and Rare Book Collection were knowledgeable and provided an ideal working environment. Staff at the Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Department for Art, Prints and Photographs at the New York Public Library made a week of research in New York run smoothly. Also, I presented parts of this dissertation at “Socialist Realist Art: Production, Consumption and the Aesthetics of Power” in Stockholm in October 2012 and at the University of Heidelberg in June 2013 and received helpful feedback.

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at the University of Illinois, how much I learned there, and how much I’ve missed it.

The original idea for this dissertation came from my work assisting Bodo von Dewitz at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, which acquired Daniela Mrázková’s collection of Soviet-era photos, and who put me to work researching the photographers’ biographies. Thanks to him, I stumbled across *Soviet Photo* and realized how much material was in there waiting to be mined. Kasper König, my boss first at the Museum Ludwig and now with Manifesta 10, has taught me more about looking at art—and trusting my instincts—than I could have learned anywhere else. I deeply appreciate his irreverence and ability to draw unexpected connections between art, culture, and society.

Three professors were particularly inspiring during my undergraduate years at Smith College: Nina Antonetti, Craig Felton, and Karen Koehler. They were among the reasons that I chose to pursue a PhD in the first place.

Caitlin Bass, Andrea Ferber, and Nathan Gerth edited my chapters and offered sound advice. Shenja Cherniakova good-naturedly reviewed my Russian-English translations and offered relief from all the heavy rhetoric.

A dissertation represents the culmination of many years of graduate study. I cannot thank enough the friends and colleagues whose insights into our work, reflections on academia, moral support, welcome distractions, humor, hospitality, and encouragement were vital to my happiness and success: Caitlin Bass, Gisela Carbonell-Coll, Andrea Ferber, Julia Gonser, Miriam Kienle, Helen Inglis and Ross Musselman, Magdalena Nieslony, Carmen Ripollés, Kathy Shannon and Matt Frank, and Amy and Jamie Weber.

My grandparents unfailingly believed in me and supported my education. It would have meant everything to me to show them my dissertation. My parents always believed I could do this, even if it took me far from home, and have continued to offer their support in big and small ways. My sister did it all first—she showed me how to get it done with a baby around and her drive is an
example for me. Ezra Owen has kept my commitments and priorities in perspective since his arrival in our lives. And finally, Sören deserves the most thanks of all. He has joined me in Illinois, taken me to Germany, and seen me off to Russia. I’m grateful for his unfailing faith, encouragement, and support, which all kept up my determination when it threatened to flag. While we believe in sharing the double burden, he accepted more than his half of it for many months, for my sake. I couldn’t have finished this without you.
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Introduction

“But just as every progressive comrade should have a wristwatch, he should be able to use a photographic camera. This will come with time. In the USSR there will not only be mass literacy, but photographic literacy in particular as well. And it will exist very much sooner than the skeptics think.”

—Anatoly Lunacharsky, 1926

In September 1927, the magazine Soviet Photo printed a photograph of thirteen men, some of them with cameras, sitting and standing with their eyes closed, their backs slumped as though asleep, and their heads resting on hands or against fence posts (figure 0.1). On the left four men look on, one standing upright at his camera and tripod, another gazing off to the side beyond the edges of what we can see, and two looking at the photographer and seeming, in poor resolution, to smile or wink. This photograph bears the caption, “On the Occasion of Chamberlain’s Crossing by Flight from Europe to America. Photo-reporters at the Berlin aerodrome after a futile twelve-hour wait (as is known, Chamberlain touched down not far from Berlin).” The caption-writer’s faith in his viewers’ abilities was low. Below the caption, in smaller print, he added: “This picturesque illustration is, of course, a pretense by tired and bored photo-reporters.” This image represents a valuable lesson for a reader unfamiliar with the fundamentals of photography. She or he learns that what is visible is not necessarily a complete or representative depiction of the circumstances. Men might slump and close their eyes during the instant when a shutter clicks, and stand up again laughing moments later. Do not trust what you see to tell you the whole story. While many of Soviet Photo’s readers surely possessed enough sophistication not to believe everything they saw, this basic lesson in understanding what photographs do was still being presented to readership in the Soviet Union late in 1927, nearly a century after photography’s invention.

2. Caption to an untitled, uncredited photograph, Sovetskoe foto no. 9 (September 1927): 278.
Several pages later in the same issue, a variety of images challenge the viewer, ones demanding a more complex understanding of photography. City dwellers who crane their necks to look up the facades of modern buildings will recognize the balconies (fig. 0.2). A river fills another frame, bearing a boat of indeterminable size. Neatly juxtaposed is a diver captured in motion; we cannot see whether he and the river below are part of the same scene (fig. 0.3). On the opposite page a radio tower, all sunlight and crisp, with criss-crossing lines converging somewhere in the near or middle or far distance, stands above advice on how to achieve “artistic softness.”

Ten years later, such differences among styles and subjects are nowhere to be found in Soviet Photo and the photographs, whether visually or in terms of content, all complement one another. For example, an image of a performance on Red Square seen from a nearby rooftop is paired with a photograph taken from the ground during the same gymnastics event (figs. 0.4 and 0.5). In another set of images the viewer sees four street scenes that share the same rhythm and proportion of buildings, streets, people, and vehicles (figs. 0.6–0.9). The captions inform us that these photographs were collectively awarded second and third prizes in a contest. Consistency is the message. These images and their juxtaposition provoke the questions that motivate this dissertation on Soviet Photo. Central among them is, what changes enabled the journal’s transformation from an organ for and by everyman— naïf to artist, as in these images from 1927—to an organ for a method—Socialist Realism—that is typically thought of as being imposed on the masses by the state, and in which the photographs have such a predictable, conservative feel? The answers to this question are more than a matter of describing how the Stalinist regime consolidated its hold on the arts. They demand consideration of how the photographing and viewing masses were imagined and, thus, how their artistic, social, and political role was conceived. They also raise questions about the role of photography in Soviet culture and how that role shifted, as well as the debates between the artistic avant-garde on one side, and the people who shaped official Stalinist culture on the other.
The history of *Soviet Photo* could take many forms. One telling might begin with the origins of the journal in 1926 under the relative freedom of the New Economic Policy (1921–1928), before its content focused ever more exclusively on the politics of the day. This telling sees the journal becoming overtly ideological in 1929, following along with the so-called “proletarian episode” of the arts from 1931 to 1933.³ Then in 1934 it would lose the contradictions and halt the debates that had given it color, in favor of a monolithic Stalinist cultural politics. This telling would serve as a detailed case history explicating the development of Soviet cultural history as it is already well known in broad strokes from political history. But this history would fail to show the ways in which Soviet cultural life was not as monolithic, or totally regulated, as has long been assumed.

Another telling of *Soviet Photo’s* history might focus exclusively on high art questions. A scholar could comb the journal’s pages for references to Aleksandr Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich, Semyon Fridliand, Arkadii Shaikhet, and others whose works now form the canon of Soviet photography. Such a study would provide a more complete picture of their presence in the press beyond avant-garde journals such as *Novyi lev* and *USSR in Construction*; analyze propaganda images; gather a large source base for critical consideration of terms like documentary, formalist, and so on; and seek to theorize images and possibilities of resistance, compliance, obedience, coercion, and willing participation. But this telling would ignore the context of these artists’ work and overlook the central interest of *Soviet Photo* in mass amateur and press work, in favor of remaining within Western post-war categories of analysis and following an understanding of art that focuses on the production of a small, privileged elite.

In this dissertation I consider both the political history behind *Soviet Photo* and its implications for the canonical history of photography in the USSR, but these themes are

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³ The “proletarian episode” from the first Five-Year Plan refers to the push by a group of writers to create literature that would correspond to political ideology in particular ways, for example in its content and readability to the masses. These “proletarian” writers were actually intellectuals who sought to reach the proletariat, but they also instigated much debate and claimed that all other writers must follow suit. They were disbanded in 1932.
subordinated to a different set of questions. My goal is to use *Soviet Photo* to tell a history of how
“Soviet” or “proletarian” photography was defined, theorized, and used as something special to the
USSR, something with the power to shape how people thought and acted. As such, this dissertation
does tell a history of photography, but not only of celebrity artists or cultural context. Rather, it tells
a history of photography as studied according to its manifestation in a mass-oriented print medium.
It is essential to this approach that questions of high versus low art, and any privileging of certain
people or circles, be abandoned. By doing so, this project breaks down the perceived specialness of
the avant-garde. When we look at the history of Soviet photography through *Soviet Photo* as opposed
to individual figures, then we find many more facets to that history and discover a rich field of
inquiry. And, given photography’s literal accessibility to millions of people, it is only fitting to think
about how de-privileging our treatment of it enables deeper engagement with ideas and works in
further historical or cultural contexts.

Given my focus on a mass-oriented medium, this dissertation is intended to address scholars
with a range of concentrations. The closest fields, of course, are the history of photography and the
cultural history of the USSR. However, this project is also intended to speak to scholars studying
periodicals of all kinds, who might see this as a case history of the relationship between aesthetics
and politics or the shaping of public discourse. Recent years have seen increased research on
periodicals, and while the most famous object of this interest is probably the Weimar German *AIZ*
(*Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*), numerous studies address publications from all continents, of varied
political allegiances, in peacetime and at war, whether they are publications designed by artists or
simply including illustrations by artists who now belong to the academic and museum canon. The
overwhelming (though not quite exclusive) focus of these studies is on magazines or newspapers
that evince a distinctly modernist aesthetic or whose artists’ other work is part of the modernist
canon. The recent *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* solidifies this preference in
three thick volumes devoted to modernism alone. Soviet Photo sometimes engaged its modernist counterparts in the USSR in debate and printed some photographs and articles by modernist artists. This dissertation moves beyond the modernist canon without losing sight of it, broadening our view on magazine culture and examining how one journal operated as it sought to establish and defend an oppressive mainstream.

This dissertation’s title refers to “proletarian” rather than “Soviet” photography for two reasons. Making “Soviet” photographs in the USSR was an imperative but at the time there were many definitions of what a Soviet photographer was, or should be, beyond the obvious geopolitical category. Nevertheless, I focus on proletarian as the major qualifying characteristic because it referred to the nature of photographer, photograph, and forum or viewer alike. “Proletarian” is also a useful term for how it refers to the photographer’s working methods (her or his labor), a person’s class background, his or her place within the Soviet economy, the ways in which photographs should be distributed and viewed, and the potential for an image to act upon its viewer. Thus I use a broad definition of proletarian: it might refer to a member of the laboring class, or to a labor-related subject or theme, or to a particular consciousness. By choosing “proletarian,” I do not limit my focus to the “proletarian episode” in the arts and literature, though one chapter is devoted to it. Finally, I speak of a “search” for proletarian photography because Soviet Photo’s endeavor never seemed to reach fulfillment. By and large, photographers made material that did not fully satisfy the editors’ and authors’ ideals. A perfectly proletarian photography remained out of reach.

A consideration of how artists and theorists imagined photography for the Soviet Union raises further questions regarding visual literacy, the status of the medium, and picture theory. Visual literacy was a consistent but infrequent topic in Soviet Photo. The journal played a significant role in

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developing the idea for the Russian-speaking context during the period; its authors worked with the assumption that the very act of looking at or taking a photograph would further develop this literacy. The possibilities for comparing it with New Vision are rich and can help position the history of Soviet Photo within the broader inter-war context. The question of visual literacy is also relevant as an inquiry within the framework of picture theory. While these inquiries will be both fruitful and necessary to a future expansion of this research, they have only begun to emerge in this study and are not developed here.

The history of amateur, press, and art photography in the Soviet Union from 1926 through 1937 is one of conflicting ideas, of groups and institutions established and eliminated, and of photographers going in and out of favor. At the same time, the status of photography drifted somewhere between its importance as a medium for political propaganda, and its peripheral position as an art form whose proponents alternately sought to unseat the dominance of painting and sculpture or to position photography among them. Throughout this history Soviet Photo's most central principle remained consistent: a Soviet photograph was an image of the present day. It should reveal life and conditions in the USSR to the viewer and prompt identification with Socialist construction and people’s everyday life. In doing these things or refusing to do them, each photograph and each photographer, by choice or not, bore political meaning.

A Brief History of Soviet Photo and a Note on Methodology

Soviet Photo was first published within the joint-stock publishing company Ogonek, which also published the journal Ogonek, on the initiative of its chairman and editor-in-chief Mikhail Kol’tsov. Kol’tsov was a journalist and author who had traveled to the Weimar Republic in 1925 and returned with illustrated journals whose quality and character convinced him to strive for similar quality in

5. Ogonek means “spark” and is pronounced ah-gone-YOK; it is never referred to in translation.
Russia. He reportedly saw increased photographic production and its greater visibly as a solution to the “bourgeois mediocrity” of Russia’s amateur photographers. Soviet Photo was founded in order to encourage greater development in the fields of photography and photojournalism and, accordingly, addressed learners, knowledgeable amateurs, and working photojournalists. Due to their institutional connection, numerous members of the editorial staff worked on both Ogonek and Soviet Photo, including Kol’tsov, V. Mikulin, and Semyon Fridliand (brother to Kol’tsov); numerous photographers were also involved with both publications. This provenance may have helped lend Soviet Photo a literary and cultured association. In addition to publishing Soviet Photo, Ogonek also pursued the spread of photography by releasing the short-lived Soviet Photographic Almanac (1928–1930), which also shared many contributors with Soviet Photo. The Soviet Photo Library (biblioteka Sovetskoe foto) also released dozens of instructional books on technical topics during the 1920s and early ’30s; however, it is unclear how long this continued.

The illustrated cultural magazine Ogonek was founded in 1899 in the Russian Empire and suspended during the period of the October Revolution and Civil War. When it was reestablished in 1923, its publisher was one of a few hundred private publishing houses in the Soviet Union. Private publishers were associated with the intelligentsia in the 1920s but became less prevalent as private enterprise withered late in the decade. Like state-owned publishers, they were subject to censorship. In 1922 the office Glavlit (Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs), part of the Peoples’ Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros), became the censorship authority and provided each publication with a Glavlit number. Past scholarship has claimed that Soviet Photo was published by a state organization from the very beginning; the bodies Narkompros and Soiuzfoto

7. V. P. Mikulin, ed., Sovetski fotograficheskii almanakh 1: Izdanie zhurnala Sovetskoe Foto (Moscow: Ogonek, Ltd, 1928); Sovetski fotograficheskii almanakh 2: Izdanie zhurnala Sovetskoe Foto (Moscow: Ogonek, Ltd, 1929); and Sovetski fotograficheskii almanakh 3: Izdanie zhurnala Sovetskoe Foto (Moscow: Ogonek, Ltd., 1930).
have erroneously been cited as publisher. On one level, these mistakes are simple and easily corrected because *Soviet Photo* includes its publishing information. On another, they suggest that *Soviet Photo* conveyed official attitudes, not just permitted ones, from the very beginning. In fact, control remained in private hands until September 1931, when the Journalistic-Newspaper Association (*Zhurnalno-gazetnoe ob”edinenie*, Zhurgaz) took over publication. Simultaneously the title became *Proletarian Photo*; it changed back to *Soviet Photo* in January 1934 under Soiuzfoto, the Soviet Union’s largest entity for overseeing work and production in photography-related fields. Although the publisher changed numerous times during the period 1931–1938, *Soviet / Proletarian Photo* remained a state publication (see Appendix A).

*Soviet Photo* was published in Moscow and its voice frequently shows a Moscow-based perspective. Articles on photo circles, exhibitions, or conditions in the provinces and in other cities, such as Kharkov or Kiev, are news items; the way that other locales are specifically named indicates that Moscow was the authors’ point of reference. The occasional “Letter from the countryside” (*Pis’ma iz derevni*) delivered news about other places to the “center.” It must therefore be understood that although the journal addressed the masses in the whole country, decisions about what to publish were made at the center of the USSR’s cultural life.

*Soviet Photo*’s popularity increased throughout the 1920s. One indication of this success is the jump in the journal’s print run, which rose from a monthly average of 12,000 in 1926 to more than 27,000 in 1930 (see Appendix B). Another indication is the appearance of high-quality reproductions in every issue. Until late 1928, photographs were printed in the same quality and on the same kind of paper as all articles. Beginning in late 1928 or early 1929, *Soviet Photo* elevated certain images by printing them in “mezzotint,” as the journal referred to these reproductions. They were of obviously

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10. See, for example, four letters from the countryside published in *Sovetskoe foto* no. 14 (July 15, 1929): 450f.
higher printing quality, with more tonal differentiation and on better paper than the rest, though the artistic quality of these images varied. A series of articles entitled “On our mezzotints” critiqued these images; most of the others, which appeared among the text, were not discussed.\(^{11}\) The mezzotint reproductions almost always exhibited the work of professional photographers, whether artists or photojournalists. Amateurs’ photographs were printed in lower quality.

*Soviet Photo* did not have to compete for attention with many other publications. Its founding followed four months after the journal *Photographer* (*Fotograf*), which appeared for four years and represented the All-Russian Society of Photographers (VOF, *Vserossiiskoe obschestvo fotografov*), founded in 1915, whose members were by and large studio-based professionals.\(^{12}\) *Photographer*, VOF, and the related Russian Photographic Society (RFO, *Russkoe fotograficheskoe obschestvo*, founded ca. 1897) were associated with the Pictorialist school of photography. Pictorialist photographers used subject choice and technical means to give their work a soft, “artistic” look, working mainly in the period from the 1890s until circa 1920. Pictorialism retained popularity far longer in Russia and, seen from a Soviet perspective, was associated with pre-Revolutionary aesthetics, social privilege, and outdated political or class attitudes; however, these older photographers were not sidelined in the new Soviet state. Furthermore, many VOF/RFO members and *Photographer* authors also appeared in *Soviet Photo*.\(^{13}\) The overlap in staff shows that regardless of older photographers’ aesthetic styles or un-proletarian social origins, their knowledge was valued. However, with the RFO dissolving in the late 1920s and *Photographer* ceasing publication in 1929, the Pictorialists could no longer present a

\(^{11}\) In the last issues from 1928, certain reproductions are clearly of higher quality and seem to be printed on better paper than the rest of the issue, but *Soviet Photo* did not explicitly mention any mezzotints until 1929.


\(^{13}\) The photographers Nikolai A. Petrov of Kiev, Iurii Eremin, V. Ulitin, and N. Andreev were Pictorialists and whose work appeared in *Soviet Photo*. Historian of photography Grigorii Boltianskii and K. Chibisov both served on *Soviet Photo’s* editorial board, and Chibisov, Efim Zozulia, and Iu. Laubert contributed technical articles.
unified front that might advocate for their views or aesthetics. Even so, Soviet Photo continued to reference their work and even print it well into the 1930s.

Soviet Photo was almost singular in its reach, assuming that production corresponded to demand and readership, and it was published for more years than any other photography journal. In comparison to the print run or circulation of Western journals, Soviet Photo’s print run can seem low for a country whose population was approximately 156 million in 1926. Seen in comparison to other Soviet publications, however, its prominence is clear. Valerii Stigneev has rightfully noted that a print run of 14,000, which Soviet Photo reached in January 1927, was a record for the period. This number is particularly high when seen in contrast to the print runs of avant-garde journals. The avant-garde magazines Lef (1923–25) and its successor Novyi lef (1927–28) had print runs of up to 5,000 and 3,000 respectively, and Novyi lef cost twice as much as Soviet Photo in January 1927. The attention accorded to avant-garde journals by scholarship stands in no relation to their visibility. Soviet Photo even compared well against visual arts journals addressing traditional artistic mediums. Furthermore, the sheer number of art publications in the Soviet Union was low in the first place, ranging between ten and twelve from 1926 to 1930 and dropping to six in 1932.

Only USSR in Construction, an illustrated journal of large dimensions and good printing quality in which photographs and texts showed positive aspects of Soviet life and industry, outstripped Soviet Photo’s reach. Printed in four languages (Russian, English, German, and French) to reach an international audience, its print run exceeded that of Soviet Photo by a factor of two in 1930, nearly four in 1934, and three-and-a-half in 1937, even as it cost considerably more than Soviet

15. Statistics are available in K. S. Muratova, ed., Periodika po literaturi i iskusstvu za gody revoliutsii 1917–1932, Literaturnaia bibliografia 11, series ed. S. D. Balukhatyi (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1933). Art (Iskusstvo), which was devoted to traditional media such as painting and sculpture, initially appeared in fewer issues and with a lower print run than Soviet Photo but eventually became comparable to it in print run and the number of yearly issues. It remained the USSR’s major journal for art. Several different journals were called Iskusstvo; for a time, the one to which I refer was called Sovetskoe iskusstvo.
Research by Erika Wolf has demonstrated that *USSR in Construction* was intended for a privileged audience, not the laboring masses. Statistics vary, but when *Soviet Photo* was founded in 1926, Russian workers earned an average of between 28 and 35 rubles per month in wage; a single issue of *Soviet Photo* was 35 kopecks, or between 1% and 2% of one’s wage. On the whole, the journal appears to have been relatively affordable for many workers. Yet despite its relative accessibility, *Soviet Photo*’s mass character only went so far. None of the editors appear to have been drawn from amateur photography groups, for example, so although the importance of such groups was declared in every issue for years, their members either were not a part of editorial decisions or received no credit for it. There are very few examples of workers providing content for the journal to publish, let alone establishing a distinct voice in the discussions that took place on *Soviet Photo*’s pages.

Despite having a price and print run that positioned it for broad reception by the reading public, *Soviet Photo*’s impact was hampered by a severe shortage of photographic material. Cameras were not produced in the Russian Empire, and they were not produced in the Soviet Union until 1933. The early years of *Soviet Photo* are marked by the high number of articles bemoaning the lack of good or plentiful equipment; the journal exhorted government officials to support the production of more negatives and photographic paper as well as the development of a Soviet camera. These pleas are underscored by technical articles describing how to transform a wooden box into a *camera obscura*, reuse glass negatives, make one’s own lenses, and more. Photographers managed with old equipment and supplies from the pre-Revolutionary period, scant new materials imported from the

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17. In 1930, a yearlong subscription to *USSR in Construction* cost 10 rubles to *Soviet Photo*’s six, and soon it was twice as expensive. The print run figures and subscription prices for *SSSR na stroike* are summarized in Appendices B, C, and D, Erika Wolf, *USSR in Construction: From Avant-Garde to Socialist Realist Practice* (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 1999), 411–413.


West through official channels, or what they brought back from their own trips to the West.

Apparently, the cameras that were in workers’ or the government’s hands had been appropriated from the propertied classes after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution:

They [the cameras] were able to transfer to the working class as a result of complex socio-economic processes—the securing of the dictatorship of the proletariat, [and] the former landowners’ and bourgeois’ loss of their socio-economic base and their weakening power to own private property. As a result of exactly these processes, pre-revolutionary cameras, which had been in the hands of class aliens, began in significant number to move into the hands of the new dominant proletarian class by individual, collective, and state means.  

The Russian original speaks of the cameras’ movement into proletarian hands as though it were of their own volition. Production of the camera FED finally began in 1933. Named after Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinskii (1877–1926), head of the state security forces, the Cheka, it was often referred to as the “Soviet Leica” and, indeed, was an unlicensed copy of the German model. The commencement of its production was symbolic of Soviet prowess in successfully copying a piece of new, sophisticated technology from abroad. For Soviet Photo and its readers, it was even more significant because it represented the opportunity to finally realize the project of creating masses of Soviet photographers and photo-correspondents. It represented the potential for the medium to become democratic at long last. Further cameras were produced in the USSR beginning in the mid-1930s, but shortage persisted as a significant factor in Soviet photographic activity until after World War II. It is therefore with reservations that one must read Soviet Photo’s many references to the “mass amateur photography movement,” “mass movement of photo-correspondents,” and so on.

One particular challenge in conducting this study of “proletarian” photography, then, is the relative lack of actual proletariat production, that is, photography produced by workers. There are


further problems in locating surviving material. Soviet Photo offered consultations (critiques of photographs with tips for improvement, in person or via mail) to its readers and they were fairly popular, with up to 1,080 taking place via mail alone during the first half of 1930.\textsuperscript{22} The photographs submitted to contests could also provide insight into how and what people in the USSR photographed. By the magazine’s third anniversary, eight contests had taken place so far with 1,828 participants submitting 6,254 photographs.\textsuperscript{23} Yet whatever consultation and contest submissions may have been kept by the journal were destroyed when its archive burned in 1996; although some photographs by worker-photographers survived at the Museum of the Revolution in Moscow, now the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia, and in the archive of the Comintern, they are small in number and were never chosen for their capacity to represent the whole of photographic activity in Soviet Russia.\textsuperscript{24} Yet the photographs submitted for consultations or to contests do not necessarily represent instances of amateur photographers authoritatively staking their claim as practitioners of new art forms or qualified recorders of Soviet life. Their participation in Soviet Photo’s project makes them per se supplicants to a higher authority. From the first issue of Soviet Photo in 1926 until the abandonment of its focus on amateur work in 1931–32, the journal maintained a position and tone vis-à-vis its readers as expert and teacher. Its pupils rarely saw praise; when they did it was subtle, as in the occasional, usually uncommented printing of photographs taken by members of photo circles. Rather than truly being a “mass organ” of photography, it remained a publication produced for the (imagined) photographing masses by members of an elite.

\textit{Soviet Photo} is overwhelmingly textual, not visual, and articles and photographs often convey conflicting messages, as with the photograph of a radio tower and the article on artistic softness that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Untitled accounting of the journal’s selections and activities in the first half of 1930, \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 11 (June 1930): 323.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} “Chto proideno i chto vpered,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 194–198, here 196.
\end{itemize}
I mentioned in the opening. While the visual materials greatly vary within many issues—in style and content—the written contributions are somewhat consistent in their message at any given time and they provide a clearer story, making it easier to trace the journal’s development. The texts and images thus often seem to tell conflicting histories. Where possible, however, I have tried to examine instances in which photographs and written texts work in concert and where their differences are productive.

Given *Soviet Photo*’s self-declared mass orientation and the accessibility that its relatively low price suggests, it appears confusing and more than a little backwards for *Soviet Photo*’s authors to refer to some photographic reproductions as mezzotints. That printing technique was outdated by the twentieth century and has immediate associations with artistic skill and handicraft. It has never been associated with photography. There are three reasons why a Soviet photography publication would seem to utilize a technique so strongly associated with individual, low-technology forms of artistic work. One is that the term “mezzotint” may have carried positive associations with the skill, learnedness, and tradition of high art. Another factor is that, outdated or not, the mezzotint offered tonal qualities that seemed most comparable with those of photographic reproductions. In the influential book *Art of the Day* (1925), Nikolai Tarabukin devoted a chapter to the mechanics of reproducing photographs, though the chapter actually begins with the history of printmaking starting with Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and other major figures from the 1400s and 1500s. Among other things, Tarabukin noted that mezzotints have tonal differences that were not offered

25. The mezzotint technique dates to the early seventeenth century. It is laborious: first a craftsman evenly roughens a metal plate, usually copper, with a rocker, a bladed tool with many points. The rocker must pass over every part of the plate and roughen the whole equally. An artist then uses a scraper (or burnisher) to make some areas smooth again. During the printing process, the rough surfaces take on ink while the smoothed ones do not, resulting in areas of white in the finished print. Mezzotints can achieve a high degree of tonal differences because the scraping allows for many mid-tones and a high level of detail. By the nineteenth century, advances in technology rendered the mezzotint outdated.
by other media until the rise of photography. Notwithstanding a preference for the quality offered by mezzotints, the last, and ultimately most significant, rationale behind Soviet Photo’s terminology is that “mezzotint” was likely a general term in Russian at the time. It appears in Soviet encyclopedias of the 1920s and ’30s in discussions of photomechanical processes. These encyclopedia entries indicate that the word mezzotint was used almost synonymously with another half-tone process, rotogravure, when speaking of reproductions made from metal plates that are wrapped around printing rollers (tifdruck, from the German Tiefdruck). Although Soviet Photo’s use of “mezzotint” appears unusual, un-modern, and backwards, the impression is misleading and should probably not be understood as an indication of the printing technology that its publisher, Ogonek, used.

Three photographs from 1931 provide a closer impression of the printing technologies that were in use. Roman Karmen’s Conveyer at Izvestia’s printer and S. Luchininov’s Paper each show the processes or materials necessary for fully mechanized serial printing (figs. 0.10 and 0.11). V. Shishkin’s Company Newspaper, by contrast, shows a young woman making multiple editions by hand, going over a sheet with a wooden roller and with more sheets of printed papers lying about (fig. 0.12). Soviet Photo never wrote on the technology of printing newspapers or periodicals during the entire period I have studied, only the technology that an individual photographer would require for her or his prints, enlargements, and so on. Press production and printing almost never appear in the abundant photographs of factories. It is ironic that Soviet Photo would leave out this information, which could have been interesting and even necessary for an aspiring photojournalist or curious amateur wanting to imagine or participate in the mass distribution of her or his work.


27. Bol’shia sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1st ed., s.v. “Glbokaia pechat’” and “Fotomekhanicheskie sposoby pechataniia.” Due to Soviet Photo’s lack of discussion about their printing technology, I do not have a more precise term than “mezzotint” for referring to the higher-quality reproductions of photographs. For this reason I will continue to use it in the following chapters, and it appears in the footnotes as well.
Finally, this dissertation intentionally neglects some of the themes and phenomena that receive sustained attention in *Soviet Photo*. Among these are the development of technical practices of photography in the USSR; subfields such as aerial photography, photography in or of the Red Army, photography’s uses in the natural sciences; reports on contemporary photography outside the USSR; and the depiction of the USSR’s non-Russian ethnicities. While some of these fields are fascinating and rich—ethnographic photography in particular has received increasing attention recently—they lie beyond the scope of this project. I am instead concerned with issues that relate more directly to photography, photography’s political uses, and art history.

**Review of the Literature**

Most Western scholarship on Soviet photography of the 1920s and 1930s has focused on the avant-garde and montage, also examining the connections that existed between the Soviet avant-garde and its Western counterparts. The scholarship delves into the relationship between photography and other mediums, such as designs made by the Constructivists and poster art. In the last fifteen years, monographic studies and exhibitions have provided more opportunity to consider the political and cultural context of their respective subjects, leading to more nuanced consideration of photographers’ political engagement and the potential ethical ramifications of their work during the Stalin period. In these studies, *Soviet Photo* is used (if at all) exclusively as a source for quotations critical of the avant-garde, as a way of showing that avant-garde artists were heavily criticized and pressured by the Soviet state. This one-track interest in Soviet avant-garde photography has resulted

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in art historical analyses and popular perceptions that frequently remain rooted in Modernist paradigms.\textsuperscript{30} This is particularly confounding and somewhat frustrating in light of the fact that as examples of Soviet photography slowly became more known in the West in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s, significant collections actually did, and do, bring together images by photographers who worked outside of the avant-garde.\textsuperscript{31} The collection amassed by Daniela Mrázková in Prague, which is now located at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, and the International Press Photo Collection in Stockholm, for example, both offer materials whose range of artistic styles and photographic subjects was not fully appreciated for a long period. They range from Pictorialist images from the 1910s to ’30s, to photographs that can easily fit into the Stalin cult of the 1930s, to iconic war photography from the Eastern Front, 1941–45. While Soviet photojournalism of the 1930s is already understood to have occupied a leading role and favorable ideological position, my work moves beyond this recognition to address what such photographs can tell us about the status of the medium and the period’s ideas about art.

In the catalogs and monographs that I review above, \textit{Soviet / Proletarian Photo} is a source but never a subject. As a result, its unique contributions remain invisible, subordinated to discussions about politics or individual artists’ careers. Moreover, it has been made to fit into styles and categories of analysis that come from the West, for example in its erroneous association with a supposed Soviet “straight photography.”\textsuperscript{32} By contrast, this project focuses on \textit{Soviet Photo} as a


\textsuperscript{32} Tupitsyn, \textit{Glaube, Hoffnung—Anpassung}, 148. She also credits Rodchenko with straight photography, but during the earlier part of the 1920s, in \textit{The Soviet Photograph}, 179f., note 23.
central publication of the period that, importantly, did not have its roots in the avant-garde even as some of its contributors were part of the avant-garde. Accordingly, there are several places where I engage with—and argue against—the received wisdom.

Erika Wolf’s research on *USSR in Construction* has been of great importance to this endeavor. She has sought and analyzed the continuities in 1930s Soviet photography, identifying multiple sources of Socialist Realism. Furthermore, she consistently refuses to categorize artists or works as being purely Modernist / avant-garde or purely Socialist Realist, focusing instead on the interrelationship between styles. Her work is critical to any understanding of Soviet photography, and has provided a formative model for this project because she also chose to study a single publication. Studying a publication offers a different perspective and a different history, with the possibility of questioning and even readjusting the canon. Katerina Romanenko’s recent dissertation examines 1930s Soviet visual culture in the illustrated press, studying how art was presented in mass media but not the art theory behind these practices. Nadezhda Drozdova-Pichurina’s dissertation on the paradigms of Soviet photography as seen through its presentation in exhibitions during the 1920s and ’30s addresses some of same events—and therefore the same photographers—as this dissertation, and also shares the approach of focusing on photography’s public manifestations rather than individual careers or biographies.

The study of press photography in the Soviet Union, and worker photography in the 1920s and ’30s, has also informed this work. Rosalinde Sartorti, Ursula Schlude, and Erika Wolf have traced specific instances of exchange, the photographs of individual workers, and the symbolism of

35. Nadezhda Nikolaevna Drozdova-Pichurina, *Reprezentatsiia khudozhestvennykh paradigmov sovetskogo fotoiskusstva: na materiale fotovystavok 1920–1930-kh godov* (Diss. kandidat isvusstvovedeniia, Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, 2013). Thus far I have only been able to access Drozdova-Pichurina’s *avtoreferat*, which summarizes her materials and methodology but does not reveal her arguments and theses.
photographs in the press.\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Soviet Photo} is both source and subject for worker photography in the USSR. This field of inquiry is significant because it addresses photography’s potential social and political meanings, and indicates an area of photography that was international in scope, but not associated with the artistic avant-garde. The worker photography movement was one aspect of the amateur and photo-correspondent movements that I address in Chapters One and Two.

To date, \textit{Soviet Photo} has been the topic of a small number of studies. A dissertation in journalism by Nataliia Zakovyrina investigates the journal’s history, examines it within the context of Soviet censorship, and offers analysis of three major themes or historical periods (the response to foreign photography, the formalism-naturalism debate of the mid-1930s, and the impact that the Socialist Realist method had on the history of photography).\textsuperscript{37} Zakovyrina’s historical research has sometimes been a guide for this project. Her work is not in art history and she rarely addresses individual photographs, and so her analysis bypasses significant questions about photography’s nature and meaning, how photographers worked or should work, and the specific relationship of style and politics. A catalog essay by Aleksandr Lavrentiev, published on the occasion of \textit{Soviet Photography of the 1920s and 1930s: From Pictorialism and Modernism to Socialist Realism}, includes a very brief, simplified survey of the magazine’s history from 1926 to 1933 as a way of representing the history of Soviet photography in that period.\textsuperscript{38} His use of the journal, however, is always only as a foil for the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko, whose significance is Lavrentiev’s central concern.


\textsuperscript{37} Nataliia Stanislavovna Zakovyrina, \textit{Osobennosti razvitiia sovetskoi fotozhurnalistiki 1920–1930-kh gg. i zhurnal Sovetskoe foto} (Diss. kandidat nauk, State University of Saint Petersburg, 2007).

Two relatively recent Russian-language volumes offer valuable contributions to scholarship on visual culture in Russia and mass media. *Eye-witness history: On problems in visual history in twentieth-century Russia* and *Soviet power and media* both collect essays on art, visual culture and the media. The first of the two looks to the “visual turn” in scholarship and seeks to integrate the visual into historical study. The second is more exclusively devoted to political themes, coming out of the long-term research project “The Political as Communicative Space in History” at the University of Bielefeld, Germany. Both of these collections are relevant for a study of *Soviet Photo* because they productively address visual culture, including photography, without limiting their approaches to the framework of any single academic field and provide models for integrating knowledge of history into the study of the visual.

*Soviet Photo* became the USSR’s main forum for developing Socialist Realism in photography, but has not yet been used extensively to examine it as a style or a method, as Socialist Realism was more commonly referred to in the USSR. Recent work on Socialist Realism in other mediums has nevertheless provided a guide for my analysis. In the past several years it has become more common to examine Socialist Realist art as art, studying the careers of individual artists and shifts within Socialist Realist doctrine itself. Approaches have ranged from studying the oeuvre of one artist to studying Socialist Realism as institutional history. The condemning moral stance that long underlay study of Socialist Realism and Stalinist culture has given way to acknowledgement that even under a

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Winkler (Vienna: Museen der Stadt Wien, 2002), 17–26. The same exhibition was held in Winterthur in 2004, accompanied by identical catalog essays. Oddly, *Soviet Photo* appears with the wrong gender—*sovjetskoje* instead of *sovjetskaia*—throughout the German translations in both catalogs. Also, Lavrentiev mistakenly wrote that *Proletarian Photo* returned to its original title, *Soviet Photo*, in 1933. It was 1934.


totalitarian political regime and in times of violence, artists worked in a gray area that offered limited
degree to position oneself. The present dissertation similarly moves beyond the perception of
Socialist Realism as a two-dimensional mouthpiece of the state to explore its early history and the
gray areas that remained even after its official instatement.

Theoretical and historical approaches to the work of artists in (or under) the Stalinist regime
have been developed perhaps most prominently by philosopher and critic Boris Groys. Groys’s
ideas do not provide an adequate model for this study for numerous reasons. In The Total Art of
Stalinism, he covers three major periods in Soviet art history—avant-garde, Stalinist culture, and the
“post-utopian,” including Sots Art—to understand the origins and successors of Stalinist culture.41
His conflation of total visions of art with real totalitarian violence reveals a distinct moral judgment
of Socialist Realism. Both artists and the Socialist Realist method become, for him, guilty parties in
association with an oppressive regime. He describes culture under Stalin without making it possible
to understand Socialist Realism’s development, how its images work, or what might motivate an
artist to work in that method. My approach here has been the opposite of Groys’s: to take a set of
images and a set of accompanying texts and study them as particular but significant manifestations
of culture in the Stalin period.

Yuri Lotman (1922–1993; sometimes spelled Jurij) was a philologist, cultural theorist, and
leading figure in the Moscow-Tartu Semiotics School whose work offers a counterpoint to Groys’s
conception of Socialist Realism and enables a different method for studying it. His thought is a
valuable guide here because, as one scholar put it, he was “deeply concerned with answering a
vexing, if morally unavoidable question, namely the degree to which the self retains freedom and

autonomy in an oppressive socio-political environment.” Lotman himself did not formulate his overarching project in that way. Regardless, a semiotic approach to Socialist Realism seems fruitful because it can take into account what role art plays within a larger system of interactions. By keeping Lotman in mind we can depart from totalitarian models in the study of Socialist Realism by analyzing how attempts to homogenize culture may sometimes lead to its diversification instead. I seek to do exactly that.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One examines the central project of Soviet Photo’s early years, the amateur photography movement. Remembering Jørn Guldberg’s suggestion that Socialist Realism be approached through institutional history, I have extended that idea to the preceding period as a way of understanding the journal’s project to organize, motivate, and teach amateur photographers from all over the USSR. Organization and teaching took the shape of working groups, activities, critiques, and the ever-present hope for more communication and engagement on the photographers’ part. The lessons pertained to visual genres such as portraiture; style; and behavioral matters like one’s attitude and approach toward photography. This chapter argues that Soviet Photo’s attempt to organize, motivate, and unify all photographers under one program was idealistic but unrealistic, and ultimately failed for both lack of compliance and due to officials’ redirection of their support to the worker-correspondent movement. This failure highlights the difficulty of speaking about any “mass movement” in the arts in connection with government control, and in particular, the impossibility of speaking in any general way about “Soviet photography.”

Chapter Two addresses the shift from amateur photography to worker-correspondent photography. Beginning in 1929, photographers were now understood as members of the press. Newspapers and other publications were supposed to oversee them. Here again, compliance proved difficult. Most amateurs appear not to have participated in this vision for their photographic work, and nor did newspapers accept them. At the same time, the divide remained between amateurs, worker photographers, and professional photojournalists. Here I argue that the all-encompassing vision of a unified photography movement, working in pre-defined ways, did not correspond to the press’s wishes or to photographers’ practical possibilities. At the same time, there are photographs that show how mass-oriented or mass-generated work would have looked.

I devote Chapters Three and Four to exploring the so-called “creative discussion” of 1928–32 between avant-garde and proletarian artists, examining how Soviet Photo’s role in that discussion has been misinterpreted and making use of its photographs and texts to better understand the views of the avant-garde’s antagonists. It is crucial to remember that the context of this discussion was not the history of Modernism in which it is so often placed; rather, it was the broader project to consolidate and Sovietize amateurs’ work. At the same time, the debates actually revolve around artists’ concerns, not the concerns of the amateur photo circles or photo-correspondents. By studying the ideologically loaded language of the period, I demonstrate that the stakes of the discussion were not only art’s relationship to current political campaigns, but also the very understanding of how the medium can and should function. Documentary photography had a negative connotation for Soviet Photo’s writers, but not for avant-garde artists. With Soviet Photo frequently cast as a purely reactionary journal in these years, the avant-garde is thus elevated in status. Following the 1932 decree “On Restructuring Literary and Arts Organizations,” artistic freedom was not eliminated, as scholars have long supposed. While it is certainly true that the avant-garde group Oktiabr’ (October) was liquidated along with its enemies, including ROPF and the main
amateur organization OZPKF (the Russian Association for Proletarian Photography and Society for Proletarian Cinema and Photography, respectively), the major actors from each group were not effectively silenced thereafter. Photographers found gray areas in which they could continue making photographs in their preferred style(s), despite the pressure to conform and the danger of losing one’s standing entirely.

Chapter Five is devoted to Socialist Realism. I examine how and when the major terms of Socialist Realism were applied to photography. *Soviet Photo* is a unique source in this regard because it reveals much about attempts to apply these theoretical categories to photography as a medium, despite their being more easily applied to literature than to visual art. Socialist Realism surfaced more in how photographers went about their work and represented it in writing than in the images themselves. It becomes clear that this definition and theorization work took place before Socialist Realism was declared the sole acceptable artistic method in 1934. Yet there was neither a lasting understanding of what it meant for a photograph to be and look Soviet and proletarian, nor a clear or monolithic idea of what Socialist Realism was. The high degree of variety and confusion among the images is tied in part to the fact that there was no clear line on what was acceptable. In an ironic twist, the introduction of Socialist Realism led to an important opening when landscape was reintroduced as an acceptable subject following years of its negative association with pre-Revolutionary tastes. I also examine certain moments in the careers of particular photographers, using figures who were central to photographic development to better understand the period.

*Note on transliteration and translation*

Transliterations from the Russian follow the Library of Congress method. Exceptions have been permitted in quotations from others, published titles and names, and where names were transliterated differently during people’s lifetimes. For example, Maksim Gor’kii is Maxim Gorky
and Maks Al'pert is Max Alpert. When named in the text, the titles of books and journals are rendered in English. All translations are my own unless cited otherwise.
Chapter One: Instructing the Masses

“The Task of the Press is the Education of the Masses”
—El Lissitzky and Sergei Sen’kin, the title of a photo-frieze at Presa, Cologne, 1928

*Soviet Photo* sought to shape the behavior and group identity of the USSR’s photographers by instructing them on what and how to photograph. In this chapter I examine how the journal instructed its readers to take good Soviet photographs and thus be good Soviet photographers. The journal, which sought to reach both amateurs and professionals, pursued its own vision. Its aim was to unify and standardize photographers’ working methods, attitudes, subjects, styles. Had this project been successful, it would have resulted in photographs that reached a broad public in order to illuminate life and work in the USSR, while also communicating political ideals and inspiring further political and social commitment on the viewers’ parts. It would also have meant that there were no exceptions to the rule. This chapter will address that dream, as well as its ultimate failure.

While *Soviet Photo* often wrote for beginning photographers—an audience whose identity could hypothetically be molded for the work ahead—other texts and images offer parallel instruction to readers who already had extensive knowledge of photography and were to be reshaped as Soviet photographers.

When *Soviet Photo* spoke of what characterized a “Soviet” photographer, the editors took for granted that the label could be understood to refer to a citizen of the USSR whose mentality, class background, profession, associations, and political allegiance were in fitting with Marxist-Leninist principles. By leaving the definition open, they allowed the possibility that anything they argued for or against could be placed in the categories of Soviet and un-Soviet. As a result, only one thing was truly clear: Soviet photographers still had to be made, either through education or re-education.¹ The

¹ Other sources on this history acknowledge the importance of the amateur movement and its connection to early press photography, but do not examine it in detail or analyze the specific stylistic lessons taught to amateur photographers in *Soviet Photo*. See A. L. Sokol’ skaia, “Fotoliubitel’stvo,” in *Samodeiatel’noe khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo v SSSR: Ocherki*
more proletarian markers a person had, the better; they included class background, job, pastimes, or associations. The persistence of separate categories for new and old amateurs, and new and old professionals, reveals that whatever the abstract ideal of the Soviet photographer may have been, the practice of photography remained entrenched in older habits. This tension is revealed in an early cover image, in which a carefully groomed young man squints into the viewfinder of a camera as though to personify photography (figure 1.1). The image is noteworthy for two reasons. One is that it is not representative of Soviet photographers’ equipment: the camera’s small dimensions would have made it a rarity in the USSR in 1926. Another is that the man is shown alone, as a subject in and of himself and without his own photographic subject. As this chapter will show, the lone photographer actually carried more negative associations than positive ones.

There were three categories of instruction directed at readers, from privileged ones like the man in the photograph down to beginners: technical (including use of equipment and chemicals), organizational (how to work in a photo circle comprised of other amateurs), and programmatic or ideological. But Soviet Photo never openly reflected on its own ideological stance and identified the sources of its technical and organizational contributions, but not the sources of programmatic content. As long as the private company Ogonek was Soviet Photo’s publisher, the authority by which the journal presumed to reshape older photographers’ practice was not obvious.

Soviet Photo taught its readers what was “good” and “bad” using images as examples. Verbal instruction on what photographers and their circles should do was usually more extensive. Visual

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2. Writing on the photo circles were Boltianskii, Vladimirov, Volodin, Katsenelenbogen, Liubitskii, Parkhomenko, Pol’ster, Toll’, Tereshchenko, Timofeev; on technical questions, Bunimovich, Grokhovskii, Domaradskii, Makarov, Mikulin, Mikhailov, I. A. Pavlov, N. Petrov, Sosin, Chibisov, Iashitold-Govorko. “Ot redaktsii Sovetskogo foto,” Sovetskoe foto no. 3 (February 1930): 96. Some of these names were also linked to the bourgeois, Pictorialist journal Photographer and professional work in the pre-Revolutionary era.
examples of good photography, presented for emulation, were generally analyzed briefly if at all, while negative examples (poor photographs) were more likely to be explicated at length. At one point, readers were instructed not to develop too much enthusiasm for any single aspect of photography. The dangers lay in getting too involved in theory, becoming a “clicking photographer” (‘shchelkunov’fotograf, one who clicks the shutter too much), not photographing enough to make one’s work visible, and not knowing enough history of photography. The desirable balance of skills and knowledge, the journal seemed to hope, would lead to the formation of “a group of [politically] conscious amateurs not only able to ‘capture the moment’, but also able to consistently and persistently work under all conditions.” In other words, an amateur photographer should be informed enough to have achieved consciousness and work well and reliably, but not so familiar with theory or history as to get distracted from the work of producing photographs. The journal thus placed emphasis on achieving expertise in technique as opposed to theory. This focus on achieving expertise in all potential technical issues helps to explain the journal’s overall focus on written instructions and diagrams pertaining to optics, equipment, the chemistry of developing, printing, and so on. Statements about meaning, interpretation, or definition provided guidelines but were not intended to invite contributions or discussion.

Here I examine Soviet Photo’s early approach to creating Soviet photographers, covering the period 1926–1932. The journal’s approach was institutional, often relying on the simple logic that if a person were fully integrated into the right groups, then his or her work would automatically begin to show that. This was the case until 1931, after which point the institutional focus weakened. The ideal photographic subject became an institution in its own right, as the repeated calls for photographs of Soviet subjects like construction and social classes latched onto broader phenomena of contemporary discourse. The current chapter’s examination of the photo circles’ teaching and

leadership rests on articles and photographs. Yet amateur photographers were not to be trained by articles and photo circles alone. The editors also emphasized participation through wall newspapers, contests, and consultations that offered opportunities to photograph subjects that were of social, economic, or political relevance to the organizers. Editors evaluated photographs not only using aesthetic or technical criteria, but also with an eye to their suitability for printing in the press or wall newspapers. By focusing on the necessity of good photographs for wall newspapers and the press, the journal indicated that a significant social role and eventual prominence would be a good photographer’s reward. The circles’ work, contest submissions, and readers’ images sent in for review represented opportunities to instruct through positive and negative examples. These discussions largely bypassed the concurrent debates among artists. At the same time, the lessons offer an answer to what Soviet photography was and was thought to do, and they propose a strategy that is focused on the masses as consumers and producers of images. As I show here, a “Soviet” photograph was one created in an institutionalized or communal setting, by a person of the right political attitude, for consumption in the right kind of forum. There were also requirements of what it should depict, and in what style. Soviet Photo wanted to teach its readers to find and understand Socialist subjects, but all of these attempts suffered from a lack of adequate and appropriate material. The subsequent lack of positive results highlights why and how the project failed.

Getting Involved: Photo Circles, Contests, and Critique

Photo circles, which were made up of photographers who shared experiences and materials in the manner of hobbyists, were not a Soviet invention. Instead of inventing a new method of organizing civil society, Soviet Photo laid claim to institutions that had existed since the 1880s4 by addressing the members of existing photo circles and seeking to support the formation of new ones. A photo circle

4. Stignevev, Fototvorchestvo Rossii, 10.
(фотокружок) was typically made up of anywhere between five and sixty members. During the Soviet period they could be hosted by factories, workers’ clubs, villages, Red Army units, and other professional or social institutions. The circles were subject of many articles from 1926 through 1932, they are mentioned in frequent boldface exhortations to readers, and eventually *Soviet Photo* printed a small number of images submitted by them. At no point does a photo circle receive credit for the authorship of any of the journal’s many articles; nor are the authors of circle-related articles or the editors clearly identified as members or leaders of photo circles themselves (scattered references indicate that the authors were sometimes the leaders of photo circles, but there were no identifying bylines). The voice of each article thus appears to come from outside the photographic movement, not from an author on the ground. This even becomes visible in a 1929 photograph of eleven editorial board members, only one of whom is associated with the actual circles. Perhaps predictably, then, the articles contain advice and instructions on how the photo circles should work, while rarely reporting the activities of any particular group. The photos circles comprised one element of what a Soviet and proletarian photographer was because active membership was represented as a prerequisite to anyone’s making appropriate photographs. They thus form the core of *Soviet Photo*’s work and message during that period. In seeking to promote photo circles, *Soviet Photo* sought to modify older photographers’ work and impress new photographers with the right character from the very beginning. In the coming years, photography was increasingly represented as a catalyst for Socialist building, and photography itself was increasingly represented as a Socialist activity.

On page four of its very first issue, *Soviet Photo* imparted the seven main recommendations

6. Anonymous, *One of the extended meetings at Soviet Photo (Odno iz rasshirennykhyh redaktsionnykh zasedaniy Sovetskogo foto)*, printed in *Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 197. D. Bunimovich of Leningrad was the only person clearly associated with photo circles.
for photo circles’ organization and activities. They were that each club should have a photography laboratory for all members’ use; a centralized course of instruction for all photography teachers must be established; the groups should hold exhibitions of their work; the circles’ work should be reproduced in book form for local consumers; illustrated journals should organize contests for amateur photographers; people making political propaganda should have to learn photography as well so they can make use of it; and amateur photographers working alone should be given access to the photography labs in workers’ clubs in exchange for getting involved in holding lectures and exhibitions. Most of these points were later expanded upon in some form or another for photo circles’ readers. We learn from these expanded instructions that photo circles should not limit themselves to the appreciation of photography; they should make photographs themselves and always improve their work. The insistence on exhibitions, publication, and contests shows a strong public orientation, and no suggestions ever pertained to a photographer’s personal development or the private use of his or her work. Soviet Photo represented itself as a forum in which photo circles could learn about and from each other but only rarely included reports on exemplary photo circles, detailing facts about their membership, material supplies, and where their photographs could be seen. As historical sources, these reports have limited use because they do not capture what was typical, only what was different in some way. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the most active or advanced photo circles worked under the leadership of engineers or workers who had come to Soviet Russia from the West.

According to “How a workers’ photo circle should work,” each photo circle must have a leader, at least one camera, a lab, teaching, advice, and financial support from its members, which

may come from selling photographic prints. It should use meetings to discuss the questions: “for whom should we photograph, what should we photograph, and how should we photograph?” (для кого снимать, что снимать и как снимать?). Of course, though these are the questions posed, the answers were already obvious to any attentive reader: members should photograph for their own wall newspapers, illustrating the things that are written about. Content might be about the fight against hooliganism, the economic order, the raising of labor productivity, or whatever other local campaigns were publicized in writing on the wall newspaper in writing. The anonymous author of this advice stopped short of suggesting individual motifs.

Such illustrations for wall newspapers were only the beginning. The goal of every photo circle should be the placement of “photo-correspondence” in illustrated magazines at the local, state, or all-union level. It is both telling and typical that this article treats photography as a means for illustrating social campaigns and written journalism. The impression conveyed by the initial years of Soviet Foto, however, is frequently contradictory. At times, it is that of a complementary medium that cannot stand on its own, and whose practitioners rely on outside instruction to find their subjects. At others, the medium is praised for its ability to capture readers’ attention and translate ideas, opening the possibility of a journal without text: “Our primary aspiration is a newspaper without text—illustrations that speak for themselves.”

Just as photographs themselves (in subject matter and presentation) were not supposed to stand alone, but be integrated into communication and propaganda media, photographers also were not supposed to be independent. In addition to the educational opportunities offered by membership in a photo circle, readers were increasingly told that the very act of working in a group expressed one element of what it is was to be a Soviet photographer. The distinct characteristic of

10. Ibid.
Soviet amateur photography, the journal claimed, was that it was alien (чуждий) to any kind of individualism. The unnamed author of one lead article declared that,

...organizations leading the photo-amateur movement, with the energetic support of all the proletarian photo-amateur masses, should commence the most decisive fight against the individualist deviation in amateur photography. It must be said, frankly and once and for all, that the photo-amateur who uses the camera exclusively for his private and “familial” needs, for the endless photographing of his own “dear relatives,” friends and acquaintances, cannot truthfully lay claim to the title of Soviet amateur photographer... By the same measure we should declare war on unprincipled pseudo-artful photographing, and on the narrowly aesthetic photographic search, and on that which lacks our social directive.12

Slogans printed in bold, large, capital letters in many issues from 1929 and 1930 make statements like: “On the 12th anniversary of [the October Revolution] there should be neither a single ‘homeless’ photo-amateur, nor a single wall newspaper without a photo-amateur, nor a single photo-amateur without a wall newspaper.”13 Striking a similarly urgent tone, another contributor noted that many photographers in rural areas were “homeless photographers” by necessity, lacking in community or nearby connections.14 His term “foto-besprizorniki” would have been recognized at the time as borrowing a term from the pressing social issue of orphaned or abandoned children, who are estimated to have numbered in the millions following the Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Civil War, and the concomitant destruction of traditional family structures. The term “homeless photographer” is all the more harsh when one considers the desolate conditions in which many homeless children lived. The image *Homeless* illustrates the point, showing a young, barefoot boy in torn clothes, with dirt on his legs, and with his mouth hanging open as he eats—though his relatively fresh-looking haircut suggests that the shot was staged (fig. 1.2). It is an image made to garner aversion, not sympathy. *Soviet Photo’s* response to unsupervised photographers was likewise negative, one of censure and warning.

The comparison of lone photographers with abandoned children exaggerated the situation,

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but the author’s and editors’ choice is indicative of the urgency with which they saw the matter. If homeless children were a danger both to themselves and to society, then the photographer who worked alone was, too. There was an underlying assumption that a photographer who chose to work alone must be devoting him- or herself to improper subject matter, as though the individual photographer must automatically be devoted to subjects that could not interest a broader group. They would remain bourgeois, part of a minority and making photographs for a minority that was stuck in the pre-revolutionary past. As the author(s) who railed against individualism argued, photographers should be involved in “all economic, cultural and other campaigns which are carried out by the party and the Soviet authorities must be conducted using photography for agitation, propaganda, and organization.”15 This conflation of structured activity and photographic subject precluded the possibility that a member of a photo circle may still engage in his or her own personal experiments, choose subject matter that bored others, or take a particular view. If each group had a leader then it would become more difficult to pursue individual projects out of sight of other photographers.

In a context that emphasized one’s group ties and social relevance, how did photo circles tie into further social or work-related organizations? Close reading of the instructions given to the photo circles reveals that there was some lack of clarity on what institutions would oversee them. The importance of the group leader in overseeing members’ photographic education and activity is evident in descriptions of their tasks and in the notification that the MGSPS (Moscow Gubernia Union of Trade Unions) would hold a course to train the leaders of photo circles.16 The leader of a group should provide assistance and leadership, and keep it connected with larger organizations and organs of oversight. The leadership of photo circles was thus supposed to be tied to the leadership

of trade unions, but there is little clarity about what institutions would have held which responsibilities, or whether there was simply a great deal of overlap in the institutionalization of amateur photography. For example, in December 1929, Soviet Photo’s editors and the Central Committee of the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (ODSK) published a lead article suggesting that each circle should name a representative to Soviet Photo and ODSK, which was an amateur organization. A leader of a photo circle would thus maintain ties to amateur organizations and trade unions, conceivably receiving instruction and oversight from both. Though couched in terms of encouraging greater use of the journal by all amateurs, the six major tasks of the representative might be read as enabling centralized, direct surveillance of photographers’ activities. The representative was supposed to register with Soviet Photo and be responsible for reading it earlier than the others and reporting on its content; write in to share information about the activities of the circle, and encourage others to do the same; increase participation in contents; select photos for submission to the journal; present readers’ questions or criticisms to the editors; and help others initiate or renew subscriptions. 17 The sviazist (literally: a person who works in telegraph communications) should serve the group and keep it in touch with the figures of authority at Soviet Photo. 18 These articles articulate in full what had already been advocated for months in commands such as, “Don’t forget to send the editors of Soviet Photo the address of your photo circle and information on its composition.” 19 During the space of approximately eight weeks in 1929, there was a repeated request for information on rural (i.e., located outside of Moscow) photographic activity from readers; they are asked to write in and inform the editors on the state of the photo-movement

18. B. D., “Chto dolzhen delat’ sviazist’?”, Sovetskoe foto no. 23 (December 1929): 712f.
in their city, region, village, business, institution, army unit, and so on.\textsuperscript{20} Apparently, readers had not yet complied with earlier, subtler requests for information and registration. Moreover, driven by the large number of what the editors of Soviet Photo felt were bad photographs received as submissions, the journal undertook measures to connect more effectively with amateurs and create a better network for teaching them.

The cumulative result of Soviet Photo’s repeated suggestions is that all amateurs must work within a group, and the group would report to a higher authority. Under this system, no individual anywhere could make work that flouted the lessons read and practiced collectively. A collection and control mechanism such as the one envisioned here would undermine the bourgeois individualism of the independently active amateur and ensure that only approved content would get photographed and presented. Ideally, every photographer and photo circle would take photographs that follow the same techniques recommended by an editorial board in Moscow and look for the same subject matter all over the Soviet Union in order to inject it with one value set. Photographic productions would be standardized and homogenized. This top-down structure would also have carried the potential for information to move up: with a representative’s name on file at the journal or with ODSK, responsibility for technically poor or thematically inappropriate photography could be reported to the next higher authority—a form of potential political, not just artistic or journalistic, surveillance.

The context of these calls to work collectively—the late 1920s and early 1930s—is that of the cultural revolution. During this time, agitation and propaganda supporting the regime came under more concerted, unified efforts. The increasing consolidation of amateur photographers into circles and the attempt to direct their work was part of the same consolidation that affected the arts and literature beginning around 1925–1927. In recent scholarship, much discussion of the cultural

\textsuperscript{20} untitled announcement, Sovetskoe foto no. 21 (November 1929): 672.
revolution has come to center on the question of whether it was top-down or bottom-up, but either way, mass membership in organizations that made agitational or propagandistic materials was one way of both enacting the cultural revolution and ensuring its further spread, not to mention generating material that would be “legible” to the masses because it came from the masses. The example of photo circles also shows how a top-down effort (browbeat photographers to join photo circles so older experts can teach new members, and new members can help move away from the older members’ individual interests) could become bottom-up (the “right” photographs will then be made and used, thus encouraging the production of even more with ever less need for outside pressure).

But a second reading of the push for photographers to join photo circles might focus on increasing control from the top. As Peter Kenez has observed in his discussion of cinema history at the same time,

In this period, cultural revolution represented a resurgence of utopian notions about the nature of culture and politics and a demand for a complete break with the past. More specifically, the cultural pluralism that had existed from 1921 to 1928 was to be rejected. Under these circumstances the enemy was no longer an abstraction, but flesh and blood: anyone who aimed at protecting the tiniest bit of cultural autonomy.

An autonomous photographer not only would have owned and monopolized some of the rare equipment that the photo circles so badly needed, but could be a class enemy on the basis of that ownership—with an entire attitude finding visual expression in photography. Not even the photo circles were free of the suspicion that they might represent the class enemy. As readers were taught in 1928, circles dedicated to all kinds of interests and activities had appeared in the country; however, they could support bourgeois, religious, fascist, “liberal-pacifist,” or other views. “Our”

(Soviet or proletarian) collectives, on the other hand, served the development of conscious, healthy individuals who would work for society’s interests.\(^{23}\) By 1929, the photo circles thus transitioned from being loosely organized groups providing lessons and supplies for hobbyists, to fulfilling a crucial social function.\(^{24}\) Providing a base for “homeless” photographers (bourgeois photographers, that is, who needed a home within the new social structures) also bore a social aspect because it represented an opportunity to integrate more people into Soviet society. This also ties into the goals of *Soviet Photo*’s founder, Mikhail Kol’tsov, to build and use Soviet photojournalism as an antidote to bourgeois amateur work. The first steps to creating Soviet photojournalists out of bourgeois amateurs could be to change the direction of their work by influencing the photo circles, and exposing them to critique and reward through more public forums like wall newspapers. Until the USSR could produce the equipment that would make it possible to outnumber the old amateurs with the young and the newly trained, the journal had to pressure existing photo-circles and professionals to change direction. The transition from a bourgeois-amateur to a worker-amateur identity was thus as important as the photographs themselves. But there was a problem: photographers would become Soviet through oversight of their work, but first they would have to choose to submit to that oversight. *Soviet Photo* never acknowledged that there was little incentive for an amateur with a private camera to give up that exclusive ownership. Their project would always have to remain an ideal, rather than a reality, because they had no mechanism for enforcing participation.

A photograph published in 1929 demonstrates how teaching was supposed to be conducted but also—and accidentally—reveals more about how the groups were comprised. In the photo circle (fig. 1.3), submitted by a photo circle as collective author, shows a group of men gathered at a table to learn about optics from a teacher at a blackboard. The teacher has drawn a *camera obscura*-like box

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with lines indicating where light enters and where an image appears, and the well-intentioned students sit poised to take notes. There is no camera obscura, lens, or other equipment in sight with which the teacher could demonstrate his point.

The students appear to be rank-and-file sailors dressed in white naval overshirts, while the man conducting the lecture at a chalkboard wears a uniform. His jacket has brass buttons, an (unidentifiable) insignia on the wristband and possibly stripes of rank, while his stiff hat has a badge above the rim. The uniform is out of focus and unidentifiable, but it nevertheless clearly indicates the wearer’s high status. The caption suggests that the photo circle was run by the Consolidated School of the Training Squadron of the Black Sea Naval Forces in Sevastopol (Crimea). The photo circle members were thus clearly amateurs, but acquiring skills in a traditional classroom setting and not on their own. This constellation may be transferrable to other situations. In a factory photo circle, for example, workers might benefit from the knowledge of an engineer who could teach them technical skills. The educational background of a photo circle’s teacher or older members was often associated with privilege, and so the social role of the circle went both ways. On one hand, it was a context that could provide visual materials for agitation and propaganda. On the other, it was a context where older, privileged members would pass on their knowledge to younger people of different backgrounds and become more “Soviet” themselves through the collective setting.

In addition to providing teachers, a factory or military setting also would have provided an audience for the photo circle’s production. The main local forum for a photographer to show his or her work was a wall newspaper. The wall newspaper as a medium was used to disseminate information and propaganda in all manner of institutions (factories, schools, offices, barracks) and it generally held texts, not images, on large sheets of paper posted on walls or stands. It was produced

regularly and was considered to be a part of the press, whose education and propaganda importance to the Central Committee of the USSR can hardly be understated. A Party resolution from 1924 mentioned wall newspapers for the first time, issuing the directive, “Wall and oral newspapers are to be developed at places of work and army posts, and they are to be adapted to the political and economic tasks of the moment.” The newspapers engaged in political, economic, and social campaigns, and they encouraged readers to behave in certain ways. Content was often pedagogical but also contained news in note form, and anyone who was able to write could be a contributor because production was collective. Wall newspapers were published by individual enterprises beginning in the early 1920s. Illustrations were frequent but photographs almost never appeared. A 1924 guide to making wall newspapers, for example, devoted several pages to the subject of illustrations without once mentioning photography. Soviet Photo’s frequent exhortation not to have “a single photo-amateur without a wall newspaper,” usually presented as a stand-alone slogan among other content, not only encouraged photographers to make their work public, but also sought to have all amateurs directly serve the Party’s goals with their photographs. Soviet Photo’s main goal regarding wall newspapers was to make photography a part of them.

The wall newspapers were discussed far more often than they were reproduced, making it difficult to gauge how readers responded to the journal’s instructions. From the very beginning, Soviet Photo constantly encouraged readers to participate in their making, but only published one

28. I do not know how frequently, if at all, the editing of a wall newspaper was conducted by other people than the writers.
reproduction before 1929. One reason why photographers did not contribute more newspapers, or their work in them, to *Soviet Photo* may have been shortage of material. Yet it is unclear what, exactly, the photographs in a wall newspaper were supposed to show. Reproductions of wall newspapers did not accompany reviews of them; once, the photo circle that made one was even shown in a group portrait without their newspaper. It appears that *Soviet Photo* never realized its campaign for the universal inclusion of photographs in wall newspapers, or did only to a very small extent—not least because photographs receive no mention in historical research on wall newspapers in the Soviet Union from the 1920s and ’30s. Like the idea of creating “masses” of Soviet amateurs, the photographic wall newspaper was a dream.

When readers of *Soviet Photo* finally got a look at wall newspapers, they were printed in such small dimensions that real criticism of their component images was and is impossible. The main concern was their overall form. Three wall newspapers under the heading “Primitive forms” were criticized in the captions as not following a clear organizational principle (fig. 1.4). According to the reviewer, the careful script of their titles and symmetrical arrangement were “mechanical” (that is, simply collecting images) and both text and image failed to agitate. The two wall newspapers presented under the heading “Who to learn from” received more positive reviews (fig. 1.5). Above, the design was considered “mediocre” but, on a positive note, the content was organized according to the photographs. Each image is located within a vertical column of writing, and they are clearly divided by lines and subheadings. As for the image below, the caption notes that horizontal orientation would be better than vertical and the heading “Lens” was not very understandable for peasants (who at the time were a majority in the Soviet population). The author believed that “lens,”

33. “Primitivnye formy,” *Sovetskoe foto* no. 6 (March 1930): 163.
referring to camera equipment, would have been beyond the ken of the masses. On the other hand, the subheadings, photographs, and text were deemed to form an “agitational and organizational whole.” The text and image were supposed to complement each other so that the photographs were not mere illustrations.34

Based on Soviet Photo’s small reproductions, it is impossible to say what the photographs in these wall newspapers actually looked like. In addition to the general difficulty of assessing how they worked, a surviving wall newspaper would help tease out what it meant for an image to be “agitational.” While they are often mentioned together, Marxist agitation and propaganda were two different kinds of persuasion and political work. Agitation took place on the ground and was envisioned as a person-to-person process. It instilled information, examples, or other material that would lead people to take direct action in fighting for Marxist goals. Propaganda, on the other hand, was more theory-oriented. It explained ideas—about history, economics, politics, philosophy, and science—that argued for Marxism-Leninism and historical materialism. Propaganda was a longer-term education effort, but in principle it and agitation were paired. They were equally necessary. Agitation, being the more short-term of the two, was suited to a medium like the wall newspaper, which held local immediacy and addressed current concerns for viewers.

One image of a wall newspaper shows how it was to be read by others—agitation in action. Eye of the Woman Worker is printed so small as not to be legible and the photographs’ subjects are indistinguishable. In the reproduction next to it, a handful of women workers pressed up against the wall newspaper look and read (fig. 1.6). A brief accompanying article describes how it was created: contributors to the factory newspaper Voice of the Woman Worker at Leningrad’s Red Banner Factory (Krasnoe znamia, a famous building designed by Erich Mendelson for a textile factory) decided to make a photo-newspaper and publicize the work of their photo circle. The factory leadership gave

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34. “U kogo sleduet pouchit’sia,” Sovetskoe foto no. 6 (March 1930): 164.
them a camera and laboratory equipment for about 70 rubles. We do not learn how or when the workers found time to photograph the factory, how they chose photographs to present, what the agitational content of their wall newspaper was, or how their colleagues reacted. These two images can only show Soviet Photo’s readers how a wall newspaper should be viewed. This rare example suggests how photographs could help construct a social setting in which agitation reached its audience.

The wall newspaper with photographs gave way to the “photo newspaper,” which appears to have been similar in format. Though Soviet Photo does not define the differences between a wall newspaper and a photo newspaper, the main difference seems to be one of context: as the photo circles were (supposed to be) ever more integrated into teams of worker-correspondents, the name for what they made changed. By the time photo newspapers were reproduced by Soviet Photo in 1931, they were clearly benefitting from improved access to material and more years’ experience looking at images and combining them with text (fig. 1.7). The legible headings are in varied font types, some clearly by hand and others made to look typeset. Portraits are juxtaposed to one another and the newspapers’ vertical sections appear to correspond to how they were folded. Although these two examples are more legible to Soviet Photo’s readers, not even a staged image like the one of women at the Red Banner Factory shows how the photo newspaper might have been presented.

In all of these cases, a wall (or photo) newspaper was a unique object. Made up of single photographs affixed to large paper background and surrounded by handwriting, the wall newspaper was reproduced by being photographed in turn, so it was usable only in the original. It almost never had any print run, the exception to which was in the printing trade, where workers could publish multiple copies and where the wall newspaper’s survival for posterity was therefore much more likely. In other industries the items in the newspaper were individually pinned to bulletin boards,

making their reproduction impossible.\footnote{Diane Koenker, \textit{Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918–1930} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 11.} In view of the individual wall newspapers’ local contexts and small radius of impact—their viewership was often limited to the institutions where they were made—it seems incongruous that they were touted as a path for photographers to establish themselves or their work with the (printed) press. Yet the wall newspaper was referred to as a part of the local press not only on the basis of the 1924 Party resolution, but also because it was perceived to be a further arena that would direct photographers to “active participation in socialist construction and class war.”\footnote{S. Evgenov, “Uroki nashego konkursa,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 6 (March 2, 1930): 162–166, here 162.} Furthermore, both wall newspapers and print newspapers could be shared among a group viewing or reading together and, if they contained photographs, had the potential for further circulation.\footnote{Walter Benjamin makes a similar point regarding film. See “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” in \textit{Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften 1} (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 136–169, here 159f.} By placing both mediums of presentation into one category, \textit{Soviet Photo}’s writers avoided questions of circulation and audience. Theorization of media and reception took a back seat to the imperative for propaganda and an all-encompassing structure that could direct each individual photographer’s efforts. By calling for wall newspapers to be submitted to some of their numerous contests, \textit{Soviet Photo} was able to combine these two strategies for organizing photographers’ work.

In the spirit of having the photo circles work for the goals of Soviet photography, and as a way to see more of what they were producing without having to travel to each wall newspaper, amateur photographers were emphatically encouraged to submit material to \textit{Soviet Photo}’s contests. From 1926 through 1937 over thirty-five were held, always with strong encouragement to participate but with widely varying breadth of response (see Appendix C). The smallest-ever number of submissions, according to published information, was twenty-eight photographs by ten photographers, and the highest, 1,500 photos by 300 individual participants.\footnote{Competition “Po okhrane truda,” results announced in January 1930 and “Bol’shoi oktiabrskii konkurs,” results
anniversary of publication, 6,254 photographs had been submitted by 1,828 participants.\textsuperscript{40} Submissions of wall newspapers went up from twenty-two in 1927–28 (contest 4 in Appendix C) to 201 two years later (contest 13).\textsuperscript{41} Each contest was held on a certain theme, and sometimes for a certain kind of presentation, as in the calls for photo series or wall newspapers. By and large, the contests changed over the years to become more in number and more overtly aligned with particular political and cultural programs during the cultural revolution (especially 1929–1931). While two early contests were called “At work” and “Life of the peoples of the USSR,” in the following years contests carried such titles as the “Anti-religious contest” or “For industrialization, for collectivization.”

The contests offered an opportunity for the comparison of amateurs’ photographs, and the results were accordingly presented as instruction for readers. Critics categorized the photographs as desirable or undesirable, judging either by their visual and artistic qualities or on matters of subject choice and the representation of ideas. Here, as in other articles that critiqued readers’ submissions, negative commentary could surpass positive reactions in both length and enthusiasm. Even contests that had winners sometimes showed such bad results that they were deemed unprintable.\textsuperscript{42} Contests were an opportunity to test photographers’ taste and ability and were openly touted as a way to direct their attention to appropriate subjects.\textsuperscript{43} Without a doubt, much of the editors’ negative criticism was an honest reaction to the quality of what they saw; some of the photographs that were reproduced demonstrate this. Negative criticism may also have been strategic in that it provided all the more reason to continue teaching readers what was and was not acceptable, and it opened an opportunity to remind readers who had authority in questions of content and taste. It is impossible

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\textsuperscript{40} “Chto proideno i chto vperedi,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 194–198, here 196.
\textsuperscript{41} S. Evgenov, “Uroki nashego konkursa,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 6 (March 1930): 162–6.
\textsuperscript{42} “Ne otstati’—ob’edinit’ usiliia,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 8 (April 1930): 225f.
\textsuperscript{43} “Chto proideno i chto vperedi,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 194–198.
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to know whether the editors exaggerated the poor quality of submissions. Due to the loss of Soviet Photo’s archive, it is now impossible to access a complete collection of submissions, if it ever was possible, though some photographs were reportedly passed on to the Museum for Work Safety.44

In the following I compare two contest results, from 1927 and 1932. One example that is characteristic of the contests’ unsatisfactory results was the 1927 “Life of the peoples of the USSR.” The theme is reminiscent of the first contest held by Photographer in 1890 on the “Russian type.”45

The Soviet version of this theme ended with no first-place winner because, as Soviet Photo explained, no photographs were adequate for first place, but the winners of places two through five had their work printed. Of the four photographers chosen here, three show subjects that are distinctly “other” to the assumed Russian norm. B. Al’bitskii won second place for Oriental Motif (fig. 1.8), showing a figure carrying a basket on her shoulder as she walks to a walled compound, and The Parting East, a photograph of three veiled subjects, and was praised for showing everyday life in one of the regions far from Moscow (fig. 1.9). His title already suggests the idea of a way of life disappearing, if “East” stands for the other or the exotic.

F. Fain’s All in the past repeats the idea of a disappearing primitive past (fig. 1.10). This photograph won fourth place; its title implies that the Jewish subject and his prayer are less Soviet than some external, more Soviet present. The man’s prayer shawl and headpiece, two candles on the table and printed Hebrew books mark him as clearly as the women’s veils in The Parting East. Some sentences about the jury’s choices praise Fain’s image because it shows a religious ceremony that still

44. “Resultaty postoiannogo fotokonkursa po okhrane truda,” Sovetskoe foto no. 1 (January 1930): 28f. The Tsentral’nyi muzej okhrany truda is mentioned here but I cannot trace its existence; the Museum of Health and Safety (Muzei okhrany zdorov’ja i truda), which was founded in the 1920s, may have been meant. See http://moscow.stolnygrad.ru/moscowbooks-06/russiamoscow-129.html, accessed July 18, 2013. If there was a Tsentral’nyi muzej okhrany truda then it may have been a part of the Gorky Park complex. On the attractions in Gorky Park, see Katharina Kucher, Der Gorki-Park: Freizeitkultur im Stalinismus, 1928-1937, Beiträge zur Geschichte Osteuropas 42, series ed. Dietrich Beyrau et al. (Cologne: Böhla, 2007).
45. Stigneev, Fotoborchetto Russii, 10.
existed at that time but was (as the authors claimed) on its way out. Fain’s other fourth-place image, *Gypsy Women*, shows two women sitting at a low table with cards (fig. 1.11). Both of his photographs distill stereotypes that stand for entire groups of people (Jewish prayer, Roma and Sinti in suspect activity) rather than claiming to capture a real ‘moment in the life.’ The theme “Life of the peoples of the USSR” appears to be useful mainly in establishing diversity as a photographic subject, but there is nothing in these photographs that could demonstrate why or how their subjects’ ways of life really were on their way out. Their disappearance is presumed by the ideology of the country’s rulers. By the same token, there is no consideration of how the subjects of the winning photographs are Soviet. Their presence in the USSR is the only logical prerequisite for their validity in this contest. The laconic title “all in the past” only hints at the idea of some behaviors and attitudes being less contemporary than others.

If “Life of the peoples of the USSR” could have no first-place winner due to lack of quality, then that lack was due to a failure on *Soviet Photo*’s part to make clear demands. Over time the instructions for contests became more explicit, and they were increasingly used as a way to gauge the photography scene. Al’bitskii’s photograph of three veiled women and Fain’s assertion of Judaism’s coming obsolescence gave way in 1929 to an “Anti-religious contest” that dovetailed with the government’s anti-religious campaigns. This time, some reflection on what was submitted and what was missing provides more insights on readers’ abilities and what ideas they had not yet comprehended. In “Results of the unsuccessful contest,” the author noted that only sixty-seven photographers participated, sending in a total of 182 photographs. None of them succeeded in showing the class essence of religion (*klassovaia sushchnost’ religii*) or something clear and agitational. Photographers had not followed the hints provided in the speeches from the second All-Union Meeting of Atheists in Moscow. Despite this criticism, *Soviet Photo* offered some sets of contrasting

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religious/non-religious images. In the two photographs *Believers cut down the forest* and *The godless plant*, the viewer sees contrasting images of Whitsunday and the Soviet celebration of Forest Day (figs. 1.12 and 1.13). The contrast relies in part on basic elements of composition and lighting. People celebrating Whitsunday are shown with a horse-drawn cart in a town, transporting a pile of cut branches to some unseen location and for an unseen purpose. Their figures are backlit, dark, and seem less important than the church looming behind. In the contrasting image, a man teaches children how to plant a sapling. The children’s concentrated posture and curious faces are in the foreground while the trees in back suggest the future fruits of their labor. One group is dark and destructive, the other is productive and oriented toward the future.

The next call for anti-religious photographs is specific regarding photographs that have a use in agitation and propaganda; aesthetic or technical quality does not figure at all.48 It is clear that the editors’ and amateur photographers’ interests diverged because at the same time E. Loginova, who sometimes wrote for *Soviet Photo* on ideological and thematic issues, called on photographers to give up their preference for “easy” shots. She wrote that the highest rates of contest participation were for themes “Winter” and “Portrait,” whereas more attention should be directed to production.49 Apparently, nature themes or pre-Revolutionary modes presented less of a challenge than the presentation of proletarian life. In a similar vein, even winning photographs of Socialist construction could be criticized as failing to capture the social aspect of the subject. “...but there is not a single shot showing the specific character of [our] achievements and their comparative value without the author’s long explanation,” complains another assessment.50

The contests’ waning importance—evident in their decreasing number—coincided with the eventual weakening of the amateur movement and the slow disappearance of articles on how the

49. E. Loginova, “Foto-liubitel’—'v nogu s zhizn’iu!'”, *Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 199f.
photo circles should operate. While the contests were still explained in terms of their relevance to
ewspapers and the printed press in 1930, by mid-1932 they were nearly irrelevant. Only the
contest commemorating the May 1 International Workers’ Day received much attention. With
focus shifting to the better integration of photographers into the printed press, the contests in their
previous form could not maintain their relevance. The results of the May 1 contest show a clear
preference for images that were a step removed from the everyday or workday of the photographer.
The winning images all focus on subjects that, for symbolic reasons, show things that were
important for their national symbolic value, but not because they reveal anything about life or work
in a particular locale. In these images, the contest’s goal clearly was not to find and support
innovative composition or creative interpretation of the subject “May 1”; it was the portrayal of
ideologically correct subjects in a manner that suggests admiration.

In four of the winning photographs, composition is used to emphasize (or create)
monumentality and, by association, propagandistic value. None show clear signs of May 1 festivities,
but they celebrate their subjects appropriately for the occasion of the holiday. V. Savchenko’s Giant
mockup of the Metropolitan on Okhotnyi riad and For the USSR’s technical-economic independence each show
workers in front of objects symbolizing the progress of Socialist construction (figs. 1.14 and 1.15).
Both have a somewhat accidental feel, with the workers in the Metropolitan image striding off to the
right, seemingly unaware of their connection to the mockup above. It is a giant map in relief,
without the iconic circle line that makes it easily recognizable today. The flag on the right
underscores the celebratory tone and punctuates the horizontal bars that extend beyond the map to
something outside the frame. The empty space in the middle of the photograph, stretching left to
right between the workers’ heads and the map, is the price of a framing choice that otherwise
includes as much as possible of the cityscape rising into the distance. In For the USSR’s technical-

52. “Kto poluchil premii na pervomaiskom fotokonkurse,” Proletarskoe foto no. 6 (June 1932): 58.
economic independence, the picture’s space is used more effectively. The giant ball bearing atop a building provides a counterpoint to the worker whose posture (head leaning back, hands on his waist) indicates awed looking; together, their two shapes anchor the top left and lower right of the image and create slanted upwards movement. The Metro model stands for a specific construction project while the ball bearing is more versatile. It is an element used in the construction of many different things and thus speaks to the general idea of technology, while the Metro’s construction created many grandiose, and specific, locations.

Another winning image of the Metro map, Kaloshin’s *Moscow by Night on May 1: Shining Metropolitan Map*, complements the first photograph and underscores the importance of the relief map itself (fig. 1.16). Compositionally plain, this photograph represents the challenge of photographing the stark light-and-dark contrast created by the lighted sign at night, and its value in *Proletarian Photo* (as *Soviet Photo* was now called) also derives from its subject. The use of scale is most exaggerated in I. Alekseev’s *Photographic portrait of Comrade Stalin*, in which a male figure gazes up at portrait that has been mounted outdoors. Stalin’s towering figure is comprised of segments that were clearly assembled on site (fig. 1.17). The man literally looking up to him demonstrates to *Proletarian Photo*’s readers the correct stance, so the monumental effect of Stalin’s portrait when seen in person is also communicated to the viewer of Alekseev’s photograph. On the same page, the avant-garde photographer Gustav Klutsis tells the story of how such large portraits were planned, printed, and then assembled in public spaces as a part of agitation work.53

To photograph and view the contemporary USSR now meant something different from what it had five years earlier, in 1927. Finally the journal had photographs that answered its demands for enough skill, the right theme, and obvious significance. These images operate on a different scale than the photographs of specific religious, ethnic, or local practices; they emphasize great

achievements and capability in construction. There is no space for the individual because all are awed viewers, taking in the “leader” Stalin or projects that were the achievements of many.

Naturally, the prizes awarded to amateurs by Soviet Photo did not have anything similar to the importance of, for example, the later Stalin Prize (awarded in the fine arts from 1941 through 1953) or same canonizing impact as the prizes awarded by Ogonek in the late Stalin period and into the Thaw.54 Furthermore, Soviet Photo’s own editors repeatedly expressed strong misgivings regarding the quality of the pool from which they chose winners. They only reveal limited information about photographers’ abilities, because submissions would presumably have represented a person’s best work, and something about the quality of teaching, if amateurs tried to fulfill what was expected of them. However, they are very telling of what a successful photograph should look like and thus speak directly to the ideals for propaganda and mass photographic production. Furthermore, contests are one of the most traceable parts of the broad attempt to engage all photographers into uniform photographic activity across the Soviet Union. Contest subjects make it possible to trace how photographers’ interest was directed from themes like “Winter” or “The Portrait” to particular political campaigns, then back again to the portrait in 1935. Moreover, the suspension of the contests for two and a half years in 1933–1935 stands for a fundamental shift in how the masses’ participation in public photographic life was conceived.

During the period 1928–1931, and reappearing again briefly in 1935, many issues of Soviet Photo and Proletarian Photo included a section “Critical notes” (Kriticheskie zametki), which was used to make specific suggestions about how to improve photographs submitted for review. More amateur photos appeared in “Critical notes” than in any other section of the journal. The idea behind the column was to have photographers learn from their own and others’ mistakes, and to learn how to

perform a critique. The column followed a pattern. With many of the photographs chosen for
critique, authors suggested different framing choices (fig. 1.18). One 1927 article addresses framing
issues in multiple images. The photograph of six men gathered around a chess game has an overlaid
white rectangle showing how the photographer’s slanted position vis-à-vis his subject (which made
the figures on the left appear closer than the ones on the right) can be corrected through cropping.
The silhouetted trees in *At twilight* on the far right of the page (the critic corrects the word choice,
calling it “night”) might be cropped much more closely to reduce the amount of undefined dark
space in the print. In the cropped portrait on the far left, the author explains that nothing should
distract from a photograph’s subject.55 In a word, the editor uses cropping to make images seem
more focused: eliminating distractions from the subject and suggesting how to cover up
imperfections in how the exposure was set up. Cropping was taught as an easy tool for
photographers still struggling with other problems, such as how to deal with lighting and space, or
what to do if a developed photograph differs from what one anticipated. “Critical notes” also served
to correct readers’ ideas about what subjects were acceptable. With the other portrait on the same
two-page spread, showing a woman with a necklace and bare shoulders over a fine dress and
flowers, the critic took aim at style instead: he or she associated the photograph with bad
professional work from the turn of the century. The critic’s advice was to photograph the woman
not as a “beauty” (the word used in the title) but as a person (человек) because that was the more
fitting subject in the current day.56

Photographers could walk a fine line between acceptability and unacceptability in terms of
how their work represented labor, workers, or other elements that had obvious political associations.
F. Kislov’s *Conversation* captures both the machine and two workers talking, two elements that were

55. N. D. Petrov, “Otzyvy ot snimkah,” *Sovetskoe foto* no. 9 (September 1927): 282–4. “Comments on photographs” was
the column title before it was changed to “Critical notes.”
good subjects for separate photographs but under no circumstances belonged together (fig. 1.19). Bad enough if the two men were talking during working hours, the reviewer found, and even worse if Kislov had interrupted them during a break to send them back to the machine. Based on these two examples of traditional portraiture and the proletarian put into context, we see that it was not just a case of composition that made a photo good or bad, nor just a question of content. The composition of the second photo is certainly interesting, and the lighting on the propped-up leg of the man on the right connects him visually to the wheel he stands on, but bold movement could not compensate for poor content. If an image’s subject strayed too far from what the journal thought was Soviet or proletarian, then the photographer clearly had not responded to demands. It was equally bad to misrepresent the nature of work in the USSR for the sake of interesting composition.

When they were given the opportunity to perform critique themselves and see it published, only twenty-eight readers responded. The two photographs Kumushki and In Batumi Harbor had been provided, one credited to an entire photo circle and the other to an individual (fig. 1.20). E. Katsenelenbogen of Viatka wrote that Kumushki (whose meaning might be described as “gossiping aunties” in English) was technically well made and that the details in the image helped make the overall impression. It evoked antipathy toward the two women drinking and talking together, which in his opinion gave it its social meaning. Katsenelenbogen appeared to refer to the government’s anti-alcohol campaign here. On the other hand, he or she wrote that In Batumi Harbor was technically poor, with bad composition and poor content. Among the image’s failings were the general gray patina that renders the fog and water the same color; a distracting foreground in which the boulder in the middle takes up too much space; the harbor from the title is hardly visible, let alone the work performed there. In a sense, Katsenelenbogen withstood a test of the readers’ abilities by recognizing social meaning in an image intended to have unflattering or negative overtones, and

recognizing what was missing from an attempted seascape. After this contribution, Katsenelenbogen published critiques with some frequency. His or her story is a rare example of a trajectory from provincial photographer (or reader) to nationally published figure who internalized the particular social orientation of the journal and its period, and then used it to advance his or her own standing.

These three forums—wall newspapers, contests, and “Critical notes”—provided Soviet Photo’s most visible examples of photographs by members of photo circles. Through 1930, the journal usually included place names in its captions to identify where a photographer came from, but this information does not explain whether the person was an amateur, employed as a photojournalist, or an artist. In some cases, of course, a photographer’s name was familiar through his writing about his work, because he was mentioned in articles, or, later on, thanks to his affiliation with a press photographic agency or particular artists’ group. But photo circle affiliation rarely figured, leaving open the question of whether the information was unavailable, left out, or listed so rarely because members of photo circles rarely had their photographs printed. Leaving aside advice columns like “Critical notes,” from 1926 through 1928, only five photographs were credited to specific photo circles and just one photographer was listed as being a member of a photo circle. Representation of photo circles reached its height in 1929 with twenty-nine photographs attributed to circles and eight photographs by members of circles; many of these images were published with the note that they had been included in an exhibition in Moscow, which may have been the reason why they were chosen. They comprised 6% of the year’s 574 photographic reproductions. Amateurs were represented fifteen times each in 1930 and 1931, in 2.7% and 4.4% of the reproductions. After 1932, not a single image was explicitly credited to a photo circle or a member of one. I propose that this decline in photo circle visibility is related directly to the rising importance of the worker-correspondent movement as a way to organize photography, a subject that I address in Chapter Two. The decline stands for a further way in which Soviet Photo’s project to teach amateurs and
increase their number was unrealistic: not even their own magazine would print their photographs.

The most consistent criticism of photo circles was that they were ineffective, poorly organized, and not pursuing the work for which they were intended. In fact, the inadequate quality of amateurs’ work may have been second only to the lack of Soviet-produced photographic materials in the number of complaints it registered in Soviet Photo. Many criticisms of the amateurs’ and photo circles’ poor work appeared in the discussion of contest submissions and “Critical notes.” Programmatic articles that discussed how to build the photographic movement gave directions on how to improve (focusing on the core points of technical material and know-how, politically appropriate attitudes and subjects, and organization).59 In sum, the nature of photo circles’ weaknesses is less interesting than Soviet Photo’s persistent criticism. The criticism shows that even the photo circles’ biggest institutional supporter wished that the movement would develop more and differently. It also shows that the movement itself was recalcitrant: try as they might to make photographers work in a more current, political, or collective manner, Soviet Photo’s writers had to acknowledge time and again that their advice was not being heeded and that the amateurs did not evince a desirable class background, but appeared instead to have bourgeois, traditionally educated, and professional roots.

Soviet Style and Content

Soviet Photo utilized “Critical notes” and contests to teach readers about acceptable subjects and technique. This section of the chapter examines more visual examples and the advice that was given about style and content. To judge by the images chosen for reproduction, a plurality of styles were considered “Soviet” during the first three years of the journal’s publication, and photographers were encouraged to experiment with different styles. Then, in an abrupt change, “Soviet” photographs

became more narrowly defined to exclude styles that looked pre-revolutionary and editorial choices leaned toward “proletarian” themes of labor, production, and the figure of the worker.

A large number of the photographs printed in 1926 and 1927 show aspects of traditional daily life and by and large, editorial decisions forewent daring formal choices. For example, the first- and second-prize winners of the first contest, “At work,” captured scenes of handiwork. *Grandfather and grandson* was not considered un-modern, and the passing on of a trade is described as a kind of “fabzavuch,” the factory’s academic counseling (fig. 1.21). The Uzbek man gluing porcelain back together in the second-prize image is described as a “painterly figure” (*zhivopisnaia figura*) (fig. 1.22). Two images from an exhibition of photo-reportage seem similarly behind the times. Strictly speaking, V. Loboda’s *On the field* (*étude*) shows nothing that would classify it as a “news” image for the press (fig. 1.23). A mother has paused in her work to nurse a baby, the sickle lodged in a bundle of hay. The motif is so universal that its similarity to an American example from the 1930s has made it famous (fig. 1.24). *On the field*’s prominence as an example of Soviet photoreportage is ironic when one considers its original context, in which its Soviet or proletarian qualities would not have been apparent to local viewers.

Given the naïveté that *Soviet Photo*’s readers were presumed (by editors and authors) to have, one might wonder how some of the contrasting examples on its pages were received. During the 1920s, many cover and frontispiece images were more experimental or advanced than the images awaiting the reader inside. One cover from 1926 is a good example. A young woman biting into an apple smiles into the camera (fig. 1.25). The extreme close-up, playfulness, and unusual moment are

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60. “Resul’taty 1-go fotograficheskogo konkursa,” *Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (June 1926): 80f.
61. Leah Bendavid-Val, *Photographie und Propaganda: Die 30er Jahre in den USA und der UdSSR* (Zurich and New York: Edition Stemmle, 1999), 6. The comparisons that this exhibition and catalog presented are problematic for a few reasons, chiefly that they are superficial. Not only were the social, economic, and political contexts divergent, but the natures of the photographers’ commissions, employers, and approaches also differed. The photographs’ only significant overlap is in their motifs, and they were not intended at the time to complement one another. Rosalinde Sartorti responds to this exhibition in her essay “Fotokul’tura II, ili ‘vernoe videnie’,” in *Sovetskaia vlast’ i media: sbornik statei*, eds. Hans Günther and Sabine Hänsgen (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 145–163.
unique among all of the year’s images. In a photograph by Albert Renger-Patsch printed in October 1927, the hands of a potter are seen from above and at an angle, with the camera pointed downward and back toward to the potter (fig. 1.26). On the same page, advice on the “Elements of an artistic image” entirely neglects to discuss this example of New Vision, instead beginning with an entirely different approach. On choosing a subject, the article suggests “nature in all her infinite diversity, the person with his world of thoughts and feelings, society and life.” The author drew on numerous examples from various eras but did not address Renger-Patsch’s photograph or Rodchenko’s Moscow Building (printed in the same issue) in his long section on point of view and perspective (fig. 0.2). In the Introduction I briefly introduced another such contrast, this time between Semyon Fridliand’s modern, sharply focused radio tower and the advice that follows it on how to achieve “artistic softness” (fig. 0.3). The issue here is not the contradictory makeup of these lessons and examples, but the failure to discuss them for readers’ benefit. New Vision perspectives like those of Renger-Patsch, Rodchenko, or Fridland were left hanging, outside Soviet Photo’s usual discourse and thus only accessible to viewers who could apply outside knowledge. The Russian art historian Aleksandr Lavrentiev has noted the abundance of articles teaching readers how to use techniques like bromoil for soft focus, which was associated with the pre-World War I Pictorialism but remained popular in the Soviet Union throughout the 1920s. Today there appears to be a deep conflict between printing texts with bromoil advice on one hand, and photographs with crisp New Vision perspectives on the other. They simply co-existed as though there were no stylistic conflict.

A year later, Soviet Photo cast “softness” in photographs in a negative light and associated it with the pre-revolutionary, bourgeois, professional background of the USSR’s older amateurs. The

catalyst for this change in assessment was the *Exhibition of Ten Years of Soviet Photography*, held in Moscow in March and April 1928. In their first discussion of the exhibition in June, *Soviet Photo* noted that it had 15,000 visitors in its short, six-week run time and was positively received, but that it had also inspired discussion on the role of art photography, photo-reportage, and photo circles.65 By the fall, reactions to the exhibition had become almost entirely negative and the purpose of amateur photography was reexamined. The editors wrote,

> We consider this mastery [of the artistic photograph] to be alien to us, alien to our era; diffuse half-tones, delicate blurry contours, continuous hues of lyrical melancholy—all of this in “artistic” photographs, “études” and “motifs,” is the fruit of bourgeois-decadent, individualist currents for whom the spirit of the revolution is sharply hostile; part of this [the artistic photograph] comes from the submission to painting, the imitation of canvas (most of all, the school of “Impressionist” artists of the past century [...]). However, we repeat: all of this is the product of high mastery, from which we must learn in order to transform it into a product of our social aspirations.66

Censure was reserved entirely for photographs that were reminiscent of pre-revolutionary artistic styles, and style was taken to be proof of class identity. As one article suggested, amateur photography should now become “worker amateur photography” (*raboche fotoliubitel’stvo*). From mid-1928 onwards, then, the divide between pre- and post-revolutionary work was understood on the basis of style and subject. But even then, the stylistic differences between examples of Pictorialism and New Vision (and the class or cultural differences for which they might stand in the West) received no attention from *Soviet Photo*’s contributors.

One example of photographic material underscores the point. The two-page photo-text spread titled “Photo Ballast” features two groups of photographs, both unacceptable. One set (left) is from the *Second Exhibition of Moscow Photo Circles* under ODSK, the other set (right), provides examples of the types of images to avoid in future exhibitions (fig. 1.27). All eight photographs are credited to photo circles. Some carry titles such as *Portrait, Étude, or Still-life*. One decorative image,

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65. “Vystavka sovetskoi fotografii,” *Sovetskoe foto* no. 6 (June 1928): 242–244.
Rose, even harks back to Pictorialist formats in its oval, as opposed to rectangular, shape; others show cats. Photographs of children in costumes are supposed to appear frivolous while the young woman in Portrait is posed to look exaggeratedly pensive. Grigorii Boltianskii, a photographer and critic who spent his career involved with the photo circle movement and, later, in the Soviet artistic bureaucracy, responded to Second Exhibition of Moscow Photo Circles and described portrait, landscape, and genre photographs as belonging to the “feudal” period of the photo circles’ work. “The photograph’s presentation, its technique and the development of its subject were poor and primitive. They were, by and large, boring, dull, registration documents.” He suggested better themes for the groups, all having to do with economic and social campaigns like collectivization, rationalization, the anti-alcoholic movement, and others.67

This sorting of photographs according to pre-revolutionary content or style easily led to the question of what a properly Soviet photograph was, and a positive answer to the question was at hand. Writing in 1929, the author Mezhin listed three criteria for Soviet photography. The first was to be a Soviet person (byt’ sovetskim chelovekom); the author specified that one did not necessarily have to be a Party member, but should be a member of the greater working collective. The second was being technically literate and mastering the creative process (tekhnicheskaia gramota, tekhnika tvorcheskogo protsessa). The author combined these two rather large fields of instruction with no consideration of whether he may have been simplifying matters. The third criterion was grasping artistic aspects such as perspective, light, composition, and so on. All of this would help achieve the “Soviet artistic photograph.” The maker of a Soviet artistic photograph would not be an artist in the old “bourgeois-individualist” sense, though an amateur photographer, photojournalist, or worker-

correspondent could still have artistic talent.\textsuperscript{68}

There was also the issue of a Soviet photograph’s subject. Mezhin wrote that the term was invested with a class-based (\textit{klassovoe}) meaning. It referred to the production of photographs that showed “the current day”—that is, everyday life, Socialist construction, class war, and everything related to the general line of the Party in the broadest sense. Nothing “neutral” could be a Soviet photograph. As for how a Soviet photograph looked, Mezhin claimed they were

...photographs that convey not only in their content, but also in their appearance, a Socialist attitude, and they should convey it such that [...] the viewer receives and assumes this attitude (even unconsciously) for himself. These photographs are agitational in the best and the most profound sense of the word. Photographs lacking this quality do not deserve the right to call themselves “Soviet photography”.\textsuperscript{69}

It was crucial that photographs contain an emotional element, the author further explained, and the pathos must be visible, for the emotional aspect of an image constituted its propagandistic strength. The makers of études, landscapes, portraits, and still lives were considered hostile, or at best indifferent, to the life of the masses and for that reason, subjects like factories should be photographed well enough (defined as well-lighted, so everything would be visible) for their pathos to become visible.

Two photographs by Arkadii Shaikhet printed as mezzotints just pages after Mezhin’s article fulfill his expectations, though it is not at all clear whether he would have had influence on the choice of imagery. They present a comparison of the hands of two kinds of workers. Above, the \textit{Hands of the Lathe Operator} wield a wrench and a lathe handle while below, the \textit{Hands of the Artisan} sew together or scrape off the sole of a shoe (fig. 1.28). In combination, these two images honor skilled labor through close-ups and lend it universality through the workers’ anonymity. The higher position (on the page) of the man at a machine can be understood literally, but in each case the activity is clear, the hands look tense and muscled, and they evoke the current day of Soviet life by

\textsuperscript{68} Mezhin, “Nuzhen li nam khudozhhestvennyi snimok?,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 23 (December 1929): 710–712, here 711f.

\textsuperscript{69} Mezhin, “Nuzhen li nam khudozhhestvennyi snimok?,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 23 (December 1929): 710.
bridging the gap between older modes of production and newer, industrializing ones. I interpret both Mezhin’s criteria and the accompanying Hands photographs as suggesting that the ideal Soviet photographic subject was a proletarian. Proletarian class identity placed a person beyond doubt and the relationship to labor (as captured in a factory image, or in an image of the work itself by Shaikhet) created this connection.

Reforming portraiture

After artistic portraiture had been the subject of some articles in the first years of Soviet Photo’s publication,70 it slid into unacceptability in 1928–29.71 The three examples of portraiture in the spread Examples of “High Art” are accompanied by an article using the format of an imagined exchange with photo circle members to explain why they are so inappropriate (fig. 1.29). “Lunatics!” cries one of the hypothetical viewers, referring to the top photograph Spring Dream. “How could you not notice that in your springtime dream there blows an uncanny autumn cold—for that matter, from an autumn of long ago, before the war?! [...] And your ‘simple dream’ [on the bottom left]—But this is really a masterpiece of vulgarity!”72 The portrait of a man in an agitated psychological state, on the bottom right, received similar treatment. These three photographs were reportedly new works by the artistic section of the Leningrad Society for Artistic and Technical Photography (Leningradskoe obshchestvo deiatelei khudozhestvennoi i tekhnicheskoj fotografii). Assuming that the claim of these photographs’ recent dates was true, then they would serve as an indication of what tastes still existed among photographers with technical means and peer support. At the very least, they

72. E. Semenov, “‘Vysokoe iskusstvo,’” Sovetskoe foto no. 17 (September 8, 1929): 532.
represent what Soviet Photo found un-modern, not politically or socially oriented, and still present enough in contemporary culture to be a danger.

Despite this emphatic rejection of traditional, romantic, or emotionally revealing portraiture, Soviet Photo printed many examples of it and seems to have shown sincere appreciation for these works. In one image from the 1926 exhibition of photo-reportage, Woman worker from Prokhorovka, a young woman in a paisley headscarf smiles into the camera, drawing the cloth over her torso (fig. 1.30). There is nothing visual to identify her as a worker, but the image was so highly esteemed that Soviet Photo printed it again as frontispiece in October 1927 and November 1928. There was no explanation of why a portrait whose exact time and location are not visible might “reportage.” And again, Soviet Photo never addressed this discrepancy between written lessons on style and the examples offered to readers. In fact, it was even exacerbated by other editorial choices. In the 1927 printing, the young woman from Prokhorovka greets readers just a page after Aleksandr Rodchenko’s Mother on the cover (fig. 1.31). The contrast could hardly be starker between avant-garde experimentation—a close-up that thematizes looking while calling attention to surface, pattern and line—and conventional modes of photography—a 45-degree turn away from the camera for a portrait, focus that highlights detail in the face only, and composition grounded by the figure’s width at the bottom and narrow top. The photograph is typical of 1927 in that one-quarter of the frontispieces and numerous other portraits are of this type: smiling young women who look shyly into or just beyond the camera.

A worker might be portrayed on the cover of Soviet Photo, or a famous author, or a political figure, but as long as articles maligned the genre in an of itself, these photographs could enjoy only shaky status.\(^{73}\) Already at the end of 1928, an editorial credited portraiture, genre scenes and

\(^{73}\) The changing status of portraiture in Soviet painting followed a similar trajectory. See Eckhard Gillen, “Künstlerische Publizisten gegen Romantiker der roten Farbe,” in Kunst in die Produktion! Sowjetische Kunst während der Phase der Kollektivierung und Industrialisierung 1927–1933, eds. Christiane Bauermeister-Paetzel, Hubertus Gaßner, and
landscape with minimal importance but stopped short of declaring them fundamentally wrong:

Production, the life of the worker, local studies, events of the new culture, national life, life in the countryside—that is what defines all the content of at least 60% of the photo circles’ work and draws the mass photo-amateur movement closer to the worker- and peasant-correspondent movement. All the rest—portraiture, genre photography, landscape, etc.—has an academic character [...]  

There is reason to believe that the authors here were too optimistic about the transformation of photo circles, but they were clear about the status of various subjects or genres. The lessons learned from artistic portraiture were supposed to be applied directly to the practice of portraying workers. The Woman worker from Prokhorovka does not conform to this expectation. The image only comes halfway because the subject was appropriate, but only identifiable as such thanks to the caption.

The redirection of portraiture to showing workers made the genre’s redemption possible. Just as the photo circles should ideally become proletarian in nature instead of persisting as a bourgeois institution, portraiture should be readjusted to new subjects—and in the discourse that defined it, it was, especially beginning in 1930. In order to make use of portraiture without reverting to pre-revolutionary models, workers and amateur photographers should be taught how “capture characteristic features of their ‘subject’.” The author even distanced himself from the term “sujet” (siuzhet in Russian), and thus from the traditional artistic meanings attached to it, by setting it off in quotation marks. A mezzotint by S. Ivanov chosen to accompany this article illustrates the point (fig. 1.32). The portrait is not individual, but of two men together, and they are anonymous. Although one of them wears a tie, neither appears to occupy a special status and their flat caps identify them as workers. A reviewer described their features as significant or grand (krupnyi), and instantly identified the photograph as a step in the direction of answering the “big and vexed” question of how a Soviet

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portrait should look. Self-portraiture, which must have appeared to epitomize the overly individual character of the portraiture genre, never appeared in these discussions—not even for condemnation.

At this juncture it is crucial to note the distinction between what some have called the “character portrait” of a person in his or her “natural setting,” and the more traditional portrait taken in a studio. Rosalinde Sartorti observed this difference in reference to the portraits published in Pravda between 1925 and 1933 and established that, with exception of the year 1931, the portraits published in the USSR’s leading newspaper were of the latter (studio-based) kind. She concluded that the period’s political rhetoric emphasizing the individual worker’s contribution, which reached a height in 1931, was counterbalanced or even denied by press images that actually represent the worker as a category, not a distinct person. The category to which a person belonged might be expressed by tools of the trade, for example, while individual and traditional portraits would be marked by elements that identify particular people. According to Sartorti, when the number of worker-portraits spiked in 1931, it was at the expense of photographs showing individuals engaged in free time, cultural, or domestic activity.

As the discussion about Ivanov’s Portrait shows, the worker-portrait was supported by Soviet Photo as a corrective to studio portraiture—a move similar to the “character portrait” Sartorti

77. On the level of terminology, Soviet Photo’s references to pre-revolutionary practice make it clear that the discussion of the portrait (portret) refers to photographs made in a traditional studio setting, and not the many images of workers in a work setting. “Character portrait,” which Sartorti uses to differentiate the images she studied, was not a distinction made anywhere in the discourse that I have studied.
identified. A *Proletarian Photo* cover from 1932 further illustrates the idea of the character (or worker) portrait (fig. 3.11). The viewer sees the young man in a large factory building; both his rolled-up sleeves and the comically large wrench in his hand suggest that he is in the middle of working. He has no uniform, name tag, sign in the background, distinctive machine or product, or other identifying material. Given the context, his gaze into the distance can easily suggest his focus on the big, long-term goals of Socialist construction.

Sartorti’s observations on the type of portraiture favored in *Pravda* resonate in light of another one of *Soviet Photo*’s suggestions on how to remake portraiture, yet it is clear that photographers and theorists imagined more changes than were visible in *Pravda*. O. Kusakov wrote, “With the portrait in photomontage we have the possibility of a *synthetic portrait*, giving the social characteristic of a person.”80 He recommended photographing members of the collective, such as shock-workers or Communist Youth members, and then using photomontage to put the subject into context. The point that interests me here is not montage itself, although it is discussed in *Soviet Photo*, and Kusakov wrote elsewhere on photomontage as an ideologically appropriate medium. What I am interested in is the principle of using a photographic portrait that represents a person’s social status and economic role, not their individuality, and the understanding of these photographs as photomonteurs’ raw material. A portrait would be a starting point to which the same or another photographer could add more visual material, thus enhancing the image’s message or adding meaning. Despite this subsequent alteration, however, the portrait would have to be appropriate in the first place. Kusakov rejected the “intimacy” of amateurs’ family portraits and the neutral backgrounds of the “realistic” portraits supposedly favored by the bourgeois.81 In his view, the subject’s social status alone was insufficient to redeem portraiture, so to establish a safe distance

81. O. Kusakov, “Problema sovetskogo fotoportreta,” 419. It is not clear what the author understood “realistic” to mean.
from earlier practices he not only advocated adding content, but also suggested altering the object itself through montage.

The discussion about portrait photography highlights a central issue facing *Soviet Photo*, namely the relationship to tradition. Amateurs and beginners were encouraged to learn to from earlier art genres or techniques, but lest they learn to imitate something pre-revolutionary, new ideas were needed that would transform art into something more Soviet in character. The solution was to render them more obviously “proletarian.” In this way, the attempted transformation of photo circles mirrored the attempt to transform their subjects. Both photo circles and portraiture were necessary, the former because it could help establish more widespread photographic practice and the latter because it fulfilled ideological purposes (capturing images of workers) and practical ones (photographers and viewers accustomed to portraiture had a point of contact). The difficulty, of course, lay in changing an ongoing practice. Sartorti examined pictorial practices in *Pravda* and found a correlation between the frequency of worker portraits and a 1931 shift in politics, but her study does not examine discourse related to portraiture. Of course, *Pravda* was not primarily concerned with photography or art, but because it was the Party newspaper, its pictorial practices held a certain authoritative status. Studying *Soviet Photo* leads to observations that pertain to a longer term in that it took more time for definite attitudes or positions to emerge. At *Soviet Photo* specialists conducted debates meant to benefit beginners. Thus it happened that even after a preferred mode of portraiture was established in 1930 in both publications, showing the anonymous worker as a universal “character,” in 1931 *Soviet Photo*’s authors continued to consider the issue from multiple angles. Sartorti, on the other hand, observed the reversion to portraiture styles from pre-1930 but did not study the considerations informing that editorial choice. Despite the suggestions for how to improve it, portraiture was still undesirable in *Soviet Photo*. As of mid-June 1930, the journal had

printed 116 photographs so far that year and only two were portraits.

In Soviet and Proletarian Photo, the persistence of other portraiture modes remains discernible, though infrequent. V. Frolov protested the style of portraiture that amateurs were still learning in 1930, which looked stiff and bland and reflected pre-revolutionary practice (fig. 1.33). The photograph on the top right, showing three girls in good dresses and shoes, invites questions that were never posed in the debates on appropriate portrait photography: did the commenters make nothing of portraiture's personal importance? Did they truly and simplistically assume that it could be nullified? The girls in the image express their connectedness to one another by joining hands in the center of the image and laying their arms on one another's shoulders. The girls barely look like adults, but cross their legs in grown-up fashion and direct serious gazes at the camera. The photograph is an expression of three people who seem to be at the cusp of choosing what and who they will be. Their demonstration of friendship matches Soviet Photo's negative descriptions of individual images that are not politically or socially oriented. The photograph does not agitate for a Soviet program, portray an exemplary Soviet citizen, or respond to the demand for images of workers. Instead it appears to be made for private collection and personal consumption.

The photograph of three girls captures just a trace of the sitters' subjectivity, perhaps only the fact of its existence, because their group portrait is the product of a process. The girls' wishes, the photographer's choices, both parties' acceptance of representational conventions, and the available setting or equipment all factor into this recording of their friendship. But before we have come to understand how or to what degree their subjectivity is visible in their portrait, it is already

erased by historical circumstances. The treatment of this image by photographic reformers (as a thing to be eliminated) is not as personal as its generation, but instead is a reflection on the social class and aesthetic preferences that the photograph was assumed to represent.

Replacing this image with a Soviet expression of proletarian identity would be not only to undo the function of such portraits as they had existed until that time, but also to fundamentally alter these three girls’ subjectivity. If one were to follow the implicit and explicit guidelines of Pravda and Soviet Photo, then remaking this group portrait would take away the personal connection that presumably is the reason for its very existence and replace it with the subjects’ social, labor-related, or other function. A properly Soviet portrait would have shown these subjects so differently that they would effectively be replaced by others, and that was the entire idea: both the girls and the photographer were supposed to concede the point and willingly change. To put it in the traditional terms of Soviet history and cultural studies, Soviet Photo worked on developing photographers’ consciousness (and, I would add, their status) as workers, after which they would emerge newly made to create photographs in accordance with the ideological expectations.85

Soviet Photo’s lessons on portraiture were emphatic, but they do not appear to have prevailed. The authors’ own repeated criticisms of common portraits reveal this failure, as does one prominent and telling example from another publication.86 In mid-1931, USSR in Construction recycled an old portrait photograph. Savel’ev’s Worker from Prokhorovka, which had already been published in Soviet Photo in 1926, 1927, and 1928, appeared with the new title Shock worker-textile worker from the Tryokhgorny Factory in an issue devoted to the textile industry. She is not identifiable as a textile worker, only a textile wearer, let alone a shock worker who produced above and beyond the required

86. Years later one of Soviet Photo’s most prolific critics still bemoaned that people could have their portraits taken in traditional styles. V. Grishanin, “Potoki vul’garishchiny: Razmyshlenia u vitriny fotoatel’e,” Sovietske foto no. 2 (March–April 1934): 21f.
norms. The young woman is the only person in this entire forty-page issue of USSR in Construction not shown at work, for example at a machine, carrying goods, or harvesting cotton. She appears on the very last page above the table of contents and masthead, almost as a capstone to the issue (fig. 1.34). Her image contradicts the main message taught to photographers about how to photograph a Soviet person, and the image that this issue of USSR in Construction otherwise so strongly conveys. The caption’s alternation reflects a desire to update the image. The subject probably worked at a Moscow textile factory originally named the Prokhorovskaia Trekhgornaia Manufaktura after its original owner, Prokhorov, thus providing the “Prokhorovka” of the 1926 caption. The factory was nationalized after the Bolshevik Revolution and dropped the name of its former owner.

Why and how did the young woman from the Trekhgorny Factory find inclusion, then? The answer begins in the masthead. In 1931, USSR in Construction’s editorial board included people who were also major figures at Soviet Photo: Mikhail Kol’tsov, Soviet Photo’s founder, was on the editorial board and V. P. Mikulin, who frequently contributed to Soviet Photo during its early years, was managing editor. The head artist for this issue was Nikolai Troshin. Troshin was a frequent head artist with USSR in Construction and also contributed articles and photographs to Soviet Photo in the period 1927–30, where he was often associated with the Western European artistic tradition (I discuss this at length in Chapter Three). This textile worker could have been included in USSR in Construction as a result of editorial discussions at both journals. It is also possible that Troshin, or someone else, particularly valued this photograph in a way that is no longer traceable. Whatever the reason was, the image’s inclusion in USSR in Construction shows that even the country’s most advanced illustrated journal did not fulfill the ideals that the editors and some of their closest colleagues espoused. Instead it took the easy route of updating a caption, relying on that short piece of text and not on the image itself to convey its central meaning.
Chapter Two: From Amateur to Press Photography

Introduction

Part of Soviet Photo’s all-inclusive vision was its identity as a journal for both amateur photography and photojournalism. The barriers between these two groups were often hazy. This was partly practical, because advice on how to take photographs could sometimes apply to anyone. It was partly unintended, as when terms “photo-amateur,” “photojournalist,” “photo-reporter,” “amateur-reporter,” and more began to proliferate and intermingle. It was never entirely clear who was supposed to constitute each group. Was it merely a question of whether one got paid, for example, or perhaps a matter of consistent visibility in the press? When a series of decisions began to homogenize amateurs and photojournalists beginning late in 1928, the circumstances demanded a change in approach. In 1929 the addition of the slogans “Mass organ of the Soviet photo-movement” and the short-lived “Photo-art—to the workers!” contributed the implication of masses of people taking ownership of photography in all its forms. In a turn-around, the abandonment of the amateur and mass-photojournalism movements was sealed by 1932, before they had truly gotten off the ground. The consolidation of amateurs and press photographers was unique to the first Five-Year Plan; despite its limited time scope and effectiveness, it shows how mass social change was imagined and what could cause it to fail.

How did a movement that was so emphatically supported come to be discarded? This chapter will discuss the project of combining amateur photographers and worker-correspondents both in terms of their host institutions and the work they made, as well as the project’s subsequent failure and dissolution. Worker and peasant correspondents (rabsel’kory) were a part of the press in

the USSR beginning in the 1920s, when a shortage of skilled journalists demanded the increased involvement of amateurs in order to help build up the press. It was also expected that they would provide a link from the people to the regime. Expanding this movement to include photographers would make perfect sense from Soviet Photo’s perspective because it could be one further way of integrating amateurs into a new Soviet photography scene. Despite this promising starting point, the failure to unify all amateur and press photographers went beyond Soviet Photo’s inability to reform the styles in which they worked, which I described in the previous chapter. It also meant the disintegration of the dream that all photographers might work in one overarching collective, one in which the differences between professional, amateur, and worker-correspondent photographers would be abrogated. On one level, the dream had been too wide-ranging to be practicable because it required the full participation of all photographers and the entire press of the USSR, which it did not receive. On another level, it proved too big a stretch to change everything from visual style to institutional structures.

In its first items addressing press photography specifically, Soviet Photo presumed a level of ignorance comparable to the ignorance of new amateur photographers. One reminded readers that how one photographed was as important as what one photographed, and then provided general technical advice. The intention to reach photographers of all skill levels also resulted in pieces of advice so specific that they must have seemed irrelevant for nearly all of Soviet Photo’s readers: another item advises photographers shooting groups of 500–600 people to take thirty to forty strides away from the group and use a negative of at least 9 x 12 cm to adequately capture them all. This second item appears to be written with press images of Party gatherings in mind. By and large, however, few

articles advised about the particularities of photojournalism, there were virtually no reviews of actual newspaper or periodical photography, and there was no specific advice on how to find employment with a newspaper.

This lack of practical, job-related advice meant that there was no way to bridge the divide between aspiring photojournalists and those who were photographers by profession. Despite Soviet Photo’s ultimate goal of making this difference disappear, its rhetoric usually maintained a divide between who was professional and who was not. Thus a 1926 review of the recent Second Exhibition of Photojournalism criticized the failings of most of the photographs on the basis of their themes and faktura and did not establish any connection between those criteria and the more basic beginners’ advice that usually occupied Soviet Photo’s pages:

The second exhibition is worse than the first. The works are not mature enough and are frequently made hastily. The chronicle of our times is poorly presented, there is no daily life [byt] and construction projects of 1926 are entirely absent. [...] The poverty of composition and faktura accompanied thematic poverty. [...] Working on faktura teaches a photojournalist to work on the accentuation of the photograph’s most important part as well, and that is one of the sorest spots of the exhibited works. 4

Thus far, only very few articles had told amateurs to focus on the capturing “the chronicle of our times,” and construction in the USSR was also a very infrequent topic in the mid-1920s. Furthermore, although faktura meant “texture” in general terms, as an artistic term it would have been entirely unknown to all but very select readers. By the early 1920s faktura had come to mean “the very working of the material” for avant-garde artists, especially those working in the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. 5 In its new and old definitions, faktura hardly comprises a relevant category for photographers, yet there is no further discussion of what faktura might refer to

in photography. The advice that was offered to aspiring photojournalists thus spanned too many registers.

The practical distance between an amateur photographer and a photojournalist was further underscored by the column “Photojournalists on their profession,” in which professional photojournalists like Arkadii Shaikhet or Max Alpert described their work. Shaikhet, who worked for Ogonek, suggested that a photojournalist should own two or three cameras—a highly unrealistic suggestion considering how few cameras were available in the Soviet Union at all. He described how one needed to work with colleagues in the press, and what skills must be trained. Shaikhet ignored the nitty-gritty details of work for a newspaper or journal: can one choose one’s own subject matter, what pay might one expect, and so on. It was precisely such figures as Shaikhet or Alpert who did not respond specifically to the much-promoted principle that amateurs and photojournalists should be united because they did not come to meet amateurs halfway.

The movement to make press photographers out of amateurs envisioned their joining the ranks of the worker-correspondents. However, had the movement succeeded, it would still have left the essential differentiation between them and the professional photojournalists intact. N. Beliaev was the first Soviet Photo author to suggest in the fall of 1926 that there should be photographer-correspondents, because readers did not always believe what the worker-correspondents wrote in the press. He assumed that the disconnect between the correspondents and their readers would be remedied because readers would believe a photograph more readily. His solution was that worker-correspondents could become photo-correspondents. Among the few photo-correspondents who had managed to establish themselves, however, there was confirmation that getting started at all was

6. Benjamin Buchloh sees a relationship between faktura and photomontage as far as the avant-garde is concerned, but photomontage was not at stake in the Second Exhibition of Photojournalism. See Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” October 30 (Autumn 1984): 95–99.
8. See, for example, L. Leonidov, “Pis’mo fotografu-professionalu,” Sovetskoe foto no. 9 (December 1926): 262f.
the most difficult part, so Beliaev’s proposed solution may have had very little to do with the available possibilities.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there were already clear indications from high levels that the worker-correspondent movement was the correct goal for photography’s development. In honor of Soviet Photo’s first full year of publication, the editors received a congratulatory note from the Worker-Peasant Correspondent encouraging them to strengthen their connection with the correspondents; the note came furnished with a stamp from the editorial board of Pravda.¹¹

Turning amateur photographers into photo-correspondents had thematic and organizational implications. For example, on the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1927 Soviet Photo suggested photographers could devote themselves to subjects like expanded factories, new residential buildings, rationalization of production, and new initiatives. Thus amateurs did not have to be in the capital in order to make relevant work.¹² These instructions could lead to both more images for journalistic purposes, and—equally importantly—fewer photographs reflecting photographers’ more conventional interests, such as portraiture. The negative responses to the 1928 exhibition Ten Years of Soviet Photography also led to more suggestions for amateurs to align themselves with the tasks of the press. Quoting Lenin from 1918, Soviet Photo’s editors suggested that work should be of “living examples” and on “local life and construction,” because these topics were central to determining the press’s character.¹³

In his debut article as photography critic in Soviet Photo, Lev Mezhericher provided some concise points on what the ideal press photograph should look like. His four main points were authenticity, informativeness, freshness, and currency (podlinnost’, informatsionnost’, svezhest’,

¹³. “Zadachi rabochego foto-liubitel’stva,” Sovetskoe foto no. 10 (October 1928): 433f. Sovetskoe foto cites an edition of Lenin’s collected works in which these quotations appear on pages 210–211 and 420, volume XV, but they do not cite the year of publication.
Like many of his fellow authors, Mezhericher also addressed the question of whether a press photo must, or even can, be “artistic”: “but by that we understand a certain appearance of the photograph that harmonically corresponds to its content and its purpose—to affect a broad scope of readers with its agitational and educational appearance.”\(^\text{15}\) He demanded originality of press photographs, in that their appearance should “not [be] entirely common”;\(^\text{16}\) this left little room for innovation because it meant he did not actually support experimentation, only slight differentiations within a general scheme. While Mezhericher did not specifically address (aspiring) artists in this article, each of his four points might be best understood as a counterpoint to the type of photography that was increasingly unacceptable to Soviet Photo. Personal portraits, private moments, and pre-revolutionary stylistic conventions would have no place in press photography.

It apparently was not clear from the beginning that amateur photo circles would be integrated into the correspondent movement, and neither is it clear who instigated this integration—photographers’ groups or the correspondents. Soviet Photo was more taken with the idea than the correspondents were. The importance and pull of the idea emerged in the run-up to the Fourth All-Union Meeting of Worker-Peasant Correspondents, which was to take place from November 27 to December 7, 1928. In anticipation of this meeting, Soviet Photo’s editors claimed to have noticed the increased “application of photography in the local press.” The instructions issued for the Central Organizing Committee (of what, the editors do not say) had stated clearly that the makers of wall newspapers should include the work of photo circles where possible, though not that inclusion was mandatory. Although Soviet Photo emphasized the importance of photography for the local press, it had to acknowledge that none of the reports being planned for the Fourth All-Union Meeting would deal specifically with photography. At the same time, they wrote about the “union” of the


\(^{15}\) Mezhericher, “Fotografirovanie dlia zhurnalov i gazet,” 303. Emphasis in original.

\(^{16}\) Mezhericher, “Fotografirovanie dlia zhurnalov i gazet,” 304.
pen and the camera as though it were already coming: “Long live the close, strong union of worker-
correspondents and worker-amateur photographers!” Integrating amateurs and correspondents
was clearly Soviet Photo’s interest and the journal began issuing instructions in that direction, but there
are signs that photography remained a tangent for the correspondent movement in general.

The decision to turn all amateur photo-circle members into worker-correspondents was
passed during the Fourth All-Union Meeting of Worker-Peasant Correspondents and nicknamed the
“Union of the pen and the photo” (Soiuz pera i foto), and it inaugurated the 1929 publishing year.
With it, amateur photographers conclusively became “worker-amateur photographers” in Soviet
Photo’s parlance; the term had previously been used alongside others but now became dominant. For
those who had already identified as workers, the decision proclaimed a link between their working
lives and their hobby. For those who still needed to be reformed, Soviet Photo announced that the
decision would compel them to “renounce the limitations of individualistic ‘quiet pleasures,’ go out
into the broad ground of class war, utilize the camera as an implement of class war and
propaganda.” Only the end of the announcement acknowledges that there may be some people
who do not wish to take part in this step forward, but the clear assumption was that once instructed
to do so, amateurs would simply join the worker-correspondents.

With the weight of an official decision behind it, Soviet Photo’s word carried more weight as it
encouraged amateur photographers to leave behind individualistic work and embrace the use of
photography in the class war and for propaganda. What ensued over the next several years were
many exhortations to readers to get more involved with the press and engage in the class war in
order to become properly “Soviet” that way. Suggestions on how to photograph for the press were
rare and rather unhelpful through the end of 1928, but they became omnipresent and exclusively
tied to political content beginning in 1929. Earlier slogans contained messages like, “Photography in

the USSR—one instrument of class war and socialist construction.” Now the meaning and the tone hardened: “You’re not a Soviet photographer if you do not devote all your photographic knowledge and art to the cause of propaganda for the first Five-Year Plan, Socialist competition, collectivization; if you don’t participate in socialist construction and class war with a camera in your hands.”

How would such a union of all amateur photographers with the worker-correspondents be organized, or was it only theorized? If thousands of photographers were suddenly to submit their work to the press, who would handle it all and how? As one contributor noted, some newspapers and journals already had entire archives of images at their disposal. There were also photographic agencies that could distribute work; in the USSR until that point, there were TASS and Russfoto. This author claimed that such organizations could be specifically Soviet, unlike their foreign counterparts. Regrettably, he did not describe the particular characteristics of a Soviet photo-agency.

Further instructions intended to adjust the “Union of the pen and the photo” continued to arrive over the next three and a half years. The organization ODSK had been renamed ODSKF, the Society for Friends of Soviet Cinema and Photography, but was still criticized for not doing enough to unite amateur photographers with the press. As a result, ODSKF was instructed to approach the worker-correspondents more and thus bring their own photo circles closer to the local printed press as well. Mezhericher, on the other hand, blamed the amateurs themselves, stating that their low press presence was a result of their photographing the wrong things, that they were not relevant for newspapers. To fix the situation, he suggested drawing up the work plans of the photo circles based on those of the newspapers and that the photographers should report back to editors on the political

19. Slogans, Sovetskoe foto no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 201 and Sovetskoe foto no. 8 (August 1930): 239.
21. “Litsom k nizovoi pechatnoi gazete: My imeem 1600 opornykh punktov,” Sovetskoe foto no. 24 (December 1930): 681f. At the same time, ODSKF was renamed the Society for Proletarian Cinema and Photography, OZPKF (Obshchestvo “za proletarskoe kino i foto”) and reportedly shifted more attention to photo-correspondents. “Foto-obshchestvennost’,” in Sputnik fotokora na 1932 god (Moscow: Zhurnal’no-gazetnoe ob”edinenie, 1931), 4–19, here 6f.
nature of their work. Interestingly, however, Mezhericher ascribed the wish for change to the amateurs themselves, claiming that they were filled with the demand for stronger connections to, and participation in, local newspapers.\(^{22}\) It is tempting to read his analysis as an indication of amateurs’ continued resistance to demands they change. Mezhericher and his colleagues never allowed the possibility that amateur photographers might simply not want to become correspondents. In this crucial point, \textit{Soviet Photo} adhered to the official line and actually failed to address the needs, and perhaps the objections, of its readers. This blind spot relates directly to the issue of what it meant to be a journal of, or for, the masses. In retrospect it appears unclear what the masses actually wanted. Becoming a “Soviet” photographer—that is, integrated into all institutional structures in order to make press photographs of certain approved subjects—could very well have meant complying with a vision that was imposed from above.

Several instances attest to the wishful thinking involved in how \textit{Soviet Photo} created a history for the photo-correspondent movement. The claim that amateurs wanted to change was repeated later,\(^{23}\) perhaps as a way of balancing out the meager results of the photo circles’ integration as though to say: they wanted to change, but certain factors prevented it. This wishful history-building applied to amateurs and the correspondent movement itself. On April 16, 1931, the Central Committee of the USSR decided to restructure the worker-correspondent movement and the editors of \textit{Soviet Photo} extrapolated the decision’s consequences for photo-correspondents even though the resolution text contains no language referring to images. The resolution mainly regulated how the work and behavior of the correspondents should be, addressing organizational questions (the need for local leadership of groups and within local papers), the importance of the correspondents to political goals, the need for the correspondents’ work to be disciplined, and so on. The

\[^{22}\text{L. Mezhericher, “Fotokruzhok i redkollegia,”} \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 1 (January 1931): 3f.\]
\[^{23}\text{I. N. Rumiantsev, “Fotokorovskii snimok v pressu: k nashim mezzo-tinto,”} \textit{Proletarskoe foto} no. 2 (February 1932): 23.\]
correspondents’ approach to their work was supposed to be exemplary.24

Working from the April 1931 restructuring decree, Soviet Photo compiled a list of recommendations for the photo-correspondent movement. The first stated that the Socialist offensive and the fight for the general party line both lay in the connection between the correspondent movement and the press. Neither the photographic movement, nor the press, was satisfactorily fulfilling the directive of the Central Committee as they tried to combine the photo-amateur movement and the worker-correspondent movement. The second recommendation stated that the task of Soviet Photo was to help fulfill the organizational tasks of the press in getting the local groups of photo-correspondents together under the leadership of editors. Soviet Photo was also supposed to help politicize the work of the photo movement. The third was that the raising of the political and technical level of photography was of great importance. It was the job of ODSKF, the press, and the professional unions to provide open darkrooms for practice. ODSKF was supposed to organize the movement’s leaders, and the journal Cinema (Kino) was supposed to devote a page to the photo-correspondents.25

Semyon Fridliand’s montage Worker-correspondent Brigade might be taken as an ideal image for how the worker-correspondents were supposed (or thought) to work (figure 2.1). The newspaper title Mover (Dvigatel’) refers both to the newspaper and each of the men whose faces overlap on its front page. They comprised a small brigade engaged in making a handwritten sheet, suggested here as a preparatory stage for the newspaper. The actual newspaper headlines mention Leningrad’s Red Banner Factory, workers’ deadlines, and the October and December programs. The two photographs in Mover are nearly indistinguishable, making it impossible to judge whether they come from a workshop or factory context. But the worker-correspondents appear to be ones who

communicate their news in writing, not in illustration. This image recalls the sobering news, two years after the “Union of the pen and the photo,” that its effects left much to be desired. A survey of 773 Soviet Photo readers revealed that 170 of them were workers and 305 were clerical or professional workers (sluzhashchie). Nearly 300 of them were students, peasants, or soldiers, which was not the desired proportion. Soviet Photo did not even state how many respondents were workers. Even worse, only 401 respondents, or 57%, were connected to the local press, while the rest were not connected to the press at all. It was time to take action. Boldface words proclaimed, “The time has come to say directly: long live photo-correspondence, enough of amateur photography, off with it!”26 This was supposed to make it a mass movement of workers and shock workers. It was touted as the only way for the photographic movement to do its work in the class war.

In comparison with the varied and frequent activities that were designed to engage amateurs (wall newspapers, contests, and critique), the attempt to engage photographers as worker-correspondents fell short. The main activity, or method of assessment, for photo-correspondents was their own version of “Socialist competition” (sotsialisticheskoe sorevnovanie, or sotssorevnovanie). Socialist competition was the idea that individual workers or professionals would produce beyond the quantity that the Five-Year Plan mandated. It was voluntary, and rewards went to the biggest achievers for their contributions. Socialist competition for photographers was put into economic and production terms, introduced as part of a larger push for meeting production quotas and eliminating the supposedly selfish behavior that undermined Soviet industry. As Lev Mezhericher explained, “Competition—this is not a campaign that started ‘at some point’ and will end ‘at some point.’ This is a method of working obtained by Lenin; it will be our invariable companion in the business of economic and cultural construction, just like the method of self-criticism will always be

26. “Derzhite kurs na udarnika i fotokorrespondenta”, Sovetskoe foto no. 22 (November 1930): 617. The actual numbers of photo-correspondents are almost impossible to ascertain. In one of the few reports on them, Boltianskii claimed that approximately 600 photo-correspondents were in the ranks at the agency Soiuzfoto. G. Boltianskii, “Sovetskaia fotoobshchestvennost’ za piatnadtsat’ let,” Sovetskoe foto no. 11 (November 1932): 25–30, here 27.
our primary appraisal of all work that is carried out.” The three tasks that comprised the so-called “photo competition” had nothing to do with the person-to-person competition that the term suggests; in fact, they do not correspond at all with “competition” as it is usually defined in English. Firstly, photographers were to be “registers” of everything and “capture everything,” distributing their work through the channels that were available to photographers working in institutional contexts—photo-circle exhibitions, wall newspapers, and the local press. Secondly, photographers were to “influence the masses,” use new means of “influence[ing] the viewer.” Thirdly, a photographer must have his entire photo circle participate in the competition. In a sense, then, photographers were to do the work that was already suggested to them, but more intensely and perhaps with a greater sense of being part of the larger collective, knowing that other Soviet workers were working as intensely. The photo competition highlights the limits of linking photographic production to broader political rhetoric: not only was the competitive production of photographic output difficult, even impossible, in the context of severe material shortages, but even when competition was reduced to a competitive attitude, its results could hardly be (literally) visible.

Remaking portrait photography offered the opportunity to change one’s approach and express a new Socialist attitude visually. But when reforms were supposed to move beyond that, into the area of more general principles, they became less visual.

Mezhericher’s references to the photo circles shows that he, at least, still perceived them as a common forum for activity. Yet while the idea of photo competition appears to have been directed at amateur worker-corrеспondents, it was expounded in Soviet Photo by photojournalists, for example Boris Ignatovich and Semyon Fridliand. The photographers did not expand on how they understood this new method of work: Ignatovich cited the low quality of photographs provided by the agencies

Russfoto and Press-Klishe, and Fridliand claimed that many photographers could not improve as long as they imitated the work that the agencies disseminated. Both photographers provided their own work as examples of how photojournalists (not correspondents) might reshape theirs.

The Socialist competition of photographers was conceived of as a mass activity but mainly presented through the work and thought of highly experienced photographers who lived from the profession. In *Details of machines* Ignatovich studies two close-ups of metal parts. They appear to be wheels, bearings, nuts, pipes, and shafts (fig. 2.2). Smooth surfaces gleam in the light or are hidden in precisely outlined shadow. There are no workers; no movement is discernible; the depth of field is filled entirely by the machines. The opposite is true of Fridliand’s *Hauling grain* opposite (fig. 2.3). In a raking angle reminiscent of New Vision, men and women seen from above line up horse-drawn carts loaded with sacks. The depth of field and the angle have rendered the people and the way they moved as unidentifiable as the machines on the left. Like Ignatovich, Fridliand played with light and shadow. In both cases, the viewer might wonder why Ignatovich and Fridliand did not comment on the press appropriateness of their work. While the artistic quality is obviously very high and well considered, the role that such images might play in a particular newspaper or journal is unclear and their captions do not illuminate the newsworthiness of their subjects. The divide between photojournalists and amateurs was best revealed in the responses to this miniature competition. Two amateurs wrote in to *Soviet Photo* with their reactions to *Details of a machine*, pointing out that it was not “current” in any visible way and that, from the perspective of a person who worked with machines, the image “produces the impression of a scrap-heap of details, but in any case not a representation of details or their executable function.”

If the photo competition was meant to help produce more press-oriented work for *Soviet Photo*...
Photo’s editors to review and print, then it was a failure. While the photo competition offered a way of talking about press photography that aligned it with political and economic goals, it did not present photographers with a concrete task along the lines of, for example, a contest submission. Instead it was vague: work harder and do more, and somehow it will help turn you from an amateur into a photo correspondent or photojournalist. Furthermore, it seemed to define distinct roles for amateurs and photojournalists at certain moments, only to blur the lines at others, as with the heading “competition of photojournalists” on one hand and the suggestion that the competition would take place within photo circles on the other. Where were the photo-correspondents in this constellation? The pairs of photographs published in that rubric almost always bore the names of prominent photojournalists. Amidst all the criticism toward amateurs for failing to take better photographs, it must be remembered that they did not necessarily want to accept the “lead” offered by photojournalists or workbench-oriented laborers, as Ignatovich demonstrated.

Actual implementation of the “Union of the pen and the photo” was apparently a constant struggle when it came to directing amateur photographers to the right subjects, and the concurrent photo competition had no positive effect. Slogans and full-length articles continuously called upon photographers to join the worker-correspondents long after the 1928 decision already declared them to be such. Programmatic items on what to photograph became progressively more concerned with political fine points at the expense of photography’s (potential) further development or theorization. Many of these articles read like boilerplate texts into which area-specific terms (photography, shot, photo-correspondent) could simply be inserted. There are multiple ways of understanding the increasingly policy-oriented tone of the lead articles. One way would be to associate them with specific political shifts happening at the upper levels of the Communist Party, or various committee decisions about how to implement programs. If we approach them from the other way around instead, they present a different question: what was the connection between a photographer’s
political education (which was the stated goal of the ideological articles) and the style and subject of his or her photographs? The connection is restrictive in that photographers ideally were not supposed to capture anything but politically useful subjects, and the implicit assumption is that a properly educated photographer would not. I argue that the failure to explicitly connect political goals with elements of style and technique left wiggle room for photographers because the how of the connection was missing. While the prevalence of political concerns in Soviet Photo’s pages can give the impression that photography was somehow brought into line with the Party, it only happened on the level of text. Aligning images (how they are made, how they look, how they are used) with policy was a long-term work in progress that, when it came to the photo-correspondent movement, did not bear fruit because the movement lost momentum and was abandoned before that alignment could happen.

When Soviet Photo failed to verbalize how the “Union of the pen and the photo” would look, it stopped drawing a connection between ideology on one side, and pages full of technical advice on the other. A committed Bolshevik photographer could produce work that demonstrated great technical skill, but even if she or he was devoted to subjects such as Party meetings, industrialization, or collectivization, what about style? This gap was not bridged for the general audience; instead, questions on the relationship between form and content were addressed in a debate between Soviet Photo’s main figures and avant-garde photographers from the October group, which I discuss in Chapters Three and Four. In terms of worker-amateur photographers and correspondents, the two fundamentals remained the “mass proletarian character” of the movement, and its foundations in organizational-technical matters.31 The terminology of stylistic and theoretical debate, which also contained some references to artists from Western Europe, were written for a specialist audience and not the masses of readers who are just learning how to make, and talk about,

photographs.

Despite the apparent difficulty in achieving amateurs’ compliance and the disconnect between worker photo-correspondents and photojournalists, for a time there was a concerted effort to make the “Union of the pen and the photo” appear successful—a form of ‘worker-washing.’ The cover from *Proletarian Photo’s* January 1932 issue presents an ideal imagination of the masses of photo-correspondents (fig. 2.4). A crowd of men jostle as though to get closer to the viewer with more than a dozen of them holding up cameras to point, focus, and shoot. Seen from an elevated perspective, some of them are cut off at the edge of the paper to suggest a larger group than fit in the frame. Five-pointed stars are visible on some of their hats, and at least two of them are clearly smiling. Many of their cameras are a good deal less compact than the small one provocatively shown in the hands of the well-groomed photographer on the cover of *Soviet Photo* in May 1926 (fig. 1.1), but the suggestion is clear nonetheless: cameras were now in the hands of the people in great numbers and photographers were pushing to be active. As the critic V. Grishanin explained at great length in the same issue, worker and rural photo-correspondents were the new, and only, definition of photography as a mass movement. By summertime there was confirmation that the amateur project had been abandoned: photography had “risen” to the level of propaganda.

Only one story of a successful transition from amateurs to professional photo-journalist received attention in *Soviet* or *Proletarian Photo*. The cover image of February 1932 shows a miner of the Donbass region handling a long drill, photographed by Mikhail Kalashnikov (fig. 2.5). The photographer was identified as one of the worker photo-correspondents who had become a photojournalist once and for all (he later established himself as a photographer for *Pravda*). His

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34. I. N. Rumiantsev, “Fotokorovskii snimok v pressu: k nashim mestso-tinto,” *Proletarskoe foto* no. 2 (February 1932): 23. The photographer Mikhail Kalashnikov was not the same person who later invented the AK-47 assault rifle.
success story paralleled that of the critic Katsenelenbogen, who also appeared to have emerged from nowhere to fulfill the ideal career path (see Chapter One).

However positively the editors of *Soviet Photo* may have wished to view the results of their efforts at including photographer in the worker-correspondent movement, and even though photography was accepted as a means of propaganda at the time, the movement itself seems not to have given photography serious or sustained thought. In an example from 1930, the author of a small book of instructions on worker-peasant correspondents’ anti-religious propaganda (produced by an atheist society in coordination with the current government campaign against religion), reported that amateur members of photo circles were sending in more and more works to support the cause, but they seldom captured truly anti-religious “material” in their images. Notably, he did not refer to the photographers as correspondents. The author then acknowledged *Soviet Photo*’s anti-religious contest but wished for photographs that were “documentary,” that is, not staged. The suggested topics for documentary images focused on particular religious events and activities (such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals) or the clergy. The text implies that documentary images of religious life would then be used in creating anti-religious propaganda. In this case, the photographer was just a producer of raw material who would have no creative role, while making anti-religious material would require foresight, planning, and targeted presentation. This understanding of the photographer’s role and the capacity of a photograph in and of itself recalls questions regarding the medium that surface, in some form, in every chapter of this dissertation: namely, what the relationship of image and text were to be, and whether photography had the ability to convey messages visually, on its own.

In spite of the obvious importance of the worker-correspondent movement to the history of Soviet photography at that period, photographers appear to have remained largely invisible within

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the larger history of the worker-peasant correspondent movement. The integration of photographers in the movement apparently was not extensive enough to register in histories of it. In one study, a long chapter on the “Reorganization of the worker-peasant correspondent movement in the period of the large-scale socialist offensive (1930–1936)” reports nothing about the reorganization having included photographers or their integration. 36 Another Soviet-era history of the worker-peasant correspondent movement notes the integration of amateur artists’ groups, with the resulting numbers of drawings received by newspapers, and contests for the best writing; amateur photographers receive no mention here, either. 37 More recent Western studies of the correspondents focus on literacy, Bolshevik writers, and the history of the press. 38 Photographers do not figure here, either. The reason for photographers’ absence in histories of the worker-correspondent movement might be that their presence in it was short-lived, and they did not succeed as hoped. In 1934, for example, one of the correspondents wrote that there were (still) no organizations for photo-correspondents in outlying regions (na mestakh) and that “mistakes” were made in photography for this reason. 39 Within the next year, the photo-correspondents and other amateurs all but disappeared from Soviet Photo’s pages.

It may seem easy to ascribe the demise of the amateur and correspondent movements to the government decree of April 23, 1932, dissolving all independent artistic organizations, but I argue that this decree actually bears no relation. 40 Because the amateur photo circles were nominally

40. “O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii: postanovlenie TsK VKP(b) ot 23 aprelia 1932g.,” Sovetskoe foto no. 5 (May 1932): inside cover.
integrated into the *correspondent* movement in 1931 at the latest, it was logically impossible to dissolve the circles as *artistic* organizations later. Also, because the worker-correspondent movement continued after 1932 untouched by the decree (however little attention it got), there is no reason to assume that organized groups of photo-correspondents would have been affected. Furthermore, the photo-correspondents were technically working as a part of the press, not in arts organizations, so it would have been difficult to extend the decree to them. When Stigneev writes that by 1934, 250,000 amateurs found themselves without an organization, it would be more fitting to specify that they did not have an organization serving the needs of amateurs. Yet even that claim is only shaky. Amateurs themselves could not disappear. During a time of increasing oversight over citizens’ actions, it is impossible that authorities in the arts could simply let them work entirely independently—perhaps even forming groups of their own with no oversight from Moscow. Very occasional references to “circles” in the mid- and late 1930s show that photo circles had not disappeared, but they were no longer the chief addressee of *Soviet Photo*’s instruction. After *Soviet Photo* held no contests in 1934, the one contest of 1935 attracted 1340 participants. Stigneev sees this as evidence that amateur activity had come back to life, and that the short-lived journal *Amateur Photographer* (*Fotoliubitel’*, 1936–37) confirms this. I argue that amateur work was never extinguished, only undesirable. The amateur-oriented column “Critical notes” disappeared from 1932 through 1934, but reappeared sporadically beginning in 1935. Amateurs regained their presence but did not enjoy priority anymore; when an author titled his article “The Photo-Circles are Homeless” in 1935, recalling the references to homeless photographers from the 1920s, there came no response. When the large *First All-Union Exhibition of Photo Art* was prepared for 1937, *Soviet Photo* even listed the photo circles as a potential

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source for material but did not bother courting them.\footnote{Komitet 1-i Vsesoiuznoi vystavki fotoiskusstva, “Delo nashei chesti,” and anon., “Otdel’ i temy vystavki,” \textit{Sovetskoe foto} no. 5–6 (May–June 1937): 6 and 7.}

The lack of clarity in how the 1932 restructuring decree was implemented for photography groups may be explained by the fact that photography was not distinctly categorized as \textit{either} an art form or a press activity. The status of amateur photographers was unclear. Previously encouraged to work under the auspices of the Society for Proletarian Cinema and Photo OZPKF (previously ODSK), they were now cut loose and officially considered to be photo-correspondents, not independent amateurs. OZPKF received criticism for not having done enough to integrate the photo-correspondents into the worker-correspondent groups of \textit{Pravda}, and so its ineffectiveness became the official reason for its disappearance after the 1932 decree. Editorial board member S. Evgenov considered the possibility that the photo-correspondents could be led by DISK, the House of Amateur Art (\textit{Dom samostoiatel’nogo iskusstva}), which therefore must not have been considered an independent artistic organization to be dissolved by the restructuring decree. Amateurs who had not yet advanced to becoming correspondents would be collected by the professional unions (\textit{profsoiuzy}), while technical and political education of all photographers would be left to the institutions still standing: the agency Soiuzfoto, \textit{Proletarian Photo}, and the latter’s offspring newspaper \textit{Photo-Correspondent (Fotokor)}, which turned out to be short-lived.\footnote{S. Evgenov, “Fotorabsel’kory bez OZPKF,” \textit{Proletarskoe foto} no. 9 (September 1932): 3–5.} Thanks to the bureaucratization of Soviet artistic life, the 1932 decree probably meant that \textit{different} institutions held authority, not that no institutions existed.

Lev Mezhericher compiled a chart of the people and structures constituting photography in the USSR encompassing institutions, publications, production, and different types of photography, providing an overall view that was presumably supposed to account for everything (see Appendix D). There are two categories where photo-correspondents would logically fit, “Social and
Propagandistic” photography (including “photo-information” and “photographic publication”) and “mass” photography (divided between the amateur masses and commercial studios). But Mezhericher does not list correspondents as being active in either the social or propagandistic sections, and none of what the masses did fits the descriptions of photo-correspondents’ production or identity. The chart was published late in 1934, when the photo-correspondent movement was disappearing as a subject of Soviet Photo’s articles and just before amateur photographers made a reappearance. But in addition to confirming the impression that the photo-correspondent movement was left to languish, Mezhericher also revealed that the amateurs had been left alone to organize or not organize themselves. There was no longer a national organization for amateurs beyond Soviet Photo.

What caused the failure to get amateurs more involved in press-related work? The most obvious answer would be inclination: that amateur photographs responded negatively to the demand that they give up photographing personal subjects in order to serve the press’s demands. Another is that the local press often did not wish to have multiple people serving it with images because some newspapers had a photographer on staff, while others received images from the photography agencies based in Moscow. Even if photographers had changed their preferences and newspapers had been willing, they would have been hindered by legal hurdles. While the press reportedly wished to have more spontaneous street shots, receiving permission even for that was difficult for photographers.46 The guide Sputnik of the photo-correspondent provides a condensed list of what subjects were tightly controlled, and although it by no means included all restrictions, it offers insight into how extensive they were. Some geographical regions of the country held no photography restrictions at all, but they are not named for the reader. The list instead states that entire regions were forbidden for photography, such as transport sites, a 4.5-mile (7.5 km) swath along the borders, and parts of

46. “Foto-liubitel’—v nogu s zhizn’iu!”, E. Loginova, Sovetskoe foto no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 199f.
the Crimea, the Black Sea shore, Leningrad and Vladivostok; that all aerial photography from military and civil airplanes, hot-air balloons, and the like required special permission from government institutions; that permission was necessary to photograph inside all quarters belonging to state and public institutions, organizations, and facilities; and that all photographs of infrastructure that served the military (which seems to include bridges, tunnels, and stations that may also have served civilian purposes as well) required special permission. Receiving permission required stamped paperwork that would list in advance exactly what, where, and when was to be photographed, and a small fee of two rubles. The NKVD (Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and OGPU (All-Union State Political Administration), that is, the political police and the secret police, held oversight over these photographs. If Socialist construction was a desirable subject for photographers, then it would have to be on a very small scale indeed in order not to fall under the transport or military relevance clauses, or under state and public institutions, organizations, and facilities, which might be construed to include state-owned factories.

*Soviet Photo* only once had the temerity to complain about these restrictions, but the American photographer Margaret Bourke-White was more detailed in her account of the difficulties that accompanied her 1930 trip to photograph factories and industrial sites in the USSR. She arrived in Moscow and received papers that gave her permission to access and photograph factories all over the country. Over the course of her book *Eyes on Russia*, it becomes clear that these papers, which were signed by a Moscow ministry official, not only made her work possible but also lent necessary privileges. For example, she used them to photograph textile factories, major industrial sites, and more; she used them to get out of trouble when Red Army soldiers policed her for photographing an old man on the street with his permission; and she and her interpreter used them to buy scarce foodstuffs and get a space on a train for which they already had a ticket. Despite her having received

47. “Pravo s”emki,” in *Sputnik fotokora*, 159–163. Among the editors of *Sputnik fotokora* were numerous names from *Soviet / Proletarian Photo*: Bunimovich, S. Evgenov, Katsenelenbogen, P. P. Prigozhin, V. A. Jashtold-Govorko.
permission to take photographs, her negatives were kept in Russia for censorship after her departure, to be mailed later. If Bourke-White needed these papers in order to work, travel, and eat, then what misadventures might a less privileged photographer encounter? If the photos of these policed locations had to be censored, what kinds of delays prevented them from getting to the press on time? We can begin to imagine the bureaucratic hurdles encountered by ordinary Soviet citizens, whose papers did not always come from the top. Erika Wolf has written that “legal restrictions [...] essentially criminalized the unauthorized photography” of the subjects I listed above, limiting access to professional photojournalists. Soviet Photo’s instructions for anybody with a camera to photograph Socialist construction were unrealistic at best, and they were disingenuous.

Amateur photographers and photo-correspondents failed to deliver not only because they did not get behind the grand vision of Soviet Photo and other institutions, but also because the impossible was demanded of them if they had trouble accessing the USSR’s most relevant subjects. In a sense, the integrated, “institutionalized” Soviet photographer ran up against yet more institutions. The vision of Soviet photography as an all-inclusive structure failed, but not because of the 1932 reorganization decree so frequently cited in discussions of artistic life. One reason was the failure to account for subjectivity, in the sense that the subjects that photographers found interesting were, at least in part, personal: portraits of friends or other things unrelated to class war and Socialist construction. Another reason was the lack of material and the hurdles to reaching newsworthy items. The push to produce cameras in the USSR, creating access for all, coincided with the push to have all photographers focus on the same goals, but experience demonstrated that these two causes were irreconcilable. Of course, this problem did not signal the overall failure of Soviet Photo: the articles on

technical aspects of photography provided instruction for readers everywhere, and the large number of good, thought-provoking photographs was presumably sufficient reason to subscribe to the journal. The fulfillment of the idea that every photographer is a photojournalist has come about in the present day instead. In the era of cameras integrated in mobile phones, the New York Times website and the BBC invite readers to contribute their own photographs of current events, inviting readers to provide them with material—but without offering instruction and inclusion in return, and without declaring the necessity of ideological conformity.
Chapter Three: Soviet Photo and Avant-Garde Photography

“Show not just cinema, but also photographs with appropriate captions that are interesting for propagandistic purposes.”  
—Lenin, 1922

Introduction

When Soviet Photo’s writers turned their attention to the photographic avant-garde, they subordinated it to the larger project of creating masses of amateurs and worker-correspondents who would shoot “Soviet” photos of appropriately Soviet and proletarian subjects. Art photography received comparatively little space and represented a minority of the work being produced and reproduced, but Western reception has accorded it pride of place and established its position in the modernist avant-garde canon. This chapter, by contrast, examines the avant-garde’s position within the Soviet photography scene more broadly by analyzing some of its major principles in reference to the concepts offered by Soviet Photo.

The major players here are the journal Novyi lef (1927–28) and the October Association of writers and artists (Ob”edinenie Oktiabr’, 1928–32), in addition to Soviet Photo. Novyi lef was founded as a successor publication to the Futurist Lef (1923–25). Numerous Novyi lef writers were of the Russian Formalist school. The author and theorist Osip Brik was a contributor, and Aleksandr Rodchenko published photographs and essays. Novyi lef covered many topics, but my analysis is devoted to those items that engaged in debate about photography and responded to Soviet Photo.

Novyi lef and October shared numerous contributors and members, even though the later group distanced itself from its avant-garde predecessors. Octo-ber’s membership included visual

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1. “Lenin i fotografii,” Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (January 15, 1929): 33–35. Lenin is reported to have dictated this to N. P. Gorbunov on January 17, 1922.
2. There was also a literary group called October that existed from 1922 to 1925; it was part of the movement for proletarian literature and dealt with both political and aesthetic questions. The publication Oktiabr’ (October, 1924–37) was published by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), not the October Association. When the journal Lef (Novyi lef’s predecessor publication) was founded in 1923 it was associated with the Futurists, but Novyi lef
artists, filmmakers, architects, writers, and cultural theorists who were interested in remaking the arts into something wholly new that would better fit the USSR. In 1930 a Photo Section was founded as a subgroup of October. Some October members wrote prolifically, but I am not aware of a single publication that surveys the range, scope, or history of their production, nor one that attempts to analyze it as a body of interrelated work. This chapter contributes to the knowledge and analysis of October. While October’s existence and dissolution have become central to our understanding of the Soviet photographic avant-garde, it actually appears that photography was marginal to the group as a whole. Most October theory mentions neither photographers nor the medium, though it does explicitly address mediums like painting. Today, Novyi lef and October are often lumped together in scholarly literature as though they were related institutions or, more importantly, as though they represented the same ideas. However, a major difference between Novyi lef and October, which figures in this chapter, lay in how writing and work addressed ideology; the former group was less overtly political, whereas the latter declared its “proletarian” identity.

Soviet Photo, Novyi lef, and October all concerned themselves with what Soviet photography was and should do. This chapter shows that each group staked out a distinct, if inconstant, position. Soviet Photo’s reception of the avant-garde changed over time and the avant-garde’s own positions were not unified either. Soviet Photo initially showed a capacious attitude toward various divergent viewpoints on photography, but after the first Five-Year Plan was underway that stance shifted to become less tolerant. Definitions of acceptable Soviet photography became narrower to the point that Soviet Photo’s writers rejected the avant-garde altogether. By untangling the history of Soviet Photo’s relationship to the avant-garde, I wish to contribute to our understanding of how the Soviet avant-garde came to lose its standing—a loss that helped make its eventual marginalization possible,

even if it was not the direct cause.

*Soviet Photo, Novyi lef,* and October all built on similar ideas about what documentary photography was but disagreed about its significance, worth, and potential. To build this larger argument I turn first to *Soviet Photo’s* reception by *Novyi lef,* which I argue has been misunderstood. I show that Rodchenko and *Novyi lef* were not met with blanket rejection in the 1920s; on the contrary, *Soviet Photo* usually accepted his work as a form of experimentation. Then I read closely two of October’s foundational texts, its “Declaration” and the “Program of the Photo Section of the October Association,” which show that October sought to draw a link between documentary, realism, and proletarian identity; in this October was ahead of *Soviet Photo,* which had not yet begun dealing with realism. At the same time, the Photo Section had obvious and consistent overlap with some of *Soviet Photo’s* programmatic statements. This overlap raises the questions why, and over what, the two groups eventually argued at all.

I then look at Sergei Tret’iakov’s theory of factography. Although Tret’iakov was not a member of October, *Soviet Photo’s* critics grouped them together in their reception and flattened out any differences. This is significant because *Soviet Photo* built its case against October’s approach to photography using language that refers to Tret’iakov instead. Rather than simply being a mistake that invalidates the discussion, this confusion actually produced (or inspired) expression of how *Soviet Photo* conceived of documentary photography. The crucial difference between *Soviet Photo,* October, and Tret’iakov is that *Soviet Photo* attached negative connotations to documentary, and seeing a parallel between it and Tret’iakov’s factographic method, thus rejected factography. Close reading of *Soviet Photo’s* artwork choices highlights where the journal truly diverged from the avant-

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garde—namely, in the principle that agitation and propaganda required documentary photographs that could be universalized, not localized, and that propaganda must build on documentary by adding a bias or message that was not immanent to the photograph in and of itself. Finally, although Soviet Photo’s conception of photography’s documentary nature emerged in connection with the avant-garde’s advances, its status was ultimately tied to its role as propaganda by or for the imagined masses of Soviet amateurs.

The historical context of these developments was the cultural revolution accompanying Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932), a USSR-wide centralized economic plan for development, production, and consumption. The cultural revolution promised to remake Soviet women and men through education of people at all ages and levels, vocational training, development of cinema, radio, and the press, the mechanization of the household, and more. As Catriona Kelly wrote,

The cultured person (kul’turnyi chelovek) was efficient, hard-working, punctual, au fait with important political events, a responsible member of the kollektiv, scrupulous in his or her hygienic habits, fit and tough (zakalennyi), disciplined (in the sense of obedient to party or workplace superiors) and committed to intellectual self-improvement, though never to an extent that threatened the stability of the kollektiv to which he or she belonged.

Photography was both an instrument of cultural revolution and one of the areas for improvement.

Novyi lef and Soviet Photo

Soviet Photo’s open stance on photography during its early years meant that avant-garde artists used it briefly as a forum for publishing articles, but exactly this openness to diverse views soon led them to criticize it for backwardness. By and large, the animosity was not mutual. Soviet Photo’s one-time criticism of Rodchenko was an anomaly and not the beginning of a campaign, official or otherwise,

against him or his closest colleagues.

In 1926 the formalist author and Futurist Osip Brik published the essay “The Photo-Still versus the Picture” (“Foto-kadr protiv kartiny”), and Soviet Photo placed it among articles for beginners on how to recognize what one sees in a photograph, technical advice, and suggestions on what workers’ clubs can do with photographs. Brik was one of few avant-garde writers or artists contributing to Soviet Photo. His article was one of many in the journal’s first issues that reviewed photography in the USSR, explored the work of photo-journalists, discussed its possibilities in the countryside or in the service of the Red Army, and made recommendations on portrait photography, among other topics. The editorial selection for such articles does not privilege any particular use of photography or a single understanding of its importance.

Brik’s essay opens, “Photography is supplanting painting.” The medium’s three major advantages, he wrote, are precision, speed, and its low price. Using photographs by Rodchenko, Brik argued that the photographer “captures life” (fiksiruet zhizn’), while the painter made paintings, and that photography should not aspire to the level of painting, but instead must “show that not only life as reformed according to aesthetic rules can impress, but [also] real, vital life itself, which is captured on the technically perfect photo-still.” Rodchenko’s two photographs, each taken from the building at 17 Miasnitskaia Street, elucidate Brik’s point by showing everyday scenes from a window, the kind a viewer might see in her own life (figure 3.1). These images could also be used to argue Rodchenko’s own view that photography should provide multiple views on (or in this case from) a subject. Brik’s viewpoint received a response two months later, but he never wrote for Soviet Photo

One of the Rodchenko photographs chosen to accompany Brik’s article presents the courtyard of 17 Miasnitskaia Street seen from above at a sharply slanted angle (fig. 3.1). In the context of Soviet Photo’s image choices at the time, this type of image could appear to be aligned with foreign examples, and not the work of amateurs or photo correspondents, because there are numerous examples of Western photographs making use of extreme angles. At this point, Rodchenko and other photographers received praise for using such an unusual perspective. Courtyard of the Building at 17 Miasnitskaia St. provides an unusual, strange angle onto an everyday scene; the angle and scale render the man in the courtyard much like the trees around him. His movement, direction, expression, and identity are all unrecognizable. Rodchenko’s image does not convey a prominent location (the other is clearly a square with a monument in the middle) or a particular event or activity. Another, more representative, bird’s-eye view of the street, this time of New York City’s Columbus Circle and the construction of a pedestrian tunnel, carries an explanation of what the viewer sees and why it would be interesting: “A tunnel is being built below the square for the safe crossing of pedestrians” (fig. 3.2). Soviet Photo usually used the bird’s-eye view to teach its readers about the possibility of conveying particular information, whereas Rodchenko’s image is not presented as carrying specific information and does not receive a journalistic context. When another, similarly angled photograph of the courtyard at Miasnitskaia Street was printed later, a critique praised the “freshness” of Rodchenko’s approach despite his photographic “tricks.” Still, there is no mention of journalistic use or purpose. This early discussion of Rodchenko’s work evidences that Soviet Photo’s approach was still capacious, including different approaches without establishing specific links between style and message.

Photographs taken at an extreme perspective were even met with unequivocal approval in

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when it was deemed that their looks underscored appropriate content. Rodchenko’s
Moscow house and Semyon Fridliand’s Tower of the Radio Station “Great Comintern” received praise for
their artistic qualities in an article that explains to readers how the editors made their image choices
(figs. 0.2 and 0.3). Rodchenko’s works were characterized as “deliberate” (umyshlennye), and of this
one, a critic wrote, “Here is a wall with six balconies, a fragment of contemporary construction in
the capital; the photograph is made deliberately, through a camera tilted too far with the goal of
revealing all the building’s grandness and singularity. There is no boring realism here; instead, the
‘soul’ of construction and its artistic concept are emphasized” by the photograph’s perspective. The spirit of urbanism that the author credits to Rodchenko is, he writes, shared by Fridliand, and
he notes the tower’s “triumph of iron” (torzhestvo zheleza); ironically, Fridliand would later argue
against the use of such perspectival distortions in polemical attacks on Rodchenko and his cohort.
Given this praise for Rodchenko’s work—and his images were often reproduced in Soviet Photo in
1927, a time when the journal was oriented toward instruction—it is unsurprising that an article
explained to readers that the distorted proportions of extreme foreshortening were the natural result
of holding a camera close to a subject or at an extreme angle.

Why is it, then, that the journal later published “Ours and Abroad,” an anonymous attack on
Rodchenko accusing him of plagiarism from Western images (fig. 3.3)? The article pairs three sets
of photographs that use raking angles and provides captions, showing that Rodchenko’s came after
their Western counterparts. The brief text, signed simply “Photographer,” accuses the “artist-
professor” Rodchenko, who is already famous for photographing unusually, of imitating motifs by
D. Martin (American), Albert Renger-Patzsch (German), and László Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian,

13. Ibid.
15. Fotograf, “Nashi i za granitsa,” Sovetskoe foto no. 4 (April 1928): 176. The American photographer was actually Ira W.
Martin, not D. Martin; see Christopher Phillips, ed., Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical
contains translations of “Nashi i zagraniitza” as well as the entire ensuing exchange from Novyi lef, pages 243–270.
listed here as German). In this context, calling Rodchenko “artist-professor” renders him suspect by establishing a relationship to the many pre-revolutionary “artist” photographers whose work is scorned in *Soviet Photo*’s pages (see Chapter One). It also brings to mind the intense avant-garde competition of the 1920s that saw figures like Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, and others competing for the credit of developing a new idea or doing something first.

It was unusual for Soviet Photo to stress visual innovation as a key or important trait; the “Ours and Abroad” text is irregular in this regard and for this reason, I argue that it was not indicative of the journal’s stance toward avant-garde photography at that time. The editors did express a certain sympathy with the author’s viewpoint, however, in a note stating that the article was, unfortunately, not an April Fool’s prank, and that they actually received as proof photographs that had been torn out of Russian and Western journals. The editors did not clarify what exactly they found unfortunate—the letter itself, or evidence of Rodchenko’s supposed failure to innovate. Whether it was a result of this critique or other factors, Rodchenko’s presence in *Soviet Photo* dropped off dramatically, with only one more photograph printed in 1928, two in 1929, and none in 1930. It appears unlikely that the critique was reason enough to cease printing his works, however.

The topics of photo-amateurism and press photography continued to be printed more than anything else (except technical instructions) for the duration of the 1920s. Rodchenko and the avant-garde were of minor concern and thus there was little context for gauging this one-time direct criticism.

Rodchenko’s response to the criticism, which he soon published in *Noyyi lef*, addresses three points. The first is that originality was less important than the anonymous “Photographer” made it out to be, because Rodchenko did not care who said “A” as long as it was broadened and used, and made saying “B” possible. The second is that his own photograph of balconies was, in fact, published before Moholy-Nagy’s similar image, not after. The third point is a defense of taking photographs looking upwards or downwards, instead of holding the camera in front of one’s navel,
as older cameras required photographers to do. The traditional head-on shot, Rodchenko hinted, had more to do with the tradition of perspective in art history than with new work, and he suggested that *Soviet Photo* should stop printing Rembrandt and start printing more of his works instead.\(^\text{16}\) This third point centers on the question of whether older art was still relevant and whether photographers could learn from it. *Soviet Photo’s* writers neither entered into further discussion, nor did their opinion of Rodchenko’s work appear to develop further. When Rodchenko’s *Glass and light* (fig. 3.4) appeared that summer, a commentator simply wrote, “The entirely unusual view on a still life does not offend us here, but kind of teaches us to look at things differently.”\(^\text{17}\) Based on what *Soviet Photo* published about Rodchenko, it appears that his strong defense of raking angles actually responded to a discussion or suspicion outside of the journal.

For *Soviet Photo* the matter was closed, but the controversy over Rodchenko’s perspective unfolded fruitfully over the following months among the avant-garde contributors to *Novyi lef*, with some choices by *Soviet Photo*’s editors clearly fueling the discussion. Boris Kushner, responding to Rodchenko’s self-defense with an open letter, could not accept the “distortion” in Fridliand’s *Tower of the Radio Station ‘Great Comintern’* (which Rodchenko had called out precisely because it was in *Soviet Photo*, and it opened the door to accuse Fridliand himself of plagiarizing), and Kushner seemed to suspect that Rodchenko’s only reason for choosing it and his extreme angles was to resist tradition.\(^\text{18}\) In his response, Rodchenko confirmed Kushner’s suspicion but expanded on the point in order to argue that viewers were not seeing enough of a thing if they were missing the unexpected viewpoints. If a photograph showed a new angle on a “Socialist fact,” he argued, then it was serving the masses.\(^\text{19}\) The simplicity of this political equation is similar to the political rationale that *Soviet Photo* displayed when it approved Rodchenko’s and Fridliand’s steep angles for showing Soviet

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constructions. Rodchenko’s version of this idea reveals that his main interest lay in ways of looking and seeing.

Rodchenko’s criticism of *Soviet Photo* dwells on the use of Old Masters for teaching purposes, referring to the six-part series “Paths of Photo-Culture” from the same year. Rodchenko’s objection to *Soviet Photo* was thus a part of his broader objection to tradition in art, to painting, and to ways of viewing that he considered to be outmoded. He suggested, in effect, that readers need only learn about perspective from the way in which he used it. Taken to its logical conclusion, this rather egocentric stance would deny or declare unnecessary the art school and painting background that had been a part of his own artistic development.

In their note introducing “Paths of Photo-Culture,” the editors justified beginning the series with an examination of painting by suggesting that it would be useful in learning about composition; however, they also warned not to imitate the history of painting “blindly.” In “Paths of Photo-Culture,” as in many other articles in *Soviet Photo*, the word *kartina* (painting, picture) was still used in the form of *foto-kartina* for “photograph,” interchangeably with the more typical *snimok* (photograph, shot, image) and *fotografiia*. One can imagine that this syntactical overlap only underscored the author’s interest in painting and established a close relationship between the two, despite his reassurances that photography was the more democratic, accessible medium. Comparing the achievements of photographers with those of painters, the author, Nikolai Troshin, noted that the latter need to make more effective compositions in order for their works to have the artistic quality necessary to reach the viewer. He illustrated his point with small reproductions of Old Masters from Titian to Holbein, as well as more modern paintings by Pissarro, Sisley, and Monet. Only after studying painting, he argued, would a photographer enjoy a broader horizon and taking good pictures would no longer be a matter of chance or haste. Later installments in the series discuss the

use of light, tone, volume, depth of field, and composition using examples from both painting and photography.  

The series teaches its readers to mine the history of art for lessons without suggesting that there would be an inherent ideological conflict in doing so. By teaching the reader to identify and work with certain visual elements, it is in fact teaching visual literacy, at least on the level of technique if not also on the level of meaning (reading a photograph). It uses diverse sources, portraiture, street scenes, and so on. The contents of the paintings (who sat for a portrait, religious imagery) are not thematized. “Paths to Photo-Culture” is the most obvious instance of an approach to photography that corresponds to the opinion of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar for Enlightenment (head of the ministry Narkompros), who officially remained neutral on artistic debates but personally accepted and admired Western cultural heritage as a starting point for development that should be approached critically and not simply adopted in the building of a new Soviet culture.

This openness, the willingness to take from the old in order to make the new, was received by some members of the avant-garde as a misunderstanding of the medium of photography. Leonid Volkov-Lannit published a critique of Troshin’s articles in which he started with the use of perspective and whether photography required a different understanding of perspective itself. According to Volkov-Lannit, Troshin turned photography into painting and by so doing, submitted photography to “easelism” (stankovizm). He objected that photography was being taught as the “harmonic distribution of plastic forms,” and not as the best use of technical possibilities, not as making photographs that met documentary demands. As for the editors of Soviet Photo, Volkov-

Lannit reprimanded their willingness to choose photographs for printing based on pure artistic pleasure.  

Volkov-Lannit further defined what did constitute left photography. He listed three points: first, a preference for exact focus, contrast, and definition; second, the rejection of distorted, anamorphic images for the sake of achieving artistic effect; and third, the rejection of printing techniques involving gum arabicum, brome oil, or Gummidruck, because they served the purpose of creating a painterly effect. (Russian Pictorialist photographers, like their Western counterparts, used these techniques.) While Soviet Photo’s authors sometimes rejected pictorial modes, that journal frequently printed advice on printing with brome oil; Volkov-Lannit avoided that contradiction. While his points expand upon Rodchenko’s more vision-based concerns by addressing the chemistry of photography, they are notably more negative than positive; that is, they define left photography not on its own terms, but by suggesting how a photographer should avoid a negative model. This negative model lumped Soviet Photo and Photograph, the RFO publication associated with Pictorialism, into one category of “aestheticism,” which, according to him, contrasted to Novyi lef.  

Rodchenko’s and Volkov-Lannit’s criticisms of Soviet Photo went unanswered. Soviet Photo had provided a starting point for Novyi lef to write on, but there was no back-and-forth. This fact is significant because it underscores how little Soviet Photo was interested in intervening in artistic discussions in 1928, at the beginning of the Five-Year Plan and cultural revolution. An artistic discussion would not have fit into the more important project of teaching new photographers and changing amateur photography in the USSR.  

Artistic issues surrounding photography were not so clearly tied to political ones in 1928. Indeed, one of the very few attempts by left photographers to connect their work to the Bolshevik Revolution or political principles was Rodchenko’s vague statement, “Left, as the avant-garde of...

Communist culture, is obliged to show how and what to photograph. Every photo circle knows what to photograph, but few know how. Volkov-Lannit and Rodchenko relied on the oppositions of old/new and unacceptable/acceptable to claim and justify their position as the “correct” artists for the Soviet Union’s needs. This made it possible for critics of the avant-garde to accuse the Novyi lef group in the coming years of being apolitical. This simplistic equation of “new” and “Communist” would later come back to reflect negatively on them. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, by the end of the first Five-Year Plan clearer ideological commitments were expected of artists, so this simple relationship of photography to politics became an easy target for critique.

The end of Novyi lef’s publication at the end of 1928 is frequently regarded as an early manifestation of political pressure that was increasingly put on the artistic avant-garde. While Novyi lef’s end was spelled out by events in the literary sphere (and not in photography directly), the historiography of Soviet photography has taken “Ours and Abroad” as a warning sign of that political pressure, the closing of Novyi lef as another, and both as just a foretaste of the bitter aesthetic arguments that were to come two years later. Here I interrogate this history and offer a different conclusion: namely, that “Ours and Abroad” neither has an obvious link to the end of Novyi lef, and nor does it bear a relationship to the photography arguments of 1930–32—except to show how much changed in the intervening years.

The pressure put on Novyi lef, pressure that at least in some ways contributed to the journal’s demise, was subtle and may have simply been the revocation of funding. Lunacharsky’s openness on cultural matters enabled an environment where Novyi lef could flourish, but the gradual loss of his influence and power, beginning in 1927 (albeit mainly in matters of workers’ education) permitted the narrowing of cultural life. He may have been slated for replacement at Narkompros as early as

the end of 1928,\textsuperscript{27} which would have coincided with a decision to cease publication of \textit{Novyi lef}, though he did not resign for another year. The East German literature scholar Fritz Mierau suggested that a rift within \textit{Novyi lef} was the actual cause of the publication’s end.\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Novyi lef} itself provides no real clues. The final issue contains only a brief statement, presumably written by the editor Sergei Tret’iakov: “For the information of \textit{Novyi lef}’s subscribers and readers. We propose publishing our principle theoretical works, which cannot find a place in the common press during the absence of our own journal, in the Ukrainian journal \textit{Nova generatsiia}, published by Gosizdat [State Publishing House] of Ukraine.”\textsuperscript{29} (\textit{Novyi lef} was published by the Russian Gosizdat.) This suggestion implies that the end of \textit{Novyi lef} was not the editors’ own decision and that there would be nothing in Moscow to take its place, yet does not place clear blame, and it was not preceded by a discussion in \textit{Novyi lef}’s own pages. Although there is no record of \textit{Novyi lef}’s continuation in or as \textit{Nova generatsiia}, Tret’iakov’s comment even suggests that the journal was not silenced by direct censorship; otherwise, how could he suggest its continuation elsewhere in the USSR?

The subtitle carried by \textit{Novyi lef} and by its predecessor journal, \textit{Lef}, provides a clue to the potential reason for \textit{Novyi lef}’s cessation of publication: “Journal of the left front of the arts” (\textit{zhurnal levogo fronta iskusstv}). This word choice establishes a relationship to modern art since the 1910s, when the Russian avant-garde carried the label “left” (\textit{levye khudozhniki, levoe iskusstvo}). The origin of this term is not entirely clear because it did not actually contain a reference to political leftists. The

\begin{itemize}
\item Lunacharskaia, “Why Did Commissar of Enlightenment A.V. Lunacharskii Resign?”, 331.
\item Mierau may have gained this insight through his friendship with Sergei Tret’iakov in the 1920s and 1930s. On the friendship, see Fritz Mierau, \textit{Erfindung und Korrektur: Tretjakows Ästhetik der Operativität} (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976), 34f. Other scholars make reference to this insight, but it appears that they heard it from Mierau directly rather than saw it published. The editorship of \textit{Novyi lef} transferred from Vladimir Mayakovsky to Sergei Tret’iakov starting with no. 8 (of 12), 1928.
\item “K svedeniiu podpischikov i chitatelei ‘Novogo lefa’,” \textit{Novyi lef} no. 12 (1928): 45.
\end{itemize}
phrase “avant-garde” was not commonly used in the arts in the Soviet Union until later.°°* Lef merely altered the spelling, collapsing the “le” from lev with the “f” from front. In spoken Russian, as in English, the difference between “lef” and “lev” is small. In an entirely separate development, by the time Trotsky and Stalin competed for power over the Communist Party following Lenin’s death in 1924, Trotsky and his supporters were known as the “left opposition.” The left opposition became weaker in 1926 and Trotsky was expelled from the Party in late 1927, making Novyi lef’s “left front” an unfortunate, if coincidental, overlap in terms.

Although there are reasons why Novyi lef may have been in a disadvantaged position in 1928, the document basis for scholars’ general understanding that Novyi lef folded under pressure, and that this pressure was (also) expressed in Soviet Photo’s accusation of plagiarism against Rodchenko, is missing. The only possible concrete indication is a 1927 Party resolution that responded to discussions in and about the literary scene. Opposed groups of writers were not uniting, as political leaders had hoped, but becoming ever more entrenched in their positions, and the resolution was intended to help the scene coalesce. It is not clear what specific actions might have come of this resolution. Further discussions about the cultural front involved figures as high up as Stalin himself, but there appears to be no indication that the visual arts, let alone photography, were in sight of policymakers.°°

October and its Photo Section

Soviet Photo’s and October’s writers, who published an array of forums, advocated for many of the same ideas: having the masses work more, and collectively, on forming culture; the distinction between pre-Revolutionary and new, Soviet forms; the principle that, with the proletariat now

°° Many thanks to Magdalena Nieslony for pointing out this usage.
arriving at its own aesthetics, a natural result would be the rejection of certain things (portraiture or landscape, for example) and an embrace of others (defined in *Soviet Photo* as the attitude of Socialist competition and images of Socialist construction). Where, then, did the differences between them lie—in shades of political meaning, or how method was conceived, or how the artworks looked?

On June 3, 1928, October published a declaration in *Pravda*. The text outlines how the group saw art’s role in the USSR, detailing its social and political relevance and discussing the specific artistic tasks that lay ahead. It opens, “At this time all kinds of art should establish their position at the front of socialist cultural revolution.” The “Declaration” contains further phrases and political references that, disingenuously or sincerely, locate its authors solidly within the official rhetoric of the time. The “Declaration,” like *Soviet Photo*’s programmatic articles, includes language about art serving the proletariat and helping raise the country’s general cultural level; that is, the standard at which ideology, cultural life, and daily life were experienced by the masses. Contemporary economic and labor terminology used the phrase “shock-work” to describe intense, enthusiastic labor intended to build faster than normally-paced work. Referencing this term in the “Declaration,” October called upon artists to unite their efforts and join in the building of the country, working especially “on the most important points” (*na [...] udarnykh punktakh*) of buildings, objects for people’s everyday use, and the imparting of artistic education. Various references to daily life (*byt*) echo the era’s calls for it to be collective and take on new shape. But, as Hiltrud Ebert noted, the mechanism linking October’s politics and their artistic drive never became transparent.


October was, in principle, open to many artistic mediums, but was clear on how and why they should be used. After the opening sentence the “Declaration” continues,

the spatial arts should serve the proletariat and the masses of workers that follow it in two inseparable areas: 1. In the area of ideological propaganda (through paintings, frescoes, print, sculpture, photo, cinema and so on); 2. In the area of production and immediate organization of collective life (through architecture, industrial design, the decoration of mass celebrations, and so on). 34

The intention was to resolve the disparity between degrees of artistic and socioeconomic development in the country, with art now organized, planned, and presumably received on a collective basis—an approach that sounds much like the planning, organizing, and collective labor of the Five-Year Plan’s industrialization drive. After all, proletarian art should overcome individualism and market relations in art. 35

This reconstruction of how artists should work then moves beyond individualism and the market to matters of Marxist ideology and visual style. The artist must always work on himself to maintain his own ideological standards at the level of the “revolutionary proletarian avant-garde.” Artists were called upon to see themselves not as “masters” passively “representing reality.” Activity within the framework of dialectical materialism must be combined with the repudiation of one kind of realism and embrace of another:

Meanwhile, we reject the petty-bourgeois realism of imitators, the realism of stagnant individual daily life, the passively contemplating, static, naturalist realism that copies reality in vain, embellishing and canonizing the old daily life, tying up the energy and weakening the will of a proletariat whose will is not yet firm. We acknowledge and will build proletarian realism, which expresses the will of the working revolutionary class; dynamic realism, showing life in motion, in action; realism that reveals life’s perspectives; realism that makes things, rationally rebuilds the old daily life, that acts with all art’s means in the thick of the fight and construction. But we simultaneously reject aesthetic, abstract industrialism and the bare preoccupation with technical aspects posing as revolutionary art. 36

Verlag, 1992), 70.
34. “Deklaratsiia ob’edineniiia ‘Oktiabr’,” 135f.
The rejections of “petty-bourgeois” art continued. October’s goal was to move from the previous era’s slogan of bringing “art to the masses” (iskusstvo v massy) to “preparing the ground for art of the masses” (podgotovliaet pochvy dlia iskusstva mass, emphasis in original). This promise was made even more explicit in October’s closing:

Mass amateur art will draw immense masses into artistic work. This work is connected with the class war, with the development of industry and the transformation of everyday life. This work demands sincerity, qualifications, cultural maturity, revolutionary consciousness. We will devote all our strength to this work.37

Many of the “Declaration’s” signatories were already, and are now, associated with the artistic avant-garde, such as the brothers Aleksandr and Viktor Vesnin, Aleksei Gan, Moisei Ginzburg, Gustav Klutsis, and Sergei Eisenstein. Although Rodchenko did not join the initial declaration, he is now remembered among art historians as one of the group’s most prominent members. The text itself would seem to indicate the direction in which new Soviet art was headed. It is thus all the more surprising that the signatories should call for devoting their efforts to amateur artistic activity because, although the (vaguely conceived) “masses” had long been a part of the rhetoric surrounding ideas for a new Soviet art, actual amateur artistic production hardly figured in these artists’ interests. In their “Declaration,” October thus conceived of new audiences, arenas, and working methods for artists, but the amateurs they theorized about remained faceless and vague. Amateurs appear as a mere token for what “art of the masses” could mean in practical terms.

Does October’s “Declaration” represent the avant-garde’s impending sellout to the political demands made of them during the cultural revolution, as Ebert postulated?38 That is, was it an attempt to make the language surrounding the avant-garde’s work more palatable to the Party, and thus negotiate more leeway for artists—at the risk of losing hold on their true artistic priorities? Or was it the beginning of an argument about what constitutes realism? I argue that the October

“Declaration” represents a further step in the direction of establishing realism in new Soviet art. It was an ideologically imbued step, and one that led to conflict with *Soviet Photo* even as it seemed to take a similar position.

The scholarly literature often glosses over this ideological commitment in the Soviet avant-garde or finds ways of separating it from their art. On one hand is the claim that aesthetics were of primary interest to avant-garde photographers in the late 1920s, only to be replaced by ideological concerns in the 1930s.\(^{39}\) On another, even scholars who acknowledge the centrality of Soviet politics in many artists’ work avoid analyzing it, in favor of insightfully analyzing individual images, again reinforcing the focus on avant-garde aesthetics as separate from its politics.\(^{40}\) One early extensive collection of artists’ and theorists’ writings underscores that choice by introducing the aesthetic strategies of avant-garde photographers and leaving out their politics, choosing not to reprint texts by the avant-garde’s critics, who addressed politics more openly.\(^{41}\) The Soviet avant-garde photographers’ relationship to West European formalism and experimentation receives more emphasis than, and partially obscures, the sincerely political nature of their work. The decision not to discuss the avant-garde’s politics more deeply is in itself ideological and dates to Cold War-era discomfort with artists’ commitment to Soviet ideals, while theoretical approaches to the avant-garde simply take different directions.

This relationship between the Soviet avant-garde, politics, and the Western avant-garde is further complicated by the statement that October’s Photo Section published. The statement also increased the potential for conflict between October and *Soviet Photo*. The “Program of the Photo Section of the October Association” was published in 1930 without attribution and is divided into

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eight points; it is not accompanied by images. The authors were against kartina-type photography and bourgeois-style pathos. At the same time, they were also against contemporary Western photography, naming Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray as negative examples. The things they supported sound strikingly reminiscent of Soviet Photo: “propaganda and agitation for Socialist daily life” and images of “Socialist construction,” for example. The Photo Section also wanted photographers to be press workers and suggested that each of its members should be in a factory or collective farm photo circle, perhaps even leading it. They were for a collective working method, also recalling Soviet Photo’s ideas about how the circles would change the photography scene. The Photo Section wanted photographers to be “politically literate” and well trained in technique. They even went so far as to claim that October would “undertake as its primary task organizing and instructing the cadres of proletarian photo-workers,” drawing the best members of photo circles into its fold. Finally, the program’s eighth point reads, “Originating from all of this, working in the field of photography, we consciously subordinate all of our activity to the tasks of class war of the proletariat for the new Communist culture.”

Two aspects of the Photo Section’s “Program” deserve attention here. The first is that it had the potential to dovetail with Soviet Photo’s project but also carried the possibility of conflict, depending on who the intended audience was. It clarified the “Declaration’s” suggestion that October’s mass orientation would manifest itself through a connection to amateurs by proposing to go to workers’ photo circles—which, of course, was exactly what Soviet Photo had already claimed for itself. Furthermore, given Soviet Photo’s relative dominance and reach, it appears strange that the Photo Section did not stake out its position in relation to it, differentiating itself from Western examples instead. This invites the question, for whom was the “Program” written? Its publication in a 1931 collection of October essays is not helpful in finding an answer. The research on October’s

42. “Programma fotosektii ob’edineniiia ‘Oktiabr’,” 149–151.
primary sources is so scant that there is little place to turn for answers. Some work on Rodchenko uses the “Program” as evidence for his rejection of earlier methods and styles but beyond that, its contextualization in the era’s broader photography debates has not yet taken place. This chapter and Chapter Four begin to fill that gap.

The second issue with the “Program” that deserves sustained study is its stance on fact and documentary. It reads,

Through the fixation of socially directed and not staged facts, we agitate and show the fight for Socialist culture. [...] We are decidedly against staging, which obstructs the idea of photography and cheapens reality. Staged photographs provoke the incredulity of the masses toward documentary photography and discredit our primary and decisive war on the cultural front. 43

These sentences show that documentary photography held positive associations for the Photo Section and it was supposed to hold sway with viewers. Documentary photography and reality are paired here as things that should be effective but may lose their impact if staging gets in the way; they are spontaneous and unaltered. “The staging of facts” is less clear: how can facts be staged? The Photo Section had no answer to this conundrum. These categorizations and connotations of documentary, fact, and reality were where the Photo Section and Soviet Photo diverged.

Factography and Documentary

Factography, which was developed as the “literature of the fact” by the authors of Novyi lef in 1927–28, was the practice of capturing reality and changing it through its representation in writing and in photography. It was not intended to be the unconsidered recording of one’s surroundings, the accusation that Soviet Photo eventually levelled at it. Factography was oriented toward having artists and writers produce things (texts, images, knowledge) while at major sites of production or

43. Ibid.
construction (factory complexes, infracture projects) in the USSR. Studying it allows a tight focus on what fact, realism, and documentary meant to different actors in the Soviet photography scene. Because Soviet Photo’s response to factography changed, the differences between their position, and those of the factographers and October, crystallized.

Leah Dickerman has argued that Novyi lef’s conception of realism was based on the fixation of facts, as theorized by Sergei Tret’iakov and made by him and Rodchenko. As she points out, these facts responded to belles lettres by proposing journalism. In the early years, the faktoviki—literally, “factists”—directed their interest towards the “accumulation of facts.” The factographers’ attempt to focus photographers’ attention on journalism even came before Soviet Photo and the establishment took that step a year or more later with the integration of amateurs into the worker-correspondent movement.

Sergei Tret’iakov published an early article on his journalistic method in Soviet Photo in 1927, writing about the necessity of carrying a camera with him as he worked. He informed readers that artistic considerations were unimportant to him and he aligned artistic interest with “falsification”: “All my sympathies lie with the journalist who mounts reportage and photographic pieces in order to reach not a falsification (as by a novelist), but a ‘true’ representation of reality.” He claimed that his journalistic work was incomplete without photographs and hoped for a time when photographs would be published not as illustrations to articles, but as autonomous elements that conveyed information on their own. For now, Tret’iakov presented this method without a political slant, but in later texts it becomes clear that he put his whole political and social commitment into the

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44. For an introduction to factography, see Devin Fore, “Introduction,” in “Soviet Factography,” special issue, October 118 (Fall 2006): 1–10.
45. Tret’iakov’s essays on factography are translated and reproduced in October 118 (Fall 2006).
49. Ibid.
literature of fact.

Throughout the period when Tret’iakov published and expounded his factographic method, Soviet Photo and Proletarian Photo did not engage with the idea either positively or negatively; only after several years passed did they seem to realize the negative implications that factography could have on making propaganda and decide to argue against it.

To reconstruct how Soviet Photo came to reject Tret’iakov’s factographic practice and October’s realism, it is crucial to work through the period’s definitions of documentary. Looking back on these terms’ usage, it appears obvious that while factography was a mature and theorized approach to recording events, and realism was theorized in different ways by different parties, the term “documentary,” in the Soviet context, eventually referred to images that seemed to record what was in front of the camera without going a step further, without taking a position. Thus, “documentary” in the Soviet context meant something different than the definitions that were establishing themselves in Western Europe and North America, and which continue to exist (with some modifications) in scholarship. In the USSR, documentary was an unsophisticated, one-to-one representation of reality as it existed on the other side of the camera lens and the term thus acquired a negative connotation. It was not always so negative: in Soviet Photo the very first justification for why photographic activity was important described photography as a method for “documentarily” (dokumental’no) capturing images of the reality around each photographer.⁵⁰ This interest was associated with the need to document the Soviet Union; images used in newspapers today would provide historical insight later on. This kind of documentary activity seems oriented toward straightforward recording, not argument.

For Soviet Photo’s writers documentary photographs were, in a way, the basic building block of a photographic practice that would achieve some political or social goal; they were simple, a raw

⁵⁰ Vit. Zhemchuzhnyi, “Vnimanie fotoliubitel’stvu!”, Sovetskoe foto no. 1 (April 1926): 4f. The author was also a contributor to Novyi lef.
material that editors or photomonteurs could utilize in making propaganda or assembling further images. On numerous occasions, various contributors commented on the need to enhance the photograph’s inherent documentary nature either by giving it a slant (captions or juxtapositions) or through compelling artistic quality. Their message was that a documentary photograph should not stand alone and, while a photograph in and of itself could be neutral, it should preferably be assigned a politics. Soviet Photo’s authors expressed the need of a photographer or journalist to direct the meaning of his or her work. And according to how Soviet Photo understood factography, there was no distinction between it and documentary, regardless of how carefully or deeply Tret’iakov—working with a different set of concerns about images and language—sought to establish a difference.

The early understanding of photography’s role in documenting Soviet history was later fortified and considerably expanded by Lenin’s instruction: “Show not just cinema, but also photographs with appropriate captions that are interesting for propagandistic purposes.” Lenin’s injunction to attach captions to photographs, thus directing their reception, points to a key instance in which Tret’iakov’s factographic method diverges from that of the official mainstream. The idea that a photograph could stand on its own with the wealth of information it contains, as Tret’iakov proposed, found little resonance even among those who clearly believed in photography’s significance for art and propaganda. The preference for captions, sometimes very long ones, stemmed in part from the fear that shorter captions might “blur” an image’s meaning. The power of the image was an auxiliary power: relegated to the role of illustrating a text, it was to be given a text of its own that would delimit the range of its possible meanings. Tret’iakov’s conclusion was the opposite: he advocated the “extended photo-observation,” pairing photographs with ever more

photographs, instead of with text.\textsuperscript{53}

The stipulation that these appropriately captioned propaganda photographs be \textit{documentary} in their basic nature was added by \textit{Soviet Photo}'s editors but attributed to Lenin, thus forming the argument that documentary photography was crucial to propaganda and a basic part of the class war, cultural revolution, and Socialist construction. With this addition, one of \textit{Soviet Photo}'s most frequent contributors, Bunimovich, argued for a more complex understanding of documentary photography: that it could be either protocolary (\textit{protokol'nyi}), which he implied was insufficient, or was made such that its propagandistic character was immanent, which he preferred.\textsuperscript{54} A “good” documentary photograph did more than just show things as they were, it had something—a striking visual feature, a juxtaposition—that would make it possible to create good propaganda out of it.

\textit{Soviet Photo} printed abundant examples of what the editors considered appropriate documentary photography, and its potential uses as effective propaganda. For although the journal continued to publish genre scenes, non-Russian ethnic “types,” and cover images of workers at play during their leisure time, images of machines or people on the job came to dominate. Such “documentary” photographs often did not show elaborate scenes of labor or meaningful moments. They depended on accompanying text to show what important activity or person was depicted.

Georgii Petrusov’s \textit{Electrical smelting oven at the factory Elektrostal’} \textit{[Electric Steel]} shows the figure of a laborer holding a long pole into the bright opening of the oven, which lights the floor, his face and body (seen from the side), and makes silhouettes out of other equipment (fig. 3.5). This is Socialist construction in its smallest denomination: one man, one oven, no surrounding action. The photograph fights for political goals by showing what is desirable, however small the scale. The large slogan covering the top third of the page gives the image its meaning: “Photo in the USSR—one of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[53] Sergei Tre‘t’akov, “Ot fotoserii—k dlitel’nomu fotonabliudeniui,” \textit{Proletarskoe foto} no. 4 (December 1931): 20–43.
\end{footnotes}
the weapons of class war and socialist construction.” Thus, the photographer records construction and his own work is more construction. It is production to expand production. This idea was later formulated explicitly, in the title “Photography helps build socialism.” The same might be said of two men who push a cart along tracks in an October 1929 cover image (fig. 3.6). As in the previous photograph, the light is the image’s most prominent aspect. It creates a silhouette out of the two men and cart while highlighting the clean curves of the rails and rough edges of the tunnel’s entrance, making the whole more interesting. Noticeable use of lighting and enhances the photograph’s simple subject—two men transporting material in a cart. The result is reminiscent not only of Troshin’s lessons on creating depth in “Paths of Photo-Culture,” but also of the dominant mode of portraiture discussed in Chapter Two, which often placed proletarians in a work setting.

In a later photograph strikingly similar to Petrusov’s ironworker, S. Blokhin shows a tighter close-up of a worker in the same pose (fig. 3.7). The higher quality of this print lends his oven and clothing greater definition, while the downward tilt of his head suggests focus. The editorial choice to place this photograph immediately following a portrait of the steel founder Lukashov (fig. 3.8) establishes a close relationship between a worker’s physiognomy and labor. Lukashov is shown with clean skin, strong features, protective glasses and a flat cap, his gaze directed outside the frame. A review of the issue’s mezzotints declares, “This is really a portrait of a Soviet shock worker, confident in his future.” Looking first at Lukashov and then at a worker in action, the viewer sees two elements of one persona. Neither has the comic effect of the same issue’s cover, in which the scale of Blokhin’s *Shock worker from the factory “Hammer and Sickle”* is exaggerated by repeated emphasis (fig. 3.9). The young man is seen from below, at approximately the level of his feet; he appears to stand on piles of material, as the items behind him suggest; and the unusually long wrench in his hand, seen without any association with a similarly large machine, becomes a silly

prop. These three male workers demonstrate their strength of body, mind, and resolve, and through their clothing and locations are all marked as proletarians. These five images worked on two levels by portraying ideal workers and, in the interpretation of Soviet Photo’s writers and editors, simultaneously constituting an element of Socialist construction. Each photograph is important as one expression representing the greater whole, in which every worker is the anonymous hero and every worker-photographer’s factory shot stands for the whole of Socialist construction.

These five images of workers or labor are representative of what Soviet Photo favored because of their content, not their style. If Soviet Photo’s authors judged artistic merit, then it was only as a secondary concern. Almost every issued printed a column reviewing the photographs chosen for high-quality (mezzotint) printing. A few sentences discuss each photograph, noting what the viewer sees and calling attention to these elements’ current relevance. These descriptions make it clear that the images all show great Soviet objects and subjects and all are somehow connected to Socialist construction.57 Content trumped form every time. Judging by the discussion of these and similar images, they were understood and taught as simple recordings of fact: the proletarian works this way, the proletarian looks like this. Emphasis was almost always on the figure of the proletarian.

These small-scale images of production and social types, while offering ideas for how to enhance documentary photography with something more, would not suffice to teach photographers how to use their documentary photographs for propaganda purposes. As a result, Soviet Photo’s authors and editors demanded ever more from propaganda images—more than shots that catchily register the right subject. Soviet Photo used the “competition of photo-journalists” (sorevnovanie foto-reporterov), which I discussed in Chapter Two in the context of photo-correspondents’ participation, to show the potential of photojournalists’ best work.58 The most successful photographers to be

57. See, for example, “Kak perestraivaetsia zhizn’: Obzor metstso-tinto,” Sovetskoe foto no. 24 (December 1930): 688.
showcased were not worker-photographers or members of photo circles; they were photographers whose names were already well known through their work for the press, and some of them are now represented in the collections of leading museums worldwide. Dmitrii Debabov’s *The changing ages* contrasts horse-powered and tractor farming within one frame (fig. 3.10). By juxtaposing an agricultural scene with an image of a photojournalist perched on construction beams, the editors made a statement about the photograph’s equal relevance and currency. Like the comparison between horse and tractor, other photographs increasingly included not just workers, but also a view onto buildings or machinery, showing the achievements of Socialist construction.

In another example, Bunimovich’s two-part series of photographs shows an element in the modernization process: in the worker’s town of Armenikende (near Baku, Azerbaijan), thirteen workers are involved (some more, some less) in spreading out asphalt to be steamrolled, and in the frame below them, others prepare the raw material for paving more roads (fig. 3.11). The photographs reveal both human labor and advances in the petroleum industry. These photographs appear in reverse chronological order from top to bottom, first showing how the asphalt is finally used and then its preparation. The reason for this reversal would appear to be compositional, since the bottom photograph shows only the fore- and middle-ground stretching from left to right, while the top image recedes “up” into the distance, toward the top of the page. But the top image can also be read left to right, starting with unsettled land, then showing its development, and the positive results of this building activity on the right, in apartment buildings for workers. Together and individually, these two photographs depict transformation and show the rewards for labor. They also suggest a certain universality to the progress of building the Soviet Union, since the photographer came from Moscow while a caption clarifies that building is (also) happening in one of the republics.

An ideal Soviet viewer would construe these photos as referring to the near future by perceiving a suggestion of what is to come. These photographs capture the process of building, not
the results. The men at the steel ovens will (help) produce a tangible industrial product; Debabov’s tractor driver surpasses the horse-drawn plow, suggesting the larger area he can farm and hence the increased yields; Bunimovich’s pavement refers to major improvements in infrastructure because asphalt streets will make further transport and building possible. The small steps contained in each of these images are forward-looking. The idea of looking or moving forward is best embodied in a juxtaposition comparing Soviet (socialist) labor with foreign (capitalist) unemployment (fig. 3.12). In this example from the series “Them and Us” taken from March 1932 and given the title The Worker’s Morning, the upper photograph is captioned “Unemployed people on the theatre steps (Berlin),” and the lower, “A brigade of miners from the ‘Svoboda’ mines starts for work (Donbass, Makeevka)”. The camera lens and the viewer look down on the faceless, starkly lit unemployed and up to the more evenly-lighted miners, who consciously return the gaze as they literally step forward into work. The very label “us” encourages the viewer’s identification.

Just as the exemplary worker was a character type and not an individual when it came to portraiture, even in close-up, the construction work shown here is made universal through its undefined locations, dates, and workers. The photographs appear in context—with one another, with a caption, and so on. As I demonstrated in Chapters One and Two, Soviet Photo emphasized that aspiring photographers should capture current activities or aspects of life in the USSR—this was a prerequisite for producing images that would have relevance for the press or any larger audience. In order for photography to be agitation and propaganda, it needed to contain this universal, current element and the hint of what was to come as well as a visual juxtaposition or accompanying text that contextualized the image’s significance. According to Soviet Photo, only in this way could a documentary photograph agitate: it contained overarching importance and suggested immediate action as well.

Each of the images discussed above relies on external information contained in the caption
or simply understood as the common knowledge of a person witnessing the Soviet Union’s industrialization. They are far from Sergei Tret’iakov’s idea that photographs should be able to communicate without accompanying text, or the *Novyi lef* proposition that they would change reality. This propaganda works with an entirely different set of categories, aiming to impact the perception of its viewer, not the nature of its subject.

There was a further difference between *Soviet Photo*’s conception of propaganda and factography. *Soviet Photo* advocated for documentary photographs’ use as propaganda, and the other side of the coin was the journal’s increasingly negative mention of documentary photos that did not find that use. This attitude stood in direct contrast to factography’s insistence on images’ cool and unbiased perception. *Soviet Photo* criticized documentary as “dry” and characterized by static, posed workers; a photographer was not to be “only the ‘fixer’ of facts, but the organizer of the will of the masses; do not just show, but summon the socialist reconstruction of life…” Effective images of production would show engaged workers. Furthermore, as one writer explained by means of small illustrations, the angle at which a thing was viewed was as important as showing it at all. The angle of a shot must communicate grandiosity. Agitational and propagandistic photographs should do far more than “objectively” fix facts:

Photo-agitation and photo-propaganda are not dispassionate illumination, not “objective” fixation of facts; they are exactly that—agitation and propaganda. The strict selection of themes and their meticulous development, the aim in all work not just to show, but to convincingly prove, carry out, and assert the proletarian idea; to help the broad masses master this idea […] The proletarian photographer’s shots should do this and only this.

There is an unmistakable association between the insufficient “fixing of facts” and the basic principle of factography. Even though the factographers actually meant to differentiate between fact

60. *Sovetskoe foto* no. 11 (June 1930), 325. This is a free-floating slogan written in boldface, not part of an article.
and fiction, when it came to photography this expression instead suggested a simplistic approach to capturing whatever was before the lens. In light of the principles presented in *Soviet Photo*, this practice could be considered unproletarian and indifferent, failing (like a caption-less or artless documentary photograph) to fulfill photography’s central agitprop purpose.\(^63\)

Leah Dickerman makes the case for factography as a theory and practice that was concerned with vision and perception. She writes, “What was important for the *faktoviki* was not the ideological correctness of a particular perspective, but rather the specific, historically constituted perception of the real. [...] [Factography privileged] a descriptive mode over narrative exegesis—[...] *protokol* (report) over *proklamatsiia* (proclamation)...”\(^64\) Furthermore, “Factography’s model was insistently visual: it was a realism of immanent phenomena, presenting the world as seen.”\(^65\) For *Soviet Photo*, on the other hand, ideological correctness, proclamation, and directed vision of the world were priorities. From this perspective, factography could look dangerously like indifference; it did not look forward to the future, but recorded the present.

The danger inherent in documentary, and by extension factography, was that, fallen into the wrong hands, its inherent lack of commitment could allow instrumentalization for the wrong cause. As Lev Mezhericher warned,

> In the hands of bourgeois users, photography becomes a weapon of religious propaganda, a herald of sacred property and middle-class morals, a herald of imperial robbery [...] In the hands of the victorious proletariat photography becomes a weapon of the masses’ cultural elevation, a help to science and social organization, a dispassionate and faithful chronicler of the great fight and of construction.\(^66\)

How might an artist defend himself against the arguments of documentary’s and factography’s basic indifference to politics? German Nedoshivin, for one, argued that it was a misunderstanding to separate the documentary from the artistic. He based this idea in the thesis

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64. Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” 142f.
on the unity of the subjective and the objective in the ideology of the proletariat [...] The Marxist position on this question consists of the idea that for the first time in the ideology of the proletariat, subjective class aspirations coincide with the objective character of reality. The method of dialectical materialism is in essence an analog of reality; the same applies as pertains to proletarian art in particular: the moment of objective perception coincides with the “artistic,” and the artistic is inseparable from the objective...  

In his view, the proletariat needed to perceive the artistic element in the photograph at the same time as the documentary element. Following this line of thought, if the two elements were of equal importance, then the idea of building upon documentary by adding art meant imposing an inappropriate hierarchy on these two kinds of content—and the fundamental disagreement with Soviet Photo over what photography’s basic nature can or cannot fulfill. As the quotation shows, Nedoshivin also bolsters October’s commitment to realism by suggesting that proletarian art can only be realist. As a member of October, Nedoshivin saw documentary and expressive functions as equal. Tret’iakov and Soviet Photo both disagreed with him. Tret’iakov’s factographic method became increasingly inappropriate in Soviet Photo for its excessively documentary nature.

The definition of documentary photography examined here is the image as tabula rasa: it requires context and text to render it an effective statement or propaganda tool. By and large, the photographs corresponding to this conception were limited in scope and almost impossible to assign a specific place or date. They show men at ovens (as in fig. 3.7), or workers at the machines of textile factories whose scale the viewer cannot see, or a man at a machine whose purpose is not revealed. With this anonymity and universality of worker and setting, and if we accept Soviet Photo’s explanation of how to surpass documentary and achieve propaganda, then the propagandistic use of such photographs—even ones that are already forward-looking—would require a caption or even an explanatory narrative. These “small-scale” images may have been the product of photographers’ access to the workshop floor and not to large institutions or important places, as discussed at the

close of Chapter Two; or, formulated differently, they were the consequence of enlisting worker-photographers whose sphere of action was limited to their own factories and leisure time. While some critics applied further criteria to the images, such as the preference that a worker never be shown as smaller than the machine she or he operates, the dependence on clarifying text seems to permit almost any photograph to fulfill propaganda purposes. These small-scale, documentary-propaganda photographs stand in stark contrast to the more famous propaganda imagery that valorizes the USSR: the bird's-eye-view images of marches on Red Square, or panoramic views of massive construction projects, or the country's leaders. Yet it is these close-up, almost intimate views that bear comparison to the more daring close-ups for which the avant-garde was criticized, and which I examine in the following chapter. While they appear to be similar in subject, at the time there was a perceived gulf between them.

*Connecting Modernism in East and West*

This chapter's discussion of factography, documentary, realism, propaganda, and *Soviet Photo*’s relationship to the avant-garde raises the question, and not for the first time, of Modernism and the seeming parallels between photography in the USSR and the West, for example in the Weimar Republic and the USA. The similarities between these contexts are obvious: documentary (whatever its definition) was a dominant concern of major photographers; projects to record current events, economic developments, and the people involved were accorded great importance by state and society alike; the use of photography by committed Socialist and Communist artists or publicists spanned Western Europe and the USSR; Modernist visual strategies seemingly cropped up in the work of photographers everywhere. The temptation to compare photos made in the Weimar Republic, USSR, and US is great. Communication between artists took place through publications,

exhibitions like *Pressa* (Cologne, 1928) and *Film und Foto* (Stuttgart, 1929), and when prominent figures like El Lissitzky, John Heartfield, or Margaret Bourke-White traveled between the USSR, Western Europe, and the US. Still, it remains important to resist general comparisons, even as the study of specific instances of exchange can be fruitful and fascinating. The discourse of photography’s theorization and reception was different in, and particular to, each socio-political context. Those differences are the reason why I have avoided reconciling or plotting documentary, realism, or fact with one another across national contexts: these ideas must, above all, be understood on their own terms and in this case, within the context of photography’s intended transformation into something Soviet and proletarian, and in the context of its mass production and press application.

And yet—did the USSR’s photographers and critics, intentionally or accidentally, eventually establish definitions that meet or diverge from their foreign counterparts in instructive ways? Can their conclusions change the way we map the many notions of documentary and realism from the 1920s and 1930s? What ideas were unique to the Soviet context? Rodchenko’s work in *Novyi lef* and with October has traditionally been located within Modernism by virtue of its style, the artist’s reception in the West, and his own engagement with Western European art at that time. With the rather different aesthetic choices governing its pages and later antagonism to the avant-garde, *Soviet Photo* has long been perceived as un- or anti-modern. But how do these categories change when we move beyond visual style to a conceptual level? Do they still hold?

*Soviet Photo* promoted a unique understanding of photography’s temporality, one that I believe is inextricably tied to the particular framework of the USSR and their conception of documentary and propaganda, and which sets it apart from Modernism. Beginning with the Union of the Pen and Photo in 1928–29, all photography was tied to the framework of the first Five-Year Plan and Socialist construction. As my analysis of particular examples demonstrates, *Soviet Photo*’s
project was focused on the present and forward-looking at the same time: it sought to show the building of Soviet life as it happened. According to an outlook based on the Five-Year Plan, the viewer knows in 1930 that the girl at the textile mill and the man at the steel oven will have produced a particular amount by the end of the Plan in 1932. Their continued work until that time is already declared, so the photograph of them in production could be from any point during the continuous moment leading to that pre-determined conclusion. In other words, it would not matter whether this “smallest denomination” of production, as I called it earlier, came from 1929 or 1931, so long as it looked forward to the completion of one Five-Year Plan, then the next, and the next; its universality was what mattered, and pinning it down to a particular moment in time would take away its momentum.

The question of the photograph’s temporality has attended the medium since its invention and has given rise to such varied answers that it would be impossible to survey them here. For many early photographers and for some major theorists, however, the photo attests to what is already past. Soon after Henry Fox Talbot invented the calotype, its first (upperclass) viewers received the tip that they might photograph their china to bolster claims of theft if some of it were later missing. The difference between the then of the photograph and the now of the accusation rests on the assumption that the photograph enables us to witness change. Remember that back when Soviet Photo listed photography’s uses for its readers in 1926, historical documentation in a changing country received high priority. In the mid-twentieth century, Henri Cartier-Bresson expounded on the “decisive moment,” the fraction of a second when a photograph is shot, because the very same photograph could not be made at any other moment. In the present, photographer and collector F.

C. Gundlach tells his interviewers something similar, “That’s the singular thing about photography. This moment right now, as we sit here—now it’s over. If we had just made a picture: unique.” But what if a photograph does not attest to the past at all? If the “now” of the Soviet image is an oddly extended moment, identified with the duration of a Five-Year Plan and looking forward to its completion, then we confront a conception of photography that is very different and intrinsically tied to its politics. This preoccupation with capturing the present moment and its forward movement does not overlap with the major concerns of Western photographers in the same period because the underlying imperative to agitate was specific to the Soviet Union.

This changed understanding of photography’s temporal possibilities marks the major difference between Soviet Photo and the avant-gardists of Novyi lef and October. Rodchenko’s lef vision and Tret’iakov’s factographic snapshots consciously refused to make grand statements about current life in the USSR—not with Rodchenko defining anything in the USSR as “Soviet” content and Tret’iakov only “observing” each moment, not putting his works to further propagandistic use. So although Soviet Photo did not necessarily oppose Novyi lef’s positions while the group still existed, further developments prepared the ground for deeper conflicts with the avant-garde.

These varying approaches clashed in the “creative discussion” of photography from 1930 to 1932. By then, the differences between Novyi lef’s and October’s positions were lost, and criticisms of October got paired with negative references to “lef” work. The initial underlying disagreements were about whether documentary was adequate, the primacy of propaganda, and what a proper Soviet photograph should encompass, but later they did not appear as such. The discussion shifted and Soviet Photo relied instead on the terms of “proletarian” photography and its “formalist” enemies.

Chapter Four: Formalism and the “Proletarian Episode,” or, Left, Right, and Center before and after the 1932 decree

Introduction

In 1932, Stalin’s government issued the decree “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations,” which dissolved all independent arts organizations in order to end the stylistic and ideological disputes between them. Despite the repressive nature of this order, art production was less monolithic in its wake than appears on the surface. This chapter is devoted to how the relationship between aesthetics and politics changed during the cultural revolution’s “proletarian episode” (until 1932) and how this changed relationship continued to shape photography after the reorganization decree. Before it, October and the Russian Association for Proletarian Photography (ROPF) exchanged arguments in the pages of Soviet Photo in what the journal called the “creative discussion” (tvorcheskaia diskussiia). While art historical scholarship has reviewed the argument, ROPF’s texts have always been left out of the primary-source document collections that shape the perception of this history in the West and in Russia. The discussion of October and Soviet Photo in Chapter Three showed that although the artistic goals of these two organizations diverged, their ideological self-representation overlapped. For Soviet Photo’s core photographers and critics, there was a direct correspondence between the way a photograph looked and the photographer’s own ideological position. The avant-garde concurred, but arrived at opposite visual strategies. The avant-garde interest in formal qualities—chiefly the use of sharp camera angles—was criticized at the time

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as indicating insufficient political enlightenment. Since then, the formal strategies have come (in the West) to signal a critical distance from Party ideology. ROPF’s infamous criticisms of the avant-gardists, on the other hand, are frequently understood by scholars as a principled stance against extreme perspectives. I will argue that the avant-garde images in question were actually more objectionable to ROPF for the way they distorted workers’ bodies and space. The connection to the discussion of portraiture in Chapter One provides more context for the criticism itself. Even though ROPF did not present its polemics as instruction for amateurs, the amateur moment was its historical context. The problem with extreme perspective was not the camera angle itself, but the distortions it caused.

The critique of formalism that appeared in Soviet Photo’s pages began in a theoretical mode before shifting to call out specific photographers for censure. The shift was precipitated by numerous factors, among them the journal’s drive to define “Soviet” photography ever more closely as a proletarian phenomenon, and the increasingly intense tone of the political rhetoric accompanying the first Five-Year Plan and cultural revolution. While that rhetoric often had little to do with photography, it appears in abundance in lead articles that sometimes failed to touch upon photography at all. The sharp polemical language directed at Aleksandr Rodchenko, Eliazar Langman, Boris, Olga, and Elizaveta Ignatovich, and other October group members—which art historical scholarship universally and hyperbolically terms “attacks”—made its appearance after a clear alternative to October appeared in the form of ROPF. ROPF was aligned with the larger and more prominent Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, RAPP. Recently, art historian Erika Wolf has downplayed ROPF’s role in the history of Soviet photography and print culture, arguing that the group was ultimately of little importance to editors of the illustrated press. But this position leaves the artistic debate surrounding ROPF insufficiently examined on its own merits. I believe that

it is impossible to understand the avant-garde’s marginalization without fully understanding who was arguing against them. Furthermore, since ROPF’s positions survived well into the 1930s, they help illuminate how photographic Socialist Realism was formed.

In the standard art historical narrative of the debates about what constituted proper photographic representation in the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1932, the 1932 decree that restructured arts organizations appears as a cut-off date for artistic freedom—after which October ceased to exist and groups like ROPF, perceived as closer to official attitudes about art, won by default. Indeed, ROPF-style rhetoric continued appearing in *Soviet Photo*, which by then was renamed *Proletarian Photo* (for the sake of simplicity I generally use *Soviet Photo* here, unless referring to a specific issue from the *Proletarian Photo* period). While the 1932 decree is rightfully known for its role in clamping down on artistic freedom, to the best of my knowledge it did not result in any artist being explicitly forbidden to work and it did not decreed what *bad* to be made. It stifled discussion without actually dictating which visual style was permitted or forbidden. This chapter therefore reconsiders the consequences of the creative discussion from 1928 to 1932 in light of the avant-gardists’ later careers. Each photographer had the opportunity to redeem himself in the establishment’s eyes, though they did so with varying degrees of success. Instead of disappearing, some major artists continued to appear on the pages of *Soviet Photo*—their erstwhile antagonist.

The examples of P. Grokhovskii, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Eliazar Langman illuminate how aspects of particular photographers’ work came under fire by ROPF and *Soviet Photo* and demonstrate what the consequences could be for their careers. In ROPF’s view, Grokhovskii stood in for the right political deviation, and Rodchenko and Langman stood in for the left. I attempt to tease out what these labels meant: did they, for example, apply equally to visual style and politics? After 1932, October photographers had lost some of their status but they continued to have opportunities to rehabilitate themselves, receiving commissions and praise for their work. I use
“rehabilitate” advisedly in reference to such situations. The word is meant figuratively and is not a reference to the official political rehabilitations that later became possible for victims of Stalin’s repressions. Rodchenko’s case is particularly vexing because he continued to position himself carefully, becoming rehabilitated to some degree. While he achieved influential status as one of Soviet Photo’s editors, he was never safe from the kind of political suspicion that could have ended his career. Langman had far more difficulty redeeming himself, while Grokhovskii disappeared from view.

Formalism and Realism

In one of the earliest statements against formalism published in Soviet Photo, P. G. associated it with “‘artistic photo-reportage’, or, as it is sometimes called, ‘photo-journalism’.” Where or how he or she came up with this terminology remains unclear, but his point is clear enough: artistic photographs can be made according to two methods, the notional (smyslovyi) and the formal. The notional method involved finding good subjects and capturing them intensely (zafiksirovat’ ikh nasystchennno), while the formal method could take ordinary things and arrange them schematically or spatially (v skhematicheskom, prostranstvennom [...] poriadke). P. G. acknowledged that these two methods can be unified, but emphasized that in “our” illustrations (that is, in the USSR), the notional method dominates and the formal method only appears when it is “justified.” The notional method of making unadulterated photographs of the right subjects recalls Soviet Photo’s conception of documentary, and here documentary and artistic photography are declared mutually exclusive. Formalism was not associated with mindfully chosen subjects.

What justified formalist photographs, then? The author remained silent on this point; however, they were unjustified if the formalist composition prevented ignorant viewers from

4. Ibid.
understanding reality. In P. G.’s text “Photography in the press,” he complained for instance that “many millions” of rural viewers would look at one of Rodchenko’s photographs of a facade and receive the incorrect impression that in Moscow, buildings were built tilted, and suggested that such photographs were not necessary for, or wanted by, beginning photo-reporters (figure 0.2).

According to this view, the ability of an adept photographer to teach something unusual or new—Rodchenko’s goal to show familiar things in unfamiliar ways—did not register. P. G. asserted that the press instead needed photographs of “deep social meaning”—in the context of Soviet Photo’s frequent items on political or social programs, the reader understands P. G.’s “deep social meaning” to refer to class war and collectivization.

Soviet Photo, from the beginning of its publication, preached the division between socially-oriented and purely formalist photographs in their lessons to amateurs. This point is underscored in Lev Mezhericher’s review of an exhibition of photo circles’ work, published soon after P. G.’s critique. The two antidotes to bourgeois ideology, he reminded the reader, were the ideological photograph, which was socially oriented and had value through current themes that came from the collective, and remembering that the artistic side of work is the means, not the end. First came the content, then the formal organization: “This is how the political revolution was made, and such is the path of cultural revolution.”

Rodchenko’s point, as discussed in Chapter Three, was that formalism has innate meaning; Mezhericher worked with a fundamentally different set of definitions to create two sets of mutually exclusive options that precluded consideration of Rodchenko’s position: proletarian culture vs. bourgeois culture, and the social photograph vs. the artistic photograph. Regardless of a formalist’s political leanings (and here the 1928 October “Declaration” must be kept in mind), Mezhericher would associate Rodchenko’s work with “the bourgeois”

5. P. G. called the facade a “left front” in reference to Novyi lef.
because of its attention to artistic concerns. Furthermore, the obscure, pictorialism-oriented journal *Photographer (Fotografi)* was also criticized in *Soviet Photo* for being both bourgeois and apolitical; it was associated with the preservation of pre-Revolutionary styles.\(^7\) What we arrive at, then, is the attitude that everything is divided into either proletarian or bourgeois; while the leftist formalists and traditional artist-photographers had fundamentally different approaches to photography, their differences did not matter. Labeling a photographer as “bourgeois” thus was based less in his economic status or social class than in a fundamental dichotomy with “proletarian” photographers, whose label was determined not by their working-class lives but by the images they made.

The early differences between formalist and non-formalist photographers crystallized in a 1930 exhibition of photographs from *Ogonek*, which at the time was *Soviet Photo*’s publisher. Many of the participants’ names are familiar through their contributions (visual and written) to *Soviet Photo*: Bunimovich, E. Mikulina, Semyon Fridliand, Arkadii Shaikhet, F. Kislov, I. Grokhorov. An exhibition review in *Soviet Photo* attempted to find the middle ground between the principle that the “statement of this or that fact” should be as “simple” as possible—as endorsed by photographers such as Shaikhet and Fridliand—and the idea that some situations called for new methods (such as a new point of view).\(^8\) According to the review, the danger in the latter method was, of course, “originality for the sake of originality,” which was negatively associated with “downwards from above” and “upwards from below.” The interest in originality was then associated with leftism. Further references to “pseudo-leftist phrases” and the “formal right deviation” also appeared for the first time in *Soviet Photo*, but these political references were neither defined nor used consistently: formalism’s political equivalent bounced back and forth between left and right. Rodchenko’s article emphasizing his indifference toward originality (it is irrelevant who said “A” as long as it leads to

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“B”) was forgotten.

After the journal was renamed Proletarian Photo in September 1931, the rhetorical divide between proletarian and bourgeois photographers sharpened and the journal tried to solidify its claim on the political center as a proletarian space. The first issue of the new journal published a series of programmatic articles. The usual declaration of photography’s central importance to Socialist construction preceded a list of tasks that sound largely familiar, for example, to serve the press better, the photo-correspondent movement should be made more Bolshevist. Further tasks included showing the experiences, achievements, and difficulties in industrial, agricultural and social construction, depicting heroes, and the need to create historical documents.9 The principle of working in brigades received somewhat longer mention than it had previously, meaning that the role of the artist or photographer was addressed in terms of organization, but not in terms of style, method, or creative license. Thus, the idea of proletarian photography was nearly identical to the earlier idea of Soviet photography, and had little to do with the medium itself or visual considerations.

Mezhericher, in his article in the inaugural issue of Proletarian Photo, predictably prioritized photojournalism over art photography, and believed that art photography represented a danger—a danger of “gliding on the surface” (skol’zhenie po poverkhnosti). He also criticized “surface” images as not showing production. Mezhericher explained what he meant by “superficiality” or “surface” with an examination of an image by Olga Ignatovich. In her photograph At one’s studies (fig. 4.1), she depicts two thick volumes of Lenin’s writings partially obscuring the body of a student. The student, and by extension Ignatovich’s photograph of him, are not a part of industrial, agricultural and social construction; the photograph does not depict a hero. For Mezhericher, the primary point in developing a new method for photography was “selfless service to the concrete tasks of Socialist

construction” and the mastering of Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism only came second, so Ignatovich had reversed priorities. In a sense, it was a condescending compliment to Ignatovich that Mezhericher was willing to assume she had intended to take a photojournalistic, not artistic, photograph. It allows room for improvement, not a basic inability or unwillingness.\

If Mezhericher saw Olga Ignatovich’s Lenin scholar as insufficiently proletarian or production-oriented, then his claim that some members used their technical capabilities to aestheticize reality and examine composition, faktura, point of view, disproportionate planes, and so on, should come as no surprise. Mezhericher associated this approach to photography with the Hungarian-born photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy—whose only appearance in Soviet Photo until then had occurred in “Ours and Abroad,” the anonymous accusation of plagiarism against Rodchenko in 1928. Mezhericher’s prime example of faktura in the Soviet context is Eliazar Langman’s Lace-maker (fig. 4.2). Not only is the content far removed from industrial production, but the form is structured like an experiment in looking. Like the human eye, the camera lens peers through a fine mesh and registers the person beyond with a different level of definition than the hand in front. The light source creates deep shadows on the lace-maker’s hands and face but leaves the mesh two-dimensional.

Mezhericher also provided two positive examples that fit his criteria of depicting socialist construction and mastering the Marxist-Leninist dialectic. Somewhat surprisingly, both images were also produced by October members. Boris Kudoiarov’s Comrades Stalin, M. Gorky and Enukidze at the parade of physical culture, Moscow, August 5, 1931 shows the three figures (sitting left to right: Central Committee member Avel Enukidze, Stalin, and Maxim Gorky) frozen in a moment of conversation and camaraderie, but utterly lacking in spatial depth or dynamism (fig. 4.3). At best, the image refers to Mezhericher’s ideological requirement, given the importance of the subjects. The second image,

P. S. Petrokas’s montage *Portrait of the Bread Factory* (fig. 4.4) was juxtaposed on the page to the *Lace-maker*, prompting consideration of what renders the overlapping of tones and forms acceptable in one photograph, and unacceptable in the other. The montage here allows the viewer to see two images at once, whereas the overlapping layers in the *Lace-maker* separate the worker’s hand from her body and obscure the rest. There is also the difference between handiwork and factory-scale production. The young woman at work before the loaves of bread is an unconventional portrait but fits with calls for the portraiture of proletarian types; she is both anonymous—she could be in any bread factory—and the viewer looks up at her. The montage locates her both in the factory and as the factory. The individual parts of this photo are all at a slant in a composition that enables the match-up of building and worker. The front of her torso is matched with the top of the factory’s facade, identifiable by the metal lettering that reads “bread factory” in Russian. The convergence of the building and the shelf into a V-shape composition show that worker, place, and product are connected. The image’s slanted parts, the truncated facade, and the angled shot looking up at the worker are all elements that would otherwise make a photograph a candidate for criticism, but used together they suggest the synthesis of Soviet labor with workers, and the role that photography can play in making those things visible.

All of the photographs that were taken by Langman and printed in *Proletarian Photo* show human figures in unusual perspective, even distorted, while the photographs specially praised by Mezhericher maintain the human form’s integrity, not subjecting it to fragmentation or distortion. Besides *Lace-Maker*, Langman also showed *Youth Commune at the Dinamo Factory* at October’s Moscow Press House exhibition (fig. 4.5). Mezhericher criticized this photograph for the distortion of scale because the teapot is larger than the young men’s heads.12 The handle of the teapot partially obscures the face of a man and it is unclear whether he is actually leaning down to the camera, or if

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the effect is only created by the angle and focus. The figure is disjointed; the viewer cannot see whether the partially-obscured face belongs to the hand on the teapot. Like Langman’s lace-maker, these figures are not the focus of the image.

Something similar happens in Rochenko’s shot of a worker standing on a pile of lumber at a mill (fig. 4.6). The viewer sees the man from the back and from below as he lifts a long timber, his legs wide for stability and providing the only visual break from the photograph’s horizontal orientation. The bottom half of the frame is unfocused and occupied by the lumber. Rodchenko offered his viewers the opposite of the heroic worker portrait by placing the seat of the man’s trousers at the top center and leaving out his face. In the installation view of the Exhibition of the October Photo Section, Rodchenko’s man at the lumber mill appears near the top, so viewers would look up to the worker’s backside both literally and in the photograph’s perspective (fig. 4.7). The humor of forcing viewers to look up at his backside was lost on Rodchenko’s critics, who did not respond even to condemn it. This experimentation and humor led to distortions of the very worker image that Soviet Photo was struggling to establish among amateurs. Even if some terms of the creative discussion were beyond the realm of what some amateurs would have known, Langman and Rodchenko offered a lesson in “what not to photograph.”

As I discussed in Chapter 3, Soviet Photo and October appeared to have in common an interest in mass amateur work. Rather than finding common ground, they differed because of the disagreement over what the masses should learn. Semyon Fridliand, a photographer and prolific contributor to Soviet Photo, warned that October’s call for art for the masses could be used for counterrevolutionary means because they prioritized form over content. His solution to this problem was a call for a Marxist theory of photography that excluded October’s approach. He argued that if the whole world were seen only in the extreme angles of the Octoberists, then it would be an absurd situation. Like other critics, Fridliand rejected Rodchenko’s point that
photographing things differently led the viewer to experience familiar things in an unfamiliar way. He thus assumed that viewers could only see the world as photographs showed it to them. This simplistic assumption betrayed how little he thought of the masses' visual literacy and was an exception to his own belief that a photograph could express its maker's ideological position and depth. His qualms with Rodchenko’s and others’ sharp angles or extreme foreshortening, then, was rooted in the conception of documentary discussed in Chapter Three. If documentary, as a starting point for all photojournalism and propaganda, represented a purely factual distillation of the entirety of Soviet life, then the “different” viewpoint must be least valued because it was least able to speak for the whole. Fridliand expected all photographers to represent a totality of current experience, and so for Rodchenko not to represent that totality with his images denied the most basic aspect of what a “Soviet” photograph should have offered. The same point can extend to Olga Ignatovich and Eliazar Langman. According to Fridliand’s analysis, they represented all workers as distorted, mired in theory or handiwork instead of proletarian labor, and so on.

Fridliand and others who criticized the October group soon founded an interest group of their own, ROPF, which like October suggested that all photography groups should consolidate the photography scene by joining them, or at least by adopting their viewpoint. Although ROPF purported not to be against unusual angles in photography, the authors of the group’s declaration actually insisted that these angles had nothing to do with a creative method for proletarian photography. Their own theoretical foundation rested on the following claims: that nobody could bring about real proletarian photography without mastering Marxist-Leninist theory, and acknowledging the method of dialectical materialism as key to understanding the forces that move history. The real tasks of photography, if one followed Lenin, were to be an agitator, propagandist, and organizer. By basing their theory of proletarian photography on method and political

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understanding rather than style, ROPF actually left open more room for experimentation than
scholars have generally believed.\textsuperscript{14} Many kinds of photographs, from Kudoiarov’s group portrait to
Petrokas’s montage, could be interpreted as meeting the requirements.

ROPF presented itself as occupying an alternative political space that was neither left nor
right, both of which were bourgeois and presented a danger to workers who may fall under their
influence. The right, which might be described as pre-revolutionary, consisted of petty-bourgeois
professionals and those who had (and wished to have) no deep understanding of photography’s
socio-political essence. Criticism of the left was far more extensive. ROPF accused the left of
elevating narrow-minded, personal concerns—which emerged from a bourgeois-individualist point
of view and were superficial—to the point where it could “disarm” proletarian photography as a real
class weapon.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, the authors of the ROPF declaration claimed that the source of leftist
creativity was Western decadence as presented by bourgeois photographers such as Moholy-Nagy,
and that his Russian “imitators” wanted to leave the real world behind and surround themselves
with [artistic] material and form instead.\textsuperscript{16} ROPF’s declaration is tucked well into the inside of
Proletarian Photo’s second issue, and not presented on page one as a lead article. But it was clearly a
reflection of Proletarian Photo’s main editorial interest because that issue’s sixteen mezzotints are all
marked with notes referring to the photographers’ membership in either ROPF or October. Every
photographer in this issue is thus associated with one camp or the other.

The debate between ROPF and October continued in early 1932. It is interesting for its
introduction of two things that would continue appearing for the rest of the decade, namely the
history of personal realignments (photographers could recant their positions and join their erstwhile

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] This point is reminiscent of Mezhericher’s warning from two years earlier that photography might be employed the
class enemy if it fell into the wrong hands; however, Mezhericher never appeared as a ROPF member in \textit{Soviet Photo}.
\item[16] “Za konsolidatsiiu sil,” 14f.
\end{footnotes}
adversaries) and the introduction of language about ideological “mistakes.” Also in this context, naturalism and factography were set up as equally dangerous right and left deviations for the first time. And although the January 1932 editorial had some criticisms for ROPF, the stronger language was reserved for October, which must fundamentally reorganize and acknowledge its “mistakes.” Photographers who had recognized them could then move on to join the right path, which Proletarian Photo all but openly declared to be the ROPF way.17

The authors of the January 1932 editorial and another anonymous article suggested that ROPF was already in the midst of a process (self-reconstruction) that October should now start, and phrased their talk of “consolidated” artists’ efforts as though October were the last group still missing the boat.18 In further contributions, letters supposedly sent in to Proletarian Photo registered their writers’ displeasure with images by Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich, and Langman. The authors were billed as “workers, collective farmers, photojournalists”19 in an attempt to underscore October’s distance from the masses and ROPF’s own proximity.

Mezhericher and the photographer Fedor Kislov provided examples of how October’s self-reconstruction might happen. Mezhericher provided a list of his mistakes in a letter to the other editors, admitting having taken part in October and believing the same things as October members. He acknowledged having failed to understand Bolshevist art properly.20 Kislov wrote of having decided to leave October and he applied to ROPF for admission. While he did not list specific shortcomings, he offered (in what almost reads like a denunciation) the names of people who had been October members with him: Rodchenko, Vladimir Griuntal’, Boris and Olga Ignatovich, and

20. Letter to the editor, Lev Mezhericher, Proletarskoe foto no. 1 (January 1932): 19f. The rhetoric of “mistakes” and “working on oneself” was a part of Bolshevist self-criticism, which I will discuss in Chapter Five.
Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi.\textsuperscript{21} The presentation of Kislov’s change of heart appears calculated to exert more pressure on October than mere negative articles from ROPF might, but it also shows how a photographer could be rehabilitated. He immediately joined ROPF’s Secretariat and, although one critic called him out just once more for his old work with October, by the end of 1932 his images of the dam construction project Dneprostroi were lauded.

In the coming months the creative discussion stopped referring to specific images or visual strategies and devolved into detail-oriented bickering between different critics. They wrote about the general weaknesses in each other’s positions and tried to associate their opponents with suspect political ideology. There were also divisions within ROPF and October that never resolved, and they even became less clear over time, not more.\textsuperscript{22} In one famous example, October members represented by the signatories Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich, Langman, Kudoiarov, and others wrote an open letter to ROPF that Proletarian Photo published, explaining that the Photo Section had been reprimanded by the main group for the “petty-bourgeois abstract theory of the fact” and for the “leftist principle of abstract documentalism,” phrasing that sounds more like ROPF’s derogatory descriptions of the avant-garde than like October’s choice of words. But if these signatories were reprimanding the Photo Section, and had themselves been its members, then at whom was the reprimand directed? It appears that October’s photographers left the Photo Section for the main group and then distanced themselves from their own former position.\textsuperscript{23} This seems to have been a meaningless bit of posturing but it speaks to the ideological pressure that the Photo Section’s members felt. With so much self-positioning, institutional positioning, and infighting, it is impossible to say with certainty what the source of the ideological pressure was or whether

\textsuperscript{21} Letter to the editor, F. Kislov, Proletarskoe foto no. 1 (January 1932): 20.
\textsuperscript{23} “Razvertyvaem tvorcheskuiu diskussiiu. Otkrytoe pis’mo gruppы ‘Oktyabr’ v redaktsiiu ‘Proletarskoe foto’,” Proletarskoe foto no. 2 (February 1932): 3.
anybody’s actions were the result of direct coercion. One month later, Rodchenko’s exclusion from October due to his refusal to take part in “reconstruction” was announced, and his signature on the open letter was denounced as a tactical maneuver.24 His exclusion, on the other hand, was understood to be a tactical maneuver on the part of October, an attempt to avoid further arguments by removing their tallest lightning rod. Internal spats like these tell us something about the period’s history, but overall they hindered progress in developing the very ideas and creative methods that could have helped the unification of photographers’ efforts that they supposedly strived for.

Reading the characterizations of artists and photographers as left, pseudo-left, and right, it is worth keeping in mind that these labels were by no means original to the writers of Soviet Photo and Proletarian Photo. The political overtones attached to these terms became more pointed, if not better defined, in the cultural revolution of 1928–1932. During this time, Stalin maneuvered to solidify his own power and discredit Party rivals, who were characterized as left and right. Articles on “pseudo-revolutionaries,” “petty-bourgeois leftists,” “counterrevolutionary rightists,” and so on appeared everywhere from The Soviet Photographic Almanach to Pravda. Discussions of the left and right deviations in culture share certain characteristics. The main terms were not defined such that they clearly mapped onto political labels and definitions; they even seemed interchangeable because both refer back to the supposedly bourgeois or petty-bourgeois artists promoting them. Despite the seriousness with which they were used, these terms’ arbitrariness precludes the possibility of a meaningful political spectrum. For example, October seemed not to object to being called leftist, only to the negative consequences that ensued if they were not proletarian. They positioned Proletarian Photo on the right, while Proletarian Photo perceived itself to be both proletarian and located in the middle between left and right. Simultaneously, the “proletarian” position became the opposite of both left and right.

Although it may seem in retrospect that the stakes were small and the unclear language meaningless in the creative discussion between October and ROPF, the censure of former *Soviet Photo* contributor P. Grokhovskii suggests otherwise. A report on his supposed “counter-revolutionary sally” appeared with a call for more vigilance in photography. He was accused of saying counter-revolutionary things and was declared a “class enemy” by a hodge-podge plenum. The plenum clearly held some authority, and while some of its members came from independent groups, it is possible that members also came from the state arts bureaucracy. It was comprised of ROPF, Moscow photo-correspondents, leaders of photo circles, October, the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists, and others in a meeting on January 27, 1932.25

It appears that Grokhovskii’s class background had come back to haunt him. The article on his censure and likely expulsion from work asserts that he “was once chased out of the central press organs as a foreign element. In the subsequent period he made it into the factory newspaper of [the power station] Elektrozavod and even led the photo circle there.” In a speech before a large group of photo-correspondents from the *Peasant Newspaper* (*Krest‘ianskaia gazeta*) in January 1932, he then reportedly called for photographs “without any kind of fiction” (...bez vsiakoi belletristiki). He was accused of thus repudiating “synthetic art” and propagating factography instead, here incorrectly called “faktorizm.”26 The authors then recalled something he had written in 1927: “Our primary aspiration is a newspaper without text—illustrations that speak for themselves.”27 Because this aspiration contradicted what Lenin favored (“Show not just cinema, but also photographs with appropriate captions that are interesting for propagandistic purposes”28), Grokhovskii was then declared anti-proletarian and a class enemy. The plenum found that Grokhovskii’s position and his

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26. Ibid.
work to be inappropriate in the Soviet Party press and in the mass photography movement. It was further decided that the plenum would “pose the question” to Elektrozavod of Grokhovskii’s further work on the newspaper and with amateurs.\(^{29}\)

After the plenum’s censure in late January, the general meeting of Soiuzfoto’s photographers and editors took place in February and Grokhovskii was also censured there for further statements he had made before the plenum. The illustrations department of the Peasant Newspaper had supposedly committed a political mistake in allowing him to speak, and the Moscow Press House failed to react.\(^{30}\) It is not clear whether ROPF or Soiuzfoto could have actually declared or enforced formal punishment but Soiuzfoto was the main state organ for photography, so it presumably held authority to determine Grokhovskii’s fortunes and make political judgments. While the two articles repudiating Grokhovskii’s viewpoint never explicitly associated him with the right, the reference to his class background suggests that he was one of the older photographers who had learned his craft before 1917 and managed to continue practicing it after the October Revolution. While he was certainly not the only supposed class enemy to have been expelled from the photography scene, his prominence led to his very public rejection. He was never published in Soviet Photo again.

‘On Restructuring Literary and Arts Organizations’: Dissolution

On April 23, 1932, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued the resolution “On restructuring literary and arts organizations.”\(^{31}\) Printed in its entirety inside the front cover of Proletarian Photo’s May 1932 issue, it stated that the proliferation of proletarian organizations was no

\(^{29}\) “Bol’she bditel’nosti na fotofronte,” 12f. The article does not say what the consequences of “posing the question” could be, but it seems to suggest that Grokhovskii was to be barred from such work in the future.

\(^{30}\) “Rezolutsiya obshchego sobrania fotoreporterov i rabotnikov redsektora Soiuzfoto ot 4 fevralia 1932 g.,” Proletarskoe foto no. 2 (February 1932): 13.

longer necessary, since their opponents were no longer so many in number, and the remaining (literary) organizations united into one Soviet Writers’ Union. Similar all-encompassing organizations were set up for artists, such as the All-Russian Cooperative-Partnership of Artists (abbreviated \(V\text{sekoks}\text{kudoznike}\)) and the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists, whose founding was reported in June 1932 by the magazine *Artists’ Brigade*.\(^{32}\) In a way, the restructuring decree recalls moments in the debate between October and its critics when they all called upon all photographers to consolidate their efforts. Of course, the decree also applied to all organizations from ROPF to October. Once dissolved, their members could join state-sponsored organizations or stay on the sidelines. The 1932 decree was quite clear in dictating that the creative discussion had to stop in all the arts, but in the case of photography it is not clear how the political administration decided which photography organizations were artistic and which were press-related. As discussed in Chapter Two, photographers were not necessarily considered artists and the press oversaw and organized the work of photojournalists. ROPF, October, and OZPKF (successor to the amateur organization ODSK and ODSKF) were dissolved, but the photo agency Soiuzfoto was not.

The debate between *Soviet Photo* and October had high stakes and it is a meaningful example of how the artistic avant-garde was discredited, despite its short duration. Nevertheless, one significant impression that is rooted in scholarship must be corrected: that October was the target of an official campaign that culminated in the decree of April 1932 which dissolved all independent artistic groups. The criticisms of October photographers’ work bear language that is reminiscent of concurrent political campaigns, but were not voiced by government organs. Scholars seem to have taken seriously Aleksandr Rodchenko’s hyperbolic complaint that “In *Soviet Photo* it had become fashionable to hound me in every issue.”\(^{33}\) To even speak of a “campaign” against October is

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exaggerated when we consider that the criticisms of their work, whose forum guaranteed a far reach, were actually written by a very small number of antagonists. Given that these antagonists also fought among themselves, it is worth remembering that October photographers were not the only ones targeted in an ongoing debate on the role and nature of photography and other arts. To some degree, October was even supported by government organizations through the State Fine Arts Publisher. Not all of October’s critics belonged to ROPF, which was an independent organization, not an official one. Although members of October were maligned as formalists (and correctly associated with the Russian formalist school), the rhetoric used against them actually placed a good deal more emphasis on their presumed political associations. And when the anti-formalist campaign of 1936 was launched, both and October and ROPF were long gone; the campaign was conducted in a cultural landscape that had been profoundly altered.

It took several months for the full impact of the decree to become clear, and enforcement may have taken some time as well; OZPKF was still one of the publishing organizations of Proletarian Photo through August. Still in May 1932, the secretariat of ROPF published an open letter to the Moscow Press House admonishing it for not being watchful and slipping in a leftist and leftist direction. The Moscow Press House, which had sponsored photography exhibitions and competitions, announced its dissolving and the reconstruction of its photography section in June, with Comrades Nazarov (from Pravda) and V. Grishanin (listed as Soiuzfoto, but also an editor of Proletarian Photo) at the head. The former leadership was accused of having supported “groupism” (gruppirovshchina), insufficient self-criticism, and of being entirely inactive in terms of social policy (po

2005), 297.
Here and in other instances, it is clear that even if artistic groups were dissolved, their ideas did not immediately become irrelevant and the discussion did not simply end without an echo. Even as institutions were restructured, their leadership could remain in the hands of a small circle of people. Former members of ROPF and the strident tone of Proletarian Photo’s editors continued with only token acknowledgements of the rebuke that was contained in the restructuring resolution.

Proletarian Photo was at pains to position itself on the winning side of any debate, regardless of the positions. Part of this effort lay in presenting the restructuring resolution as just one moment in a long series of varied, but equally significant and positively connoted, historical events shaping the development of photography in the USSR. The development of amateur activity and its integration into the worker-correspondent movement was one part of this history; the beginning of production of photography materials in the USSR was another. The next steps sound reminiscent of Soviet Photo’s priorities during every period of its history: “stimulate the spread of artistic creation in proletarian photography, direct it to the course of agitation and propaganda for socialism, strengthen and develop the technological basis of mass photo-propaganda, [and] ensure the influence and leadership role of the Party in the execution of these tasks.”

Proletarian Photo tempered its self-criticism with the insistence that it had, in general, been correct in its proletarian leanings. Repeated acknowledgement of the journal’s own “mistakes” referred to the way it discussed October, but it repeated the substance of what had been said and did not repudiate it. According to Proletarian Photo, Rodchenko and Langman continued to occupy unacceptable positions and the only problem with the journal’s role in the creative discussion was its choice of language, not any of its positions or arguments. There was no fundamental turnover among Proletarian Photo’s editors, and the title reverted back to Soviet Photo in January 1934—a very late point, given that the end of the so-called

37. “Cherez perestroiku k dal’neshemu pod’emu,” Proletarskoe foto no. 6 (June 1932): 1f., here 2.
proletarian episode in the arts is usually marked as 1932. The journal did not slavishly change course or recant any of its positions in order to comply with the spirit of the reorganization decree.

In a manner reminiscent of the early articles written for amateurs and beginning photo-journalists, *Proletarian Photo* simply continued to tell photographers how to direct their efforts and what subjects had priority. Semyon Fridliand’s list of tasks facing the Soviet photography scene characterizes the type of article published after the restructuring decree. Not a single item on his list was new. Photo-workers must improve their artistic, technical, and political level in order to make agitation and propaganda in and for the press. New cadres of photojournalists, photo-monteurs, and editors must be taught. Everyone should work out theoretical and practical questions about photography as an area of art and as a means of documentary propaganda. They should help individual photographers’ work for factory newspapers and support the circles of photo-correspondents. Finally, photographers must connect with worker-photographers from abroad.38

So after the 1932 decree ROPF and October ceased to exist, yet there is no evidence that the supposed consolidation of independent photography groups into a single state-sponsored one led to the development of new working methods, or theories, or even to new definitions of what made for a specifically Soviet photography.

On the level of individual photographers’ careers or work, the restructuring decree of 1932 was *not*—as the scholarship has long suggested—used to irredeemably condemn anyone or prevent him from working. On one hand, preventing avant-garde photographers from gathering on their own terms and producing their work independent of oversight stifled their possibilities. But on the other, many individuals continued to receive commissions and hold positions of influence. The rehabilitation of the individual was possible, but like his condemnation, it was also impermanent. This is demonstrated best by the experiences of Aleksandr Rodchenko, who later joined the editorial

board of *Soviet Photo*, and of Eliazar Langman, who serves as a less well known but equally fascinating example.

Eliazar Langman was censured in the summer of 1932, first within a comparatively small circle of bosses or colleagues at Izogiz (the State Fine Art Publisher) and then on the pages of *Proletarian Photo*. Earlier that year he had been working for the prominent propaganda journal *USSR in Construction* on a photo assignment devoted to the projects Kramatorsk Machine Construction (*Krammashstroi*) and Ural Machine Construction (*Uralmashstroi*). After the publication of that assignment, however, he was brought before the “comrades’ production-technical court” (*tovarishcheskii proizvodstvenno-tekhnicheskoi sud*) of the publishing house. The first and most weighty accusation was that on his assignment he had regarded his task formally, without taking into account its political significance. In his work on location he “not only did not get in touch with the civil organizations that could have given the correct purpose to the shoot of the factory, but [he also] ignored the plan that was given to him by the center.” The photographs he took thus were seen as incomplete pictures that showed distorted views of the factory, or captured uncharacteristic moments, or failed to depict people “heroically building [this] gigantic socialist project” (*gigant*). His work supposedly revealed his political illiteracy, which was intolerable in a photo-reporter. According to the accusation, these failings were typical of his work, not only in this case. The other two accusations against Langman were that he did not complete his work and that he withheld his negatives from the editors until he was paid. Langman’s high pay of 2,100 rubles appears to have aggravated the circumstances. Numerous colleagues testified against Langman, including the prominent photographer Sergei Sen’kin and Grishanin, who wrote for *Proletarian Photo*.³⁹ Yet four of Langman’s photographs were included in that very issue of *USSR in Construction* in spite of his censure, indicating that his contribution perhaps was not universally rejected and that in the

immediate wake of the 1932 restructuring decree, avant-garde visual strategies clearly were not (always) censored.

Langman photographed Kramatorsk Machine Construction and Ural Machine Construction alongside an entire team of photographers. The issue of *USSR in Construction* devoted to these two major heavy industry projects shows the landscape around the factories, aerial views of the new buildings, comparisons of old manual working methods to new mechanical ones, interiors of machine halls, cooling towers, the building of blast furnaces, and more. Short texts recorded and explained every aspect of making the new industrial centers, down to the workers’ clubs, apartment buildings, technical facilities, and organized athletic activities.

Langman’s four published (specifically credited) photographs from Kramatorsk focus on the shapes and lines of industrial buildings, not workers or building activity. In the first, a sharp angle toward the roof of a factory hall places the image’s (bright) vanishing point in the lower right-hand corner (fig. 4.8). The horizontal floor and vertical roof supports appear as diagonals, effectively directing the gaze to zig-zagging steel supports and the recession of repeating shapes in space. Upon closer inspection, a worker also becomes clear, standing in a basket that has been suspended from the ceiling; his activity is indecipherable. This photograph is on a two-page spread with aerial shots of the factory halls and another perspectival view by Langman, this time taken straight on but with the same interest in repeating rectilinear structure. Much more so than the first photograph, the second conveys the scale of the halls and suggests a certain modern simplicity in their form. His photograph of two cooling towers is similarly straight (figs. 4.9 and 4.10).

Langman’s fourth photograph in this set is by far the most striking (fig. 4.11). It offers a slanted view onto what must be a rooftop. The viewer sees four men who are clearly working, but as with the worker in the first image, their specific activity is unidentifiable; the photograph’s edge cuts off a fifth person. While this depiction of workers did not violate any real regulations on how to
represent them, it is an unmistakable break with the established norms of depicting labor and heroic proletarians. Langman’s emphasis was obviously on forms and space, and he subordinated the workers to them. The highlighted, curving rooftop and dark procession of repeating forms (straight structural supports) recede in a slant off to the left. As a result, the foreground does not recede into the background so much as recede with it off to an unknown point. The photograph defies the principles of vanishing-point perspective to the greatest degree possible because, in all likelihood, Langman used a single-lens camera that is designed to mimic the perspectival conventions of Western painting since the Renaissance. Looking at the first and last of these images in particular, it becomes clear that the accusation against Langman was not unfounded: his photographs are indeed formal exercises that do not offer a complete picture of life and work even when taken as an ensemble—and even supposing that a “complete picture” could ever be possible. Building activity is hardly distinguishable. His photographs offer a counterpoint to the long shots (aerial views, broad views onto exteriors) and the closeups (workers, specific pipes, or machines) and bridge that difference by giving the journal’s readers a sense of the spaces where labor took place. Langman’s contribution to USSR in Construction thus did not address a propaganda priority like images of proletarians at work, and nor was it aerial photography, which was still a relatively new possibility associated with privilege and importance, and therefore interesting in and of itself. The contemplation of space did not figure in the official demands of press photography. In a sense, Langman’s photographs make the individual worker disappear inside of the industrialization project—exactly the relationship that we might imagine in such large-scale projects today. But by the standards of the time, he depicted their relationship the ‘wrong’ way around.

Numerous resolutions were passed by the publisher’s “court.” The photography section of the Moscow Press House was to officially reprimand Langman. The resolutions also refer to the administration and civil organizations of the publishing house; they were instructed to conduct an
ideological-instructional conversation with Langman and his colleagues in order to have them introduce a form of socialist labor to their political work. While the precise meaning of this is unclear, the text suggests either that Langman should receive punishment or be subject to more oversight, or both, in order to be brought into line. The other three resolutions established that the administration should be asked to regulate the rate of photographers’ pay, the archiving of negatives, and attempts to attract the best “shock-worker” photo-correspondents (which would presumably no longer include Langman).40

Langman’s work and his trial are remarkable for numerous reasons. One is that despite the poor press he received as a member of October, he had still received the Kramatorsk commission from the country’s most prestigious illustrated journal in the first place, and it brought his work to an international viewership through its multilingual editions and elite readership. This story is also remarkable for how Langman’s censure resulted in an internal trial, rather than a termination, which is a control mechanism that until now has been unexamined in the history of Soviet photography and other arts. Furthermore, even though Langman was accused of formalism—essentially the same criticism that ROPF and Proletarian Photo had of his work—the news of the trial was tucked away in the back of Proletarian Photo in small font, not touted as “proof” of any arguments from the creative discussion. The fourth and final reason is that, after he let a bit of time pass following his censure, Langman continued to work. However bad his transgressions seemed in 1932, they clearly did not bar him from professional photography just a few years later. It took another three years before his photographs appeared again in USSR in Construction, but they were published once in 1935, four times in 1937, and twice in 1939.

Langman regained respectability in 1935 with photographs of Kazakhstan for USSR in Construction. Some reproductions in Soviet Photo were supposed to demonstrate how he had improved

40. Ibid. Recall that shock workers were Soviet laborers who produced above and beyond the required norms.
his work; indeed, to show that he had become Socialist Realist. The editors emphasized that he had made this change without giving up his individualism and noted that his photographs were distinctly Langman-esque. Surprisingly, the image chosen for praise in *Soviet Photo, Comrade Imambaev*, is stereotypically formalist, with the camera aimed chiefly at a traditional rug on the floor and the three people pushed up into the top third of the frame (fig. 4.12). The viewer cannot tell which of the two men is which because their positions do not establish their relationship or interaction. And although the caption identifies Imambaev as a shock-worker, there are no visual references to that work or his high achievement. The journal even offered an interpretation that explains the dominant foreground in *Comrade Imambaev*: “The patterned woolen rug spread out on the yurt’s floor—the photograph’s large foreground—rises up like a happy, broad path to a prosperous life. It spreads out and uplifts the narrow yurt, brings light and a major tonality [to the picture].” The camera angle is reminiscent of Langman’s earlier work but the journal’s editors justified the distortion with a caption about an important shock-worker. *Comrade Imambaev* was not included in the Kazakhstan issue of *USSR in Construction*, but its appearance in *Soviet Photo* is still indicative.

The photographs published in the Kazakhstan issue are not individually attributed to either Langman or his colleague Shulkin, though some of them are traceable and strongly reminiscent of formalist visual strategies. In the foreground of *Camel Herd*, two camels’ necks and chins create a frame for the rest and their exaggerated size makes the others seem much smaller (figs. 4.13 and 4.14). They also block sight of two people standing left and right. In *In the library of the Issaev State Farm*, the camera’s placement on or near the edge of a library desk emphasizes objects in the foreground, like one woman’s wrist and hand and part of *Pravda*’s front page (fig. 4.15). In the middle ground, more newspapers partially obscure readers’ faces. The ceiling’s cracks and exposed

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41. The issue was *SSSR na stroike* no. 11 (1935), entitled “Dedicated to the 15th Anniversary of [Soviet] Kazakhstan: We got used to thinking Kazakhstan was a steppe...” Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova were the head artists; E. Langman and D. Shulkin provided photographs.

42. “K snimkam E. Langmana,” *Sovetkoe foto* no. 10 (1935): 8. The “major tonality” refers to a major key, as in music.
wires take up a lot of space at the top of the frame, calling attention to the library’s construction and
distracting from the actual subject—the spread of literacy in Kazakhstan. These three
photographs—Comrade Imambaev, Camel herd, and In the library of the Issaev State Farm—could all just as
easily have been deemed objectionably formalist rather than Socialist Realist. The photographs’ style
cannot have been the real reason why Langman was accepted back into the establishment; his self-
representation in writing is more likely to be the reason why.

Langman helped his own fortunes by publishing an article about his re-education entitled
“My university,” describing his work leading a four-and-a-half month research trip in conjunction
with the Kazakhstan album. Most of the article is filled with descriptions of geography, history, and
the banal experiences of the journey, but Langman clearly used it to respond directly to the trial’s
accusations. Three years earlier he was accused of incomplete work, so the four and a half months
spent in Kazakhstan were a demonstration of his renewed efforts. The long descriptions show that
he got to know his subject well enough this time. He also could correct his earlier formalist mistakes,
noting that most of the Kazakhstan photographs show a general survey (obshchii plan)—unlike the
close-ups that had accounted for the objectionable foreshortening and distorting effects in his
formalist work.43 By delivering this kind of report on his travel and work, Langman conformed to
what had become the standard mode of photographers’ (written) self-representations. In this
example of a photographer redeeming himself, he continued to make photographs with his
preferred techniques—exaggerated foreground, tilted spaces, and fragmented bodies. These
photographs passed censorship in order to get published at all. The photographer spoke of his work
with the phrases and stories that would make it look more acceptable, discussing his approach rather
than his results.

Aleksandr Rodchenko was even more successful than Langman in the 1930s. Sixteen of his

photographs appeared in *Soviet Photo* from 1935 to 1937 alone, more than in all the previous years combined. He designed eleven issues of *USSR in Construction* with his wife, Varvara Stepanova, and one on his own, all of which appeared after 1932, and as Erika Wolf has argued, Rodchenko and Stepanova continued to employ an avant-garde aesthetic in that work. The main indicator of Rodchenko’s rehabilitation, however, is his work as editor for *Soviet Photo* from December 1935 through November 1937. In joining the editorial board he joined his biggest detractor, Lev Mezhericher, who was on the board from the founding of *Proletarian Photo* in 1931. With only one exception, Rodchenko’s position as editor is never discussed in the literature on his photographic work, which focuses instead on his marginalization and repression at that time.

Because Rodchenko joined the editorial board months before his statement “Reconstruction of the Artist” declared his turn away from formalism, I suggest that discussions between him and *Soviet Photo* (or concessions on either part) took place that allowed him to assume the editorship, and to which the average reader of *Soviet Photo* was not privy. A shift in his reception began with a three-page, nine-illustration reconsideration of his work published in mid-1935, which fits the mode of the artist profiles that appear in *Soviet Photo* during the mid-1930s: it acknowledges a few, not too major, failings while remaining generally positive. The illustrations included work from the 1920s such as his portrait of his mother (fig. 1.32) and some of the formalist photographs that had been so heavily criticized. The profile’s author also explained how Rodchenko came upon the idea for using steep 

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44. Erika Maria Wolf, *USSR in Construction: from avant-garde to socialist realist practice* (PhD. Diss., University of Michigan, 1999). Nikolai Troshin was even more successful, designing forty-six; but he had never been associated with the formalists. When the *Exhibition of Soviet Photo Art* was mounted in 1935, Rodchenko was on the jury and the organizer was Grigorii Boltianskii, who had played a large role in the photo-circle movement. This exhibition will receive more extensive discussion in Chapter Six. Suffice it to say here that it was heavily criticized, and Rodchenko was able to use his position to respond to the criticism rather than simply get sidelined.

45. Rodchenko and Mezhericher had continued sparring over Rodchenko’s work during 1935 as well. Their arguments were, at least in part, public: they were printed in *Sovetskoe foto*.

perspectives—he lived and worked on the ninth floor of a residential building and the view from his window inspired the steep views—thus connecting the technique to realism and making it seem less outlandish. Mezhericher could not let this appreciation of Rodchenko stand and thinly disguising himself as “L. M.,” he wrote a rebuttal to the profile in which he reviewed the creative discussion and major anti-October criticisms. Mezhericher’s rebuttal is worth noting because it suggests that personal animosities played a meaningful role in the creative discussion, as much as any real ideological or aesthetic differences.

On an official level, Rodchenko’s joining the editorial board is explained beginning in April 1936, when many photographers spoke openly about their creative practice and their comrades’ “mistakes” in a discussion on formalism and naturalism in the Cinema House (Dom kino). Apparently none of the photographers, among whom were many formalists and pictorialists, took the opportunity to declare their reconstruction. Soviet Photo’s report on the event even shows understanding for the fact that the “creative reconstruction” of the artist was not easy or painless, as Rodchenko himself supposedly made clear. Whatever concessions Rodchenko and Langman made publicly, they both received praise for having the right feeling or perception of Socialist construction, even if their work was not yet adequate. One participant even spoke in Rodchenko’s defense, calling on Rodchenko’s critics to acknowledge his self-criticism and turn toward realism. As though to culminate the discussion of his work at the Cinema House, Rodchenko published “Reconstruction of the Artist” just afterwards. Even though Rodchenko’s position in the Soviet art world was precarious at that point, the Cinema House discussions offered, at least to some extent,
the possibility of redeeming himself.

During the rehabilitation process, two of Rodchenko’s photographs were presented for consideration, first at the meeting in the Cinema House and then on Soviet Photo’s pages. Jump, of a horse and rider as they leap to clear an obstacle, and Leaps, of galloping horses seen from below, might be described as typical Rodchenko: they show a subject that is ostensibly familiar from an unusual angle and (close) distance, the first image in particular (figs. 4.16 and 4.17). The horse in Jump is elongated, and as the rider’s body melds into that of the horse’s, only his seat and boot are shown to viewers. In Leaps, on the other hand, the horses are foreshortened by their gallop, while the riders’ bodies and faces are either obscured or blurred by motion. Presented on facing pages of Soviet Photo, they offer motion that is balanced (the jumper moves left, the racers move right) but never achieves calm. From the point of view of Rodchenko’s continuing struggle against his critics, the photographs backfired: once again, the artist proved his interest in form over content. Elite leisure activities like horse racing did not belong to the image of a country full of proletarians laboring at Socialist construction projects. Knowing that Rodchenko did have commissions to photograph significant Socialist construction sites, one wonders why these two images were chosen for the Cinema House discussion. If Rodchenko chose them himself, then it is tempting to view them as his latest and most public act of resistance to official standards. Still, the title of the second image, Skachki, which can mean either “leaps” or “great advances,” adds another layer of meaning. To speak of a “leap forward” (skachok) in the 1930s could refer to the progress being made by the USSR, to the action in major works of Russian literature, or the symbolic heroes of Stalinist myth.52 Although the two photographs formed a counterpoint to his oral declaration at the Cinema House, this tension could not be used against Rodchenko if one of the titles was an alibi in itself.

In “Reconstruction of an Artist,” Rodchenko reviewed his work to date and discussed

numerous other contemporary photographers. His representation of his work on the USSR in Construction issue devoted to the construction of the White Sea Canal (which was performed by the prisoners of a labor camp) reads as though he, too, were a prisoner being reformed by labor, even though he came and went by choice: “I forgot all about my creative disappointments. I took photographs simply, not thinking about formalism. I was struck by the sensitivity and wisdom with which the reeducation of people was conducted.” Rodchenko appeared miffed that his photographs of the White Sea Canal were celebrated but never printed in Soviet Photo, and reassured the reader, “I am certain that in the future I will make genuine Soviet works.”

Rodchenko showed what his own priorities were as he went on to evaluate some prominent contemporaries; here, he was not merely repeating what others had criticized. Arkadii Shaikhet, he wrote, staged photographs and was too careful, dampening the works’ quality. Semyon Fridliand was “lyrical” and “sentimental,” and Max Alpert made good photographs but shied away from risks. As a whole, his criticisms of these three photographers indicated his continued preference for off-the-cuff snapshots and experimentation, along the lines of what he had advocated in the 1920s. Rodchenko also insulted the work of former colleagues such as Langman and Ignatovich and, at the end, called for an organization for all photographers (apparently he did not consider Soiuzfoto or the Union of Cinema and Photo Workers to be that organization), a museum for specifically Soviet photography, and “works that will stand on a high political and artistic level, work in which the photographic language will fully serve Socialist Realism.”

The clear difficulty with “Reconstruction of the Artist” is, of course, the question whether it can be taken seriously. Since Shaikhet, Fridliand, and Alpert were generally better positioned than Rodchenko, was Rodchenko’s criticism of them a daring move and thus his honest opinion? Did he distance himself from Langman and Ignatovich merely to claim that he had rejected formalism?

54. Rodchenko, “Reconstructing the Artist,” 300, 301, 304.
Intriguingly, Rodchenko managed to compose the entire “Reconstruction” without suggesting that others were right. He admitted his “mistakes,” but made no promise not to repeat them in the future. Nor did he attempt to define what Socialist Realism should be in photography, although that was an open question at the time. Many people in the USSR spoke of Socialist Realism as though it had an established definition. Rodchenko did the same here and even maintained total vagueness by doing so. The language is conformist, but he never implied that his work would be.

Rodchenko’s “Reconstruction of the Artist” statement has been treated in scholarship as the ultimate sign of the artist’s unwilling conformity to a system and a set of aesthetic principles—realist ones—to which he could not agree. Considering the criticism of his work that had appeared through 1932, it appears clear that “Reconstruction” was a necessary move to secure his freedom to continue working. Yet the essay has come to stand for his indirect coercion, an interpretation that casts the artists as a passive recipient of the state’s capriciousness. Given Rodchenko’s long-term work for *USSR in Construction*, it is possible that he was actually co-opted: finally accepted as an officially approved artist because, even if his past and preferences caused discord, it was easier to work with him than against him as long as he paid lip service to realism, at least pretending to be obedient?

Whatever difficulties he may have caused at home, perhaps his name on *Soviet Photo*, his contributions to *USSR in Construction*, and his path-breaking work in general constituted an alibi of sorts vis-à-vis the international audience. In this case, increasing state control over the arts would appear less extreme with an internationally respected avant-garde artist receiving contracts from the very top of the power structure. After all, members of the Central Committee of the USSR were on *USSR in Construction*’s editorial board, and for a period it was edited by Evgeniia Ezhova, the wife of Nikolai Ezhov, head of the political police (NKVD). Of course, all work was state-commissioned by the mid-1930s, so Rodchenko’s employment by the state is no surprise. The point is that he was still able to receive such commissions, rather than retreating into less prestigious work or other work.
entirely, and received a significant number. He staked out a position as an artist and within the institutional structures.

Rodchenko was neither forbidden to work nor in a position of significant influence. While he, unlike some erstwhile colleagues, did not become a target of physical repression, he perceived an implicit threat to his safety and was hurt by the disapproval of his work. His published diaries offer only a partial account of his life during the 1930s and 1940s, due to the infrequency of his entries and the genre’s inherent weaknesses as a source. Nevertheless, they help paint a picture of an artist who enjoyed some degree of success but was plagued by the impression that he could have achieved more. During the years when Rodchenko took commissions for USSR in Construction, he won prizes for his work. He maintained contact with photographers Grigorii Boltianskii and S. Evgenov, who had both previously been on the editorial board of Soviet Photo and had no association with October or formalism, but had not taken part in the creative discussion, either. Rodchenko and Stepanova also maintained close contact with Elizaveta Ignatovich (Boris Ignatovich’s wife); Rodchenko had sharply criticized her photographic work in “Reconstruction of the Artist,” too. When a city committee of photography workers was formed at the very end of the 1930s, Rodchenko was elected to its presidium (this committee was less prestigious than the Artists’ Union). Still, despite these successes, by the end of the 1930s Rodchenko felt that he had no followers, and he was not invited to submit work to the 1939 All-Union photography exhibition. By May, 1938, he called himself a “collector of my own work,” probably a reference to difficulties selling. What plagued him appears to have been the loss of prominence and influence, as much as any specific

57. Ibid.
58. References to Elizaveta Ignatovich are in many letters from the 1930s and 1940s.
repressions.\textsuperscript{62}

The direct and violent persecution of artists was rare after 1932 but extremely harsh when it did take place. Sergei Tret’iakov disappeared in 1937 (he was arrested and shot), and the playwright and director Vsevolod Meyerhold became a victim in the Purges, as did his wife. The painter Aleksandr Drevin was also killed; his work was associated with Western modernist styles. His wife, the painter Nadezhda Udaltsova, also painted in a style that was no longer approved, but she survived. Gustav Klutsis was a prominent avant-garde photographer but his arrest execution occurred during a time when people of non-Russian ethnicity were frequently targeted; he was Latvian. Tret’iakov’s, Meyerhold’s, Drevin’s, and Klutsis’s disappearances could reasonably be understood as a threat to others in their milieu, but what connection existed between the threat of actual violence and the repeated negative commentary on formalism in places like \textit{Soviet Photo} or \textit{Pravda}? When did a negative review indicate or become the commencement of a person’s repression, and when was it just a negative review? Scholars have often been fast to suggest a causal relationship between official disapproval of one’s art and the danger of becoming a victim in the Purges, but the connection is not clear-cut. People of all professions and political loyalties were disappearing, and there was no general rule by which writers and artists were or were not arrested. In this kind of environment, the threat to Rodchenko’s or Langman’s artistic freedom actually seems to have been more indirect than direct. If their photographic style could be condemned on one occasion and praised on another, and they could receive high-profile commissions but be barred from participation in groups like the Artists’ Union, and see their colleagues arrested for invented crimes—then the gray area in which they operated was wide and uncertain. The threat of restrictions to their artistic freedom was as powerful as actual, enforced restrictions, but came with the possibility that none would be enforced. I believe that despite the danger continued formalist work

\textsuperscript{62} He wrote obliquely about the general fear felt by people as they saw others denounced and arrested. Rodchenko, \textit{Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future}, 319 and 323 (May 17, 1938, and September 10, 1938).
could bring, the possibility of not being policed—of being one of the artists who maintained the right balance and did not get randomly targeted—was why they continued to work. They could use *Soviet Photo* for self-representation as exemplary artists in stories about their methods as a way of gaining a foothold in the gray area.

Lest Rodchenko’s editorship of *Soviet Photo* be easily explained away as an evident matter of mere co-optation or personal safety, his own professional advantages should also be kept in mind. As editor, he may have enjoyed some freedoms in his work that would have been impossible otherwise. Perhaps he hoped to exert influence over the direction that photography was taking, since—as I will discuss at length—Socialist Realism was still being defined and new standards being established. Perhaps he was paid. If the Soviet regime wished to co-opt him, then it appears he willingly allowed it to happen. But there is no evidence of coercion, only of (limited) benefit to the artist himself as he positioned and re-positioned himself over time.

Rodchenko never looked back on the period later to write about it, only noting in numerous diary entries from the 1940s that he was making “leftist” art again. Ilya Ehrenburg, who was also singled out for particular criticism during the 1930s, eventually became one of the USSR’s most lionized authors. In his memoirs he recalled,

> In 1932 I supposed that, along with RAPP, a certain style of literary criticism had also been eliminated. This was simple-minded [...] I realized that haphazard sniping was one of the peculiar features of a war which had not begun yesterday and would not end tomorrow: gunfire often hit one’s own side. This is rather unpleasant, of course, but it cannot be helped; a man may die from a bullet, but a moral hurt merely steels him; you do not change your convictions because of a wound, even a most painful one, and you do not cross over to the enemy.\(^{63}\)

Ehrenburg poetically describes the steadfastness of a person who refuses to compromise on principles, but even here the reader is left without any personal insight into the exact professional comprises made by artists who work under controlling regimes. One thing appears clear: the

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standards to which they were held were shifting, if not arbitrary. The lip service that Rodchenko eventually paid to Socialist Realism would never be enough. There was a distinct possibility that Rodchenko, Langman, and Grokhovskii could have done it differently: change the way they worked and talked, at least where exhibition and publication were concerned, and join the apparatus. They paid for their rejection of the dominant mode with obscurity and the financial worry that makes frequent appearance in Rodchenko’s diaries. It was the price of artistic freedom post-1932, such as it existed.
Chapter Five: Made to Order? The Early Development of Socialist Realist Photography

“...art does not lie in the ability to use the technology of photography; art starts where the Soviet photographer consciously chooses material, discards the unnecessary and secondary in accordance with social aspiration and artistic taste, and only permits onto the negative that which in his opinion will make a full picture and better express a certain idea, and only in the way that the picture will pass it on to the viewer, in accordance with the demands of Socialist Realism.”
—Sergei Morozov, “On the Paths to Realism, to Nationality,” 1936

This chapter tells the story of Socialist Realism’s development and institutionalization, but begins in 1930—four years before Socialist Realism was instated as the sole acceptable method for making art—because so many of Socialist Realism’s central characteristics were already established during the early 1930s. The ideas circulating in the early 1930s shaped what Socialist Realism became because they were strong ideas, presented in the right place at the right time, and because they established a paradigm of Soviet and proletarian character that provided strong theoretical and methodological definitions while leaving the right questions open—namely, those on specific visual characteristics. An examination of these years also demonstrates that Socialist Realism had a background in artists’ and theorists’ work; it was not simply handed down from above or invented from nothing, as was long asserted in research. To reframe the study of Socialist Realism in this manner departs from the longstanding, though now frequently questioned, top-down paradigm of culture in Soviet Russia. As Katerina Clark writes, “Though Stalinist culture might seem to represent an abomination of the intellectuals’ aspirations, it was nevertheless not the product of an act of parthenogenesis on the part of the Party leaders, nor was it merely the case that their ideas were

2. At the time, Socialist Realism was referred to as both a method and a style, but its definitions had more to do with methods. This differentiation was important. See also Anatoli Lunatscharski, “Statt eines Schlussworts: Über die Mannigfaltigkeit der proletarischen Stile,” in Vom Proletkult zum sozialistischen Realismus: Aufsätze zur Kunst der Zeit, Studienbibliothek der marxistisch-leninistischen Kultur- und Kunstwissenschaften (East Berlin: Dietz, 1981), 359–364. The German publication is a translation from the Russian Izbrannye stat’i po estetike (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975). The essay title means “In lieu of a conclusion: on the manifold proletarian styles.”
ventriloquated through the intellectuals.”* The ideas that underlay Socialist Realism were, at least to some degree, authentic and intellectual ones that were not necessarily developed with the goal of forming a total art.

In some tellings of Socialist Realism’s history, the Communist Party Purge of 1935–36 and the Terror of 1937 onwards serve as historical contextualization. But in this chapter I seek to discuss the history of this period’s photography without attributing all (or even most) of its developments to the violent and uncertain political circumstances of the time—in part because the photographs and artistic discussions of the period cannot be clearly or cleanly mapped onto political shifts, and in part because that approach overshadows the history of art. That approach also uses the Purge and the Terror, during which Socialist Realism was already instituted, to back-shadow prior developments, as though to indicate that Socialist Realism’s early development, which is my main focus, was a reflection of the era’s violence or enabled by it, or part of the same general phenomenon. The Purge and Terror cannot explain Socialist Realism, only the context and, to some degree, the methods by which it was institutionalized. Rather than using Stalinist-era politics to explain art history, I have chosen to discuss the photographs and the artistic debates mainly on their own as way to gain further insight into Soviet, especially Stalinist, culture more broadly. Of course every action an artist took was politicized, even if she or he had not meant it in that way, and every action also bore the possibility of political and personal consequence, including professional hindrances, imprisonment, trial, the targeting of family members for repressions, or even death. This was not a secret, but it should not be dramatized and it was also possible to do one’s work without becoming a target. Yet even in these circumstances there are some very visible instances in which photographers retained hold of their own agency, fought to keep their own voices, and sought to use both to professional advantage. I seek to illuminate these moments for what they can tell us not only about how the

photographers’ contemporary audiences understood photography, but also for what they tell us about the political and professional situations in which photographers found themselves.

In this chapter I counter the history that positions Socialist Realism in the 1930s as an aesthetic imposed on photographers from above, and moreover, that it—Socialist Realism—was a finished and packaged “canon” for arts workers to obey. Rather, I argue that while Party leaders and official arts organizations did mandate compulsory politics and methods, there were no compulsory aesthetics. The terms that defined Socialist Realism were better applicable to method than to style, resulting in stylistic range but conformity in theory, criticism, and most of all, in photographers’ own written accounts about their work. While the creative discussion about formalism from 1930–32 still resonated, theoreticians now defined Socialist Realism against formalism and naturalism. And as writers struggled to define exactly what a Socialist Realist method was, the continued prevalence of historical genres in photography indicated meaningful, if limited, openness in content. Landscape, for example, reemerged as appropriate subject matter. The Exhibition of Soviet Art Photography in 1935 instigated discussion of the principles which were becoming the basis for Socialist Realist photography, much as earlier exhibitions had instigated contention between the avant-garde and their “proletarian” counterparts. The discourses on Socialist Realist method and landscape photography in Soviet Photo then found reflection and partial revision in USSR in Construction.

Establishing the methods and terms of Soviet Socialist Realist photography

The phrase “Socialist Realism” was coined in May 1932 by Ivan Gronskii, president of the

5. Recent studies of Socialist Realism have examined the process by which the method’s principles were formed, not only during the 1930s but later as well. See Susan E. Reid, “Photography in the Thaw,” Art Journal 53 no. 2, special issue “Contemporary Russian Art Photography” (Summer 1994): 33–39; and Oliver Johnson, “The Stalin Prize and the Soviet Artist: Status Symbol or Stigma?”, Slavic Review 70 no. 4 (Winter 2011): 819–843. Nevertheless, the tendency persists to refer to an “aesthetics” or “canon” that cannot have existed yet. On the latter point, see Katerina Romanenko, “Serving the Great Collective: USSR in Construction as a Cultural Barometer,” Zimmerli Journal 3 (Fall 2005): 78–91.
Organization Committee of the Writers Union and editor-in-chief of the major newspaper Izvestiia. It was declared the official method of literary work, and understood to apply to all of the other arts as well, by Andrei Zhdanov in his speech to the First Writers Congress of 1934. In their foundational research, Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko describe the basic principles underlying Socialist Realist writing: Party-mindedness (partiinost’), efficiency (operativnost’), the positive hero, optimism, and accessibility to the masses. In literature, Socialist Realist works are based on a master plot that is modeled on certain canonical books and which they follow in a ritualistic manner. Other scholars have identified aspects of Socialist Realism in the visual arts: plan-oriented work, an understanding of what it meant to depict Soviet reality, the importance of self-criticism, and the significant role played by institutions. Yet all of these features, though characteristic of Socialist Realism, were also present before the method existed as such.

In her analysis, Clark characterizes Socialist Realism as depicting a reality in the making, and encompassing, without contradiction, both “what is” and “what ought to be.” Quoting Andrei Zhdanov’s speech to the Writers Congress of 1934, where he represented the Central Committee, Clark points out that these apparently conflicting modes were intended to combine “the most matter-of-fact, everyday reality, and the most heroic prospects.” The mundane and the glorious could thus exist side-by-side, and taken together, they demonstrated and simultaneously created Socialist reality. The mythical endowed the mundane with meaning, and so the real was shaped in and by the process of representation that made it visible in the first place. This quick summary of

Socialist Realism’s logic in the field of literature reveals not only what it should ideally accomplish, but also why it did not exactly fit the visual arts. Because Socialist Realism’s basic elements are best expressed in narrative, its most concrete elaboration (for example, in decrees or resolutions passed by official bodies) pertains to works of literature and cinema. As Jørn Guldberg points out,

... Socialist Realism was consequently far more developed and varied as a literary practice and literary political strategy than it was for other art forms. This also means, however, that the conventionalizing and canonizing of certain creative practices is most pronounced, and homogenization most noticeable, in literature. The relationship between literature and pictorial art is in many respects a derivative or transfer relationship...

Literature was thus a guide for the visual arts, but because Socialist Realist tenets could not transfer from one medium to another perfectly, visual artists worked from less explicit guidelines.

In the months and years following the declaration of Socialist Realism as the official method, *Soviet Photo* (which had regained its original title at the start of 1934) continued arguing for the same principles as it had before. When *Soviet Photo* first began to define Socialist Realist photography, authors defined it the same way as they had previously defined good photography, and without elaborating on what realism was. The terms and structures that came into play instead were Party-mindedness, flexibility, plan-oriented work, an understanding of Soviet reality, and the importance of self-criticism. Works of art and literature were also supposed to be characteristic, that is, not too specific or individualized, but descriptive of a general quality or moment. In terms of production, the era featured brigades and collaborations—photographers rarely worked on a project from beginning to end alone. And the ritual-like repetition of the master plot in literature found a counterpart in photographic practice in the way that photographers wrote about their work in *Soviet Photo*. However unintentional it may have been at the time, these stories followed a narrative that involved traveling, seeing, learning, and producing results. All of these qualities, which characterize Socialist Realist photography in the 1930s, have their roots in pre-1932 practice. All are also non-

11. Ibid.
visual attributes, appearing in methods and discussion far more than in actual photographs. In two cases, planned work and the brigade structure for photographers’ collaboration, we see that the method continued to develop. In this section I will discuss each of these methodical features individually to establish their presence and, where possible, their meaning in photographic discourse and/or practice.

The idea that a photograph should be characteristic of its subject was so well established in *Soviet Photo* that it barely received explanation as an aspect of Socialist Realism. The journal taught amateurs that Soviet photographs should capture what was typical of the USSR as a whole, while portraits increasingly depicted the universal worker type. October members’ failure to make photographs that were “characteristic” was one of the main arguments brought against them by ROPF, and when Izogiz brought Eliazar Langman to trial in 1932, it was in part for taking and submitting photographs that did not represent what was typical of his subjects. Unsurprisingly, then, one of the first articles Lev Mezhericher wrote after Socialist Realism’s instatement addressed how to personify “the heroic” in a photograph. In his view, a crucial factor was “completeness—that is, that not a single meaningful episode, not one characteristic part of an occurrence should be left out.” For a photograph to be characteristic of its subject was an all-or-nothing proposition for him—but not even Mezhericher, who quickly became one of Socialist Realism’s greatest advocates in *Soviet Photo*, suggested that this element was new.

Another major element of Socialist Realism, Party-mindedness, was already well established in *Proletarian Photo* by 1932. Despite its significance in the development of Soviet literature, the term found almost no development or theorization in photography. Intentionally or not, it was first presented in association with the April 1932 decree that restructured literary and artistic

12. “Obshchestvennoe poritsanie fotoreportera Langmanu,” *Proletarskoe foto* no. 7–8 (July–August, 1932): 64. His failure to conform to Socialist Realism was not a factor in the trial.
organizations. The text of the decree was printed inside the front cover and the editorial “Party-minded photographs for the Party press” appeared on the opposite page. The foundation for the idea of Party-minded literature is Lenin’s essay “Party Organization and Party Literature” from 1905.14 In it he wrote,

What does the principle of Party literature consist of? It is not only [the principle] that for the socialist proletariat, literature cannot be an instrument of profit for a person or group, but it also cannot be an individual thing in general, independent of the common proletarian cause. ... Literature should become a part of the common proletarian cause.15

In other parts of his essay Lenin wrote of the need for Party literature to be unified, without dissenting positions. He also wrote of the importance of Party literature not being a part of the bourgeois profit principle. Proletarian Photo’s editors, however, did not draw theoretically on Lenin’s argument. Instead, their article focuses more on practical matters, such as what Party-mindedness means in practice, and the authors suggest that photograph’ usefulness mattered more than having the masses take photographs. Party-mindedness, then, was expressed in mass reproduction and distribution. In this instance, a literary concept was coherently expressed in a way that effectively transferred it to another medium. However, with this brief assessment, the editors unceremoniously formalized Soviet / Proletarian Photo’s departure from its original raison d’être—the utopian project of generating masses of Soviet photographers—to the Party line.16

By the editors’ reckoning, useful photographs had only begun appearing during the last three or four years (since 1928, or the beginning of the first Five-Year Plan). The left and right deviations were categorically labeled “bespartiinyi” (non-Party-minded or indifferent), and in keeping with its recent trend, Proletarian Photo specifically labeled formalism un-Party-minded.17 In short, the editorial

14. Lenin’s phrase is never translated as “Party-Minded Literature.” The Russian adjective “partiinyi” refers to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with the meaning “of the Party,” with the corresponding “bespartiinyi” referring to a non-member or non-Party thing. The translation of “partiinyi” as “Party-minded” is less common.
17. Ibid.
was full of ideologically loaded rhetoric but offered no guidance as to what a Party-minded photograph might look like. It took five years for a more precise interpretation of the Party-minded image to appear. Until then, in practice there were two ways of responding to the call for Party-minded photographs. One was to focus on the forum for one’s work by continuing to work on press photography and the other was to focus on Party-minded themes, the most obvious of which was Party members.

The young photo correspondent-turned-press photographer Mikhail Kalashnikov, who already worked for Pravda, and S. Blokhin had the honor of photographing the 17th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party in January–February 1934, and a very long, positive report describes their work in stultifying detail for Soviet Photo’s readers. It addresses the role and, above all, the importance of being a photojournalist at such an important meeting. In a sense, the report on Kalashnikov and Blokhin imitates the form of the many articles by and about photographers who undertook long journeys to make series of photographs about special subjects, thereby equating Party meetings and Socialist construction projects. The reproduced images show predictable views of the presidium, the hall, anonymous attendees dutifully listening to Stalin, and two women Party members (one old, one young) sitting together (figures 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3). Some of the subjects look past the photographer while others look at him; some people are seen in close-up, while others are visible as part of a long shot. The most interesting visual element among all these photographs is the way that Kalashnikov’s view of the presidium recedes into space at a slant from the lens. Yet, even this minor difference may not reflect the photographer’s intention to set the presidium apart from the other subjects. It could just as easily be a result of where the photographer was allowed to move. This emphasis on official events and major Party personalities ossified by 1937, in particular as it applied to Stalin’s personality cult. In January 1937, for example, Soviet Photo included only ten

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reproductions (all of them mezzotints) of which seven show Stalin (alone or with others), while the remaining three depict Party higher-ups or heroes from among the people at a Party meeting. Kalashnikov’s photographs from the 17th Party Congress offer just a brief foretaste of how Party-mindedness would look a few years later.

By the end of the decade, there was a divide between written statements of what work might qualify as Party-minded and what subjects a photographer could access. One B. Maiberg wrote,

> Many misunderstand the theme of Party life as an opportunity to show only Party study and Party meetings. Likewise, some incorrectly hold that only Communists can master it. In its core this is untrue: Party themes are most diverse and multi-facetted, and every qualified photo-worker can master them if he conducts himself seriously, profoundly, and accurately.\(^{19}\)

Acceptable forums for conducting this work would be the political activity of factory workers, Party-sponsored excursions, or showing Communists at the communal farm. A Communist in a trade was a good subject for a photograph, as were veterans of the revolution shown educating children. Shots of Party meetings must show the presidium, the whole room, and the active participation and the organization of the Party collective. In short: people fulfilling particular anticipated roles and Communists doing exemplary applied work were the best subjects because they would be agitational and propagandistic.\(^{20}\) Keeping in mind the restrictions that hindered access for amateur and professional photographers, one wonders how many of these activities or forums were actually available to the average photographer without procuring a special pass. This mundane reality stands in contrast to Maiberg’s suggestion that the photographer’s conduct was the key to mastering the Party-minded image. His suggestion that the right behavior (serious, profound, and accurate) could engender good photographs refers to the photographer’s mindset and approach, but in the end, access was crucial.

> Efficiency (operativnost’), like Party-mindedness, was another term and a state of being that

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20. Ibid.
the state prescribed for all workers in the USSR. At the same Party Congress that Mikhail Kalashnikov photographed, “precision and efficiency in work” (konkretnost’ i operativnost’ v rabotе) received great emphasis, a directive Soviet Photo passed on to its readers. As an example, in an editorial that directly addresses operativnost’, the journal negatively describes the type of photographs being made of what was euphemistically called the “reconstruction of agriculture” (it was the era of violently enforced collectivization): “Tractor, field and driver. Driver, field, and tractor—seldom anything more.” According to the editors, greater precision and efficiency on the part of photographers would lead to more varied and less boring results.21

The most useful explications of flexibility in photography came from V. Grishanin, of Soviet Photo’s editorial board and Soiuzfoto. Grishanin, in a departure from Soviet Photo’s frequently anti-foreign tone, claimed that efficiency already existed in the foreign press and that Soviet photographers could learn about speed and novel lighting from them. The ability to capture quickly moving objects, or to photograph from them, appears to be one thing the author had in mind. Accordingly, one of his examples of speed in Soviet photography was a set of Viktor Temin’s images of a long-distance flight, which had appeared in Pravda. Speed was also a factor in the production process: “The efficiency of work requires precision and speed not only when shooting but also in the preparation of prints. It is essential to develop and print quickly.” He bemoaned the slow tempo of photographs’ release at Soiuzfoto, where printing some photographs from California took longer than their radio transmission from New York to London.22 Surprisingly, Grishanin expressed criticism of the photo-series method and presentation (foto-ocherk) that had become so popular in the very early 1930s, stating that it caused photographers to lose their efficiency. This comment was one of very few occasions when anybody spoke against the practice of creating an extended study of a subject, and may be related to the fact that efficiency applied not just to the

photographer’s speed of work, but also his or her speed in finding good subjects, ones that were “politically current and pressing.” The extended time commitment required by work on a longer photo-series would have prevented a photographer from changing to another topic at a moment’s notice, as any situation might demand.

Peppered throughout Soviet Photo’s discussions of Party-mindedness and efficiency, are so many references to self-criticism and working on oneself that it would be impossible to mention them all. Far from referencing photography, art, or press work specifically, these phrases tie into broader points of Leninist theory and major elements of Soviet-era culture. At the same time, they are vital to understanding how Soviet Photo critiqued artists. Self-criticism meant that a person publicly acknowledged his or her failings in a performance-like ritual in front of peers, for example at a Party meeting, and the proceedings were sometimes published in print. Self-criticism could happen spontaneously before an audience or in a planned presentation. The practice began in the 1920s and continued for decades. It is tempting to read self-criticism as dissimulation, a performance that the state demanded from individuals as a warning against disobedience. And indeed, it was more of a ritual performance than a personal confession. Yet often, as recent scholarship demonstrates, self-criticism consisted of a negative analysis of a collective body or of one’s working group, not a person’s personal failings. In a professional context, workers could direct criticism toward superiors in order to increase and strengthen their own voices. Although the origins of self-criticism lay in the rituals of Party meetings and it was always associated with the Party or other official activity, the associated idea of working on oneself tied into broader idea about creating a

Soviet “new man” after the 1917 Revolution.\textsuperscript{27} It could come from a sincere desire to see change or could be the means and result of focused work on oneself: the process of making oneself a better Soviet citizen. As Jochen Hellbeck has pointed out, the “appeal to the self lay at the core of Communist ideology. It was its defining feature and also a great source of its strength. On a fundamental level, this ideology worked as a creator of individual experience.”\textsuperscript{28} It was a powerful appeal among Soviet citizens of all strata.

When artists were to practice self-criticism or work on themselves, the exhortation held deep political and personal potential. To do so would mean changing far more than just one’s style. \textit{Soviet Photo} demonstrated how it could become a more common feature of culture and working life when, during the creative discussion of 1930–32, \textit{Soviet Photo} and ROPF recommended that the October photographers undertake self-criticism. \textit{Soviet Photo} also called for it in reference to organizations like Soiouzfoto and when it came to the ranks of photo-correspondents and photojournalists in general, implying that more self-criticism would pave the way to more and better work. Later on it also appeared in articles on Socialist Realism, seeming to form a natural part of the method. One result of this emphasis on self-criticism and the improvement that would, hypothetically, result from its practice is the sense that there was always room for positive change. Nothing was supposed to be static. In practice, this could mean that Socialist Realism would get formulated and then revised again and again. Even if a canon was established, or the working method perfectly planned and executed, there was a built-in structure for questioning. The extent of questioning would have to be small because neither Leninism, nor Socialist Realism were truly open to debate. Official standards on acceptable styles or genres within this politics could change.

Arts organizations also adopted the principle of the planned economy. After the first Five-

\textsuperscript{27} Kharkhordin, \textit{The Collective and the Individual in Russia}, 149–154.
Year Plan was instituted in 1928, leading functionaries decided to apply it to the arts in mid-1930. In one example, G. Brylov, director of the enormous Izogiz (State Fine Arts Publishing House), developed five principles of work; the first included “defined norms for output.” And not only did Soviet Photo call on all photographers to fulfill their plans (presumably referring to professionals), but Mezhericher even suggested that amateur photo circles orient themselves along the lines of the newspapers’ plan in order to improve their work and find greater presence in the press. Plans for how to photograph Red Square during May 1st celebrations or the anniversary of the October Revolution sound innocuous enough: they determined who would stand where to photograph the action. But photographing according to plan presented some difficulties. The photographers assigned to various positions around Red Square in October 1931 encountered foggy conditions that the plan had not anticipated and, as a consequence, their work did not meet expectations because they could barely capture their subjects. The next year they were to plan for inclement weather but there are no indications as to how their technology or ability might surmount fog.

Planning work meant more than assigning particular photographers to particular places according to a master scheme. It also meant predetermining how many photographs they would take, with no allowance for how well or poorly a shoot might proceed. By 1937, planning expanded to determining how many new young photographers would receive training. In that year, 2000 amateurs were to be organized into three regional schools. 700 in the factories of Soiuufoto would


go through a basic technical course; of these, 130 would stay at Soiuzfoto to work (apparently, there was no plan for the others’ jobs). In total 8,605 photographers would be newly trained that year.\(^\text{34}\)

There is no indication that these figures reflected the number of job applications, or even the production of photographic equipment. They were simply presented without supporting description of why these numbers or goals were sensible or whether they were realistic.

Exhibitions were similarly planned, with numbers for the *All-Union Exhibition of Art Photography* as follows:

1. “Paths of the great October Socialist Revolution,” up to 200 works showing Lenin, Stalin, heroes, and the Civil War

2. “The USSR in works of art photography,” up to 600 works, plus 200 in color. There was a preference for art photography made using various techniques, but it must show Soviet life

3. “Portraiture in art photography,” with up to 150 works showing the leader (that is, Stalin) and up to 250 works from everyday life

4. “Applied photo art,” including posters, montage, propagandistic materials, the use of photography in scientific study, advertisement, ethnography, x-ray, and those works whose production demanded one-of-a-kind processes or materials, with up to 250 works

5. Amateur photography in the USSR, with both photo circles and individuals participating and sending in their collectively made photo essays, photo series (*foto-cherki* and *fotoserii*), and photographic newspapers; but without a goal set for how many works will be included

6. Photo industry and publication, demonstrating industrial achievements in photographic production.\(^\text{35}\)

These numbers indicate not only what the current priorities in photography were—Lenin and Stalin first, amateurs nearly last—but also bypass questions of what exhibition submissions might actually


show the best quality. They invite the question (which I cannot answer here) whether quantity or quality mattered more in choosing images for the exhibition.

Soviet Photo avoided any kind of public assessment of how well individual photographers fulfilled their plans, but an example from the history of painting in the USSR offers a fascinating parallel. Preparations for the Industry of Socialism exhibition, which was planned for 1937 and finally opened to the public in 1939, involved a predetermined master plan for the kinds of works that would be produced by painters from all schools and stylistic groups. As Susan Reid has noted, many painters felt that the state encroached on their autonomy and creativity by planning their work to such a precise degree, and were aware that the plan would facilitate censorship. It also ran counter to how many, if not most, artists imagined the creative process.36 In the end, it was a fiasco to plan commissions in the restrictive and detailed manner of Industry of Socialism and many artists did not comply with their commissions for a variety of reasons. Some found themselves unable to fulfill orders that corresponded so poorly with their own inclinations, while others had been accounted for in more than one plan and could not fulfill all expectations due to overwork, resulting in disciplinary measures. The inadequacy of basic materials like canvas and paint and the limited availability of studio space also prevented work. Artists trained in the 1920s might find themselves ill prepared to provide large-scale history paintings (kartina) of the kind favored in the later 1930s. At least one artist was compelled to contribute work.37 By making planned, imposed art practice an integral feature of Socialist Realism, the state created a situation in which even the most loyal, devoted artist might find reason to oppose the system. Industry of Socialism represents a culmination of the introduction of plans into work in the arts because its plan was more extensive than the plans for earlier projects had been. The exhibition also demonstrates how the history of Socialist Realism is, in

part, a history of the institutions that implemented and regulated it. With *Industry of Socialism* and also more broadly, the defining role of institutions for Socialist Realism continued the integration of photographers into institutions and working structures.

The state’s minute planning of artistic production and of press photography implies total control, but in *Soviet Photo* one finds fascinating evidence of the state’s inability to execute that control as it would have wished. Specifically, they could not control what an image meant or how it was deployed. A *Pravda* article from February 1934, “On hackneyed photo-lies,” addresses the concern that regional newspapers were attaching false captions to photographs that the Moscow-based agency Bureau-Cliche provided for their use. In *Pravda*’s example, a shot of roughly eight men sitting at a table and looking at papers had received wildly varying captions, from the explanation that it was a Party purge session to descriptions of the scene as reading practice, the review of complaints, or the review of agreements pertaining to Socialist competition. According to *Pravda*, the photograph was used many times and with a different caption every time. The mistakes of the Bolshevik press and its credibility were at stake, and photography was the specific problem. The “metamorphoses” of this photograph, as *Pravda* called it, resulted in “this or that editor’s falsification of photo-documents, current, living, really existing photo-documents of life and the right for Socialism.” Further examples of reused photographs continued to surface despite *Pravda*’s warning.

What could be done against this misuse? *Soviet Photo* issued recommendations and reminders: photography had to depict the “real facts of our fight and construction,” photographs had to be “true” the same way written content was, and captions had to explain exactly what was in the image. “We need the truly realistic photograph, one that is based on the facts about the direction our development is taking...” and for that reason, the maker of a “photo-falsification” could be excluded.

from the ranks of the photo-correspondents. Speaking about the specific question of how to represent a Stakhanovite worker, one whose production was exemplary, editor S. Evgenov discouraged photographers from telling workers how to present themselves. Instead, the photograph should be a “historical document” that accompanied a documentary text and captured its subject as it existed in reality.

Obviously, none of these recommendations addressed the issue of how to control photographs’ use and meaning once they were already circulating. It was no help that the editors failed to define what a “photo-falsification” was a misleading representation of the thing depicted, or the photograph’s dishonest use in the press, or both, or more. By and large, however, Soviet Photo upheld the conceptions of documentary and propaganda that were its point of departure in the creative discussion (and which I describe in Chapter Three). “Documentary” continued to refer to photographic images that only captured the objects in front of the lens, which were indifferent to the world and not politically or socially engaged, but the term eventually lost its negative association with factography. Instead, it became a pre-stage, or step one, for making the engaged photography that would fulfill Socialist Realism’s demands in step two.

Soviet Photo’s writers continued to think of the (documentary) photograph in and of itself as the raw material of propaganda images, and the idea of what one could make with photographs expanded to include art and Socialist Realism. USSR in Construction was already achieving this second step, according to Mezhericher, who credited it with outgrowing documentary and reaching a “five-year form” characterized by monumental and artistic work. He probably meant that USSR in Construction achieved a style befitting the Five-Year Plan. Others in Soviet Photo still warned that

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40. Ia. Osipovich, “Protiv fotovran’ia i fotovrunov,” Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (March–April 1934): 3. The title of this article translates as “Against photo-lies and photo-liars.”
making protocolary images with too little artistic content remained a danger, and an article entitled “The two sides of photo-information” recommended photojournalists should work on finding the balance between their protocolary (i.e., documentary) and artistic roles. This recommendation suggests that the Soviet press did not print photographs that achieved (in Soviet Photo’s or the author’s view) the right balance of documentary and art, but the author left out his assessment of which side received too short shrift.

The idea that it was necessary to balance fact (raw material) and a message (captions or artfulness) was one important part of how Socialist Realism bore similarities with earlier approaches to photography, even though the similarity was unintentional. The idea of a photograph as raw material had already appeared in 1930 in the discussion of portraiture, when some authors suggested that the portrait could be redeemed by its alteration in montage (Chapter One). Then, in the discussion of how press photographers could best serve Socialist construction, their work appeared as a building block for agitation and propaganda. Making a good photograph—the raw material on which everything else rested—was merely step one in this process (Chapters Three and Four). And in the development of Socialist Realism as well, facts alone were not enough. They were a starting point for creative work. Maxim Gorky had advanced this view:

The fact is not yet the whole truth, it is the raw material from which the real truth of art must be extracted, smelted. One should not roast the chicken with its feathers; and reverence for the fact just leads to the coincidental and insignificant being lumped together with the fundamental and the typical. One must learn to pluck the fact’s superficial plumage, to extract the meaning from the fact.

Of course, Soviet Photo saw photography as having a basically factual/documentary nature due to the

medium itself, and suggested that it must be built upon in order to make propaganda and, later, Socialist Realism. Gorky, coming out of the literary tradition, did not orient himself toward a physical medium in the same way. Thus Gorky’s description of facts as raw material dovetailed with Soviet Photo’s basic understanding of the photograph as raw material or step one, even if they advocated different ways of making facts Socialist Realist. Where Gorky saw the need to pare down the facts and remove extraneous ones in order to communicate their message, Soviet Photo advocated adding more information to (photographic) facts.

_USSR in Construction_ provided a significant reference point for Soviet Photo as a forum in which to practice the balance between document/fact and its artistic/propagandistic representation. Sometimes Soviet Photo published short notes positively reviewing the latest issue of _USSR in Construction_, but it is more significant that as Soviet Photo wrote about a Socialist Realist method, _USSR in Construction_ seemed to implement it through brigade-oriented work structures and a presentation that employed both word and image. Two kinds of texts accompanied the images: the caption, and the photographer’s making-of story. The latter was usually retold in Soviet Photo.

In the introduction to this chapter, I noted how the ritualized reporting that photographers did on their work echoed the ritual character of a book’s plot. The photographers’ knowledge and working process were, ideally, formed by the experience of traveling to study their subjects for a long period of time. As the example of Eliazar Langman demonstrated in the preceding chapter, exemplary behavior on such a journey (komandirovka) represented a proper working method and the right attitude. Prominent photojournalists wrote in varying length on their travels to report on what they saw and experienced while fulfilling a certain commission. Yet these contributions almost never consist of reflections on or about photography, or the photographers’ creative decisions. Instead they fulfill an expectation that existed for authors of literary works: “a writer must ‘correspond’ to
literature with *his own life.* The literary scholar Evgeny Dobrenko has shown that there was to be no divergence between the character of an author’s work and his life; the same appears to have been true of photographers, who demonstrated their connection to and solidarity with the construction programs of the first and second Five-Year Plans by going to see them and depicting them for the press, much as authors were supposed to write about construction after entering industry themselves.\(^47\)

In a majority of *Soviet / Proletarian Photo*’s issues from the end of 1931 onwards, one or more photographers reported on their work.\(^48\) The inaugural reports appeared under the heading “Photojournalists share their experience.” In one of them, N. Shtertser, identified as an October member, reported on his experience photographing Leningrad from an airplane and published photographs of new grain elevators, and of Mars Field and the Smolnyi Palace—both historically symbolic locations. The commission had come from *USSR in Construction*; he and Boris Ignatovich spent a total of four working days in an airplane. Shtertser lists the kinds of cameras they used, the airplane’s speed and elevation, and how quickly he shot how many photographs. By the end, he and Ignatovich could provide the editors of *USSR in Construction* with 50 “adequate” photographs from a pool of 800 that represented 200 subjects.\(^49\) The article seeks to show how the photographers made fast decisions about their trade, how quickly they chose a particular camera, for example, or what technical aspects of the project required the most attention and flexibility. On the whole, Shtertser’s article is dry and gives no insight into his attitude toward the work, his own planning process, aesthetic inclinations, and so on. Most of the reports follow this general pattern. Photojournalists


\(^47\) The second Five-Year Plan for the national economy of the USSR was supposed to last from 1933 through 1937 but began ahead of time, in 1932. Unlike the first Five-Year Plan, no cultural revolution or similar program accompanied it.

\(^48\) The authors of these contributions were always male, and although there were some women photographers in the field at that time, women were a small minority among photojournalists. Galina San’ko, who lived on the remote peninsula of Kamchatka, was the era’s most famous woman photojournalist but she did not publish about a komandirovka or her local working conditions.

represented themselves as good and competent workers by offering technical detail in these reports, but the privilege to which their work attests (due to their access to airplane rides, special building projects, and so on) gave them a mythical aspect as well. A person like Shtetser showed the characteristics of efficiency and speed in his work, he produced a lot, and he knew what was most important about his subjects. Thinking of Dobrenko’s observation that “a writer must ‘correspond’ to literature with *his own life*,” we see here that a photographer could, too. As photographers continued publishing such reports in the 1930s and increasingly reported on major projects, their connection to the mythical seemed to grow.

These expedition narratives became more interesting as editors focused more on specific large-scale construction projects and major national feats. A report by P. Novitskii—and the vast praise heaped upon him—demonstrate how a photographer could become a hero thanks to his association with national achievement and his own self-presentation. Looking at many of these reports now, it seems they included so much obscure detail because today’s reader does not turn to them in order to learn the craft. Given *Soviet Photo*’s educative goals, however, the details may have been very important to photographers seeking to better understand technique. 20

P. Novitskii’s work on the *Sibiriakov* icebreaker earned him accolades and *Proletarian Photo* printed twelve of his photographs from the expedition. Although he was the head of a team, the photographers working with him went unnamed. 51 The writing about him by various critics and the editors contains brief notes attempting to characterize his work, such as its orderly or planned character (*planovost’*), but veers off into romantic, admiring description. *Soviet Photo* offered readers a mental image of the photographer’s physical and mental state as he worked through his tiredness

50 R. Karmen, “Po peskam Kara-Kuma,” *Proletarskoefoto* no. 6 (November–December 1933): 25. The editors’ objection to the reports’ typical content precedes the article.
and wiped perspiration from his face. Although Novitskii came from an older generation of photojournalists, the editors praised him for joining the Soviet struggle and beginning to work with Soviet feeling; also, he reportedly brought a high level of technical ability to Soviet photography. In his own contribution about the journey, Novitskii wrote of its beginning, his equipment, and various moments when particular action occurred, such as the researchers’ use of particular equipment or going onto the ice. However, he did not reveal everything about how he left the ship and safely made the cover photograph of the Sibiriakov from across the Arctic water and ice floes (fig. 5.4).

Novitskii’s Sibiriakov images impressed Proletarian Photo’s readers with the drama of their setting, not revolutionary technique. His seascapes are frequently composed like conventional landscapes, with objects in the foreground to anchor the viewer but composed to emphasize the view into the distance. In At the shores of Kamechatka (fig. 5.5), the ship’s prow cuts forward between the ice floes in the direction of the far-off land, but the seascape without any people, ships, or buildings in the middle ground has no human scale. The distance to the horizon could be huge or minuscule, and the island in the middle distance is of indeterminate size. In another context this lack of scale might render a photograph ineffective, but here it makes the photograph more impressive. It could even be exotic because a view of the open sea would have been unfamiliar to most. As though to underscore Soviet Photo’s (or Pravda’s) emphasis on the crucial role played by captions, the photographs alone cannot tell their viewer whether she is looking at the Novaya Zemlya Archipelago in the Arctic, or the Matochkin Straight between the Kara and Barents Seas, or Kamchatka. When presented together, the photographs and the expedition narrative convey both the grandness of the subject and the role of the individual capturing it.

All of the travel reporting in *Soviet Photo* presents projects that were part of publishers’ or Soiuzfoto’s programs or plans. The centrality of institutions in this process meant that there were no personal reports and none of the photographers who wrote about their work had traveled entirely on their own initiative and bill, nor had they journeyed for non-professional reasons. This circumstance limits the reports’ usefulness for learning more about the decisions and opportunities of particular photographers, but this absence of personal accounts actually helps us better understand the photographs in *USSR in Construction*. *USSR in Construction* was of great interest to the editors of *Soviet Photo*, who wrote uniformly positive reviews of its work, with the occasional constructive critique, because the journal presented opportunities for photographers to engage in genuinely creative work, and because photographers were permitted to devote the necessary time to each subject. From the beginning of its publication in 1930, *USSR in Construction* devoted each issue to a particular subject, like the construction of the White Sea Canal, the factories in Kramatorsk, the fifteenth anniversary of Soviet Georgia, and so on.

Generating material for each of the monthly issues must have meant sponsoring an enormous number of journeys, especially because each issue credited an entire group of photographers. Unfortunately, there are almost no descriptions of their material and financial scope, though one issue from 1933 reportedly involved five organizations and fourteen photographers. There was usually a head artist—famous ones included the husband-and-wife teams of Aleksandr Rodchenko-Varvara Stepanova and El Lissitzky-Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers—but others provided the

55. These sponsored trips are beginning to receive more scholarly attention because they were also undertaken by prominent members of the avant-garde like Rodchenko and Tret’ıakov, who practiced his factographic method on a communal farm.


57. S. E., “Dneprostroi i Krasnaia armiia v ‘SSSR na stroike’,” *Proletarskoe foto* no. 3 (May–June 1933): 23–25. S. E. appears to misrepresent *USSR in Construction*’s various issues. One devoted to the Dneprostroi dam project appeared as no. 10 in 1932, while the issue devoted to the Red Army was no. 2, 1933; S. E. lumps them together, and perhaps their staff as well. His own name does not appear in lists of contributors to either issue in *SSSR na stroike: iljustriruyući zhurnal novogo tipa*, reprint (Moscow: Agei Tomesh, 2006), 392.
material for these head artists to use.\footnote{58} In this way, *USSR in Construction* continued to implement the precept that brigades be the press’s basic working unit. The idea of organizing photographers into brigades came from the Central Committee decision of April 16, 1931, declaring it the ideal form for all worker-correspondent activity, so the decision also applied to photographer-correspondents.\footnote{59} Thus, there are two ways of tracing the work structure of the professional artists who were employed by *USSR in Construction*, either back to the worker-correspondents’ structure or to the ideal of the collective espoused by October.\footnote{60}

The use of the brigade changed over time and was actively developed and adapted for the new Socialist Realist method, not just absorbed from prior practices. It was originally an enforcement tool intended to bring wayward artists into the official fold, meaning that it was as much an ideological method as a creative one. This use of artists’ brigades as a reeducation method dated to late 1929 and was reconfirmed numerous times by 1931. Under this government program, painters associated with formalist or pre-Revolutionary styles were sent on journeys to various locations in the USSR (farms, factories, and so on) and charged with depicting what they saw. The results were subject to review.\footnote{61} It was apparently rare for such a trip to achieve the goal of reforming an artist’s style and thus, presumably, his or her method and attitude. The use of brigades to generate material for *USSR in Construction* was more successful.

Actively adapting the brigade-and-travel method for Socialist Realism meant using it not only as a disciplinary measure, but also as a productive one to generate vast amounts of material. It

\footnote{58} Margarita Tupitsyn attributed this collaborative process to the physical weakness caused by El Lissitzky’s tuberculosis, claiming that he resented needing to collaborate. Regardless of what Lissitzky’s attitude toward collaboration may have been, her explanation is inadequate because it cannot address why healthy photographers would also have worked in large teams. See Margarita Tupitsyn, ed., *El Lissitzky: Jenseits der Abstraktion. Fotografie, Design, Kooperation* (Hannover: Sprengel Museum, 1999), 43 and 201.

\footnote{59} S. Evgenov discussed the decision in “Novaia organizatsiia fotokorov,” *Sovetskoe foto* no. 13–14 (July 1931): 330–33.

\footnote{60} For more on the early history of brigade-style work, see Evgeny Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation*, 123f.

provided photographers like Eliazar Langman with an opportunity for re-inclusion through his journey to Kazakhstan, not just punishment for inadequate work on the journey to Kramatorsk. When combined with the ritual of reporting on one’s journeys for Soviet Photo, it expanded into a catalog of actions that together enabled the photographers to make Socialist Realist photographs: travel, see, learn, be changed, work with others, take new pictures, use those pictures to publicize the USSR’s achievements, and be held publicly accountable in a report. These journeys were easily adaptable to the Socialist Realist method because they already addressed the question of ideological acceptability and provided an opportunity to practice self-criticism. Socialist Realism as a method inherited attitudes (Party-mindedness and efficiency), but also consisted of institutionalized structures (brigades) and a set of actions (traveling and writing reports).

Yuri Lotman’s “Art in the Set of Modeling Systems: Theses on the Problem” provides a framework for understanding how these disparate methodological elements coalesce.62 Reading Socialist Realism as a language, we can see it as something that models the actions and attitudes of an artist. As Lotman writes, “...art is always an analog of reality (the object), translated into the language of a given system. Consequently, a work of art is always contingent [uslovno] and, at the same time, should intuitively be grasped as an analog of a defined object, that is, be ‘similar’ and ‘dissimilar’ simultaneously.”63 Seen along these lines, Socialist Realism is the specific expression of real things—principles, actions, and structures—and according to that system, art lies in their interplay. As such, Socialist Realism always does more than merely reflect a political aesthetic, parrot the Party line, or impose a single totalizing view. It should represent its non-visual aspects visually, but the representation of an attitude or principle is always at a remove from attitudes and principles themselves. This disconnect opens possibilities for deviation, as I show in the following section.

If so many fundamental characteristics and methods of Socialist Realism were already established before the term even existed, then what made Socialist Realism different? *Soviet Photo* represented Socialist Realism as an opportunity to renew photography. But what was new? What was wrong with the existing methods or styles, all of which were associated with state-sponsored activity anyways because that the Central Committee had in 1932 shut down all independent literary or artistic organizations? In this section I show that Socialist Realism offered something “new” by recuperating genres that were previously rejected by Soviet critics, like landscape, étude, and portraiture. By reintroducing or reforming these genres, *Soviet Photo* offered a new contribution that *USSR in Construction* seemed to confirm. As the country’s leading, elite illustrated publication, *USSR in Construction* utilized styles and genres that had been written off as hopelessly bourgeois just a few years earlier.

In order to understand what Socialist Realism was supposed to renew, we must first look back—at the period that preceded it. From the 1932 decree through early 1934, *Proletarian / Soviet Photo* was physically and metaphorically thin. Fewer issues were printed each year and the ones that were published skewed heavily toward technical contributions, template-like discussions of current political programs, and other unobjectionable content. Photographers’ reports from the field, though usually dry and rote, make for true high points in reading. There was no back-and-forth discussion of style or method, and there was no reporting on debates at the Moscow Press House (*Dom pechat*) or Cinema House (*Dom kino*). Indeed, if we judge by *Proletarian Photo*, no debates took place anywhere. The one time *Proletarian Photo* published on an exhibition, it was a brief report explaining that it commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution and focused on Lenin and other leaders. It was thus with some justification that Mezhericher finally wrote...

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64. Discussion of portraiture, which had already been so prevalent during the first Five-Year Plan, continued. I do not examine it here for reasons of concision and because the shift that took place regarding landscape is more interesting.
May–June 1934 that a “lingering lull” set in after the 1932 restructuring decree. The lull prevented further development, that is, improvement of photography and therefore Socialist Realism was necessary as part of a push for better quality.65

*Soviet Photo* was not alone in packaging Socialist Realism as a push for better quality in the arts.66 Maxim Gorky, who led the Soviet literary scene at the time and was very close to the Party’s highest leadership, thought of it in terms of improving the quality of writers’ work.67 A *Soviet Photo* editorial from January–February 1934 acknowledges its own borrowed rhetoric when it repeats calls for more artistic quality in photojournalistic work: “We should fight for the goal that the photo-reporter be not just a cultured photojournalist, but also an artist. The problem of Socialist Realism, the problem of reflecting the truth about our reality, [...] this is also current for Soviet photography.”68 This editorial was the first time *Soviet Photo* ever mentioned Socialist Realism, but without explication or instruction. Still it is difficult to say whether there was consensus over the concern of artists’ and writers’ supposedly low-quality work. Nevertheless, just as the 1932 restructuring decree cut off artistic or theoretical debate—an end point—two years later, Socialist Realism appeared as a new beginning—with the state pretending to offer artists new material.

The introduction of Socialist Realism did not bring about an immediate change in the photographs that *Soviet Photo* chose for publication. Moreover, because the journal did not publish written guidelines, there was no immediate change in standards or an obvious change in the way critics interpreted images. While it is unsurprising that initial discussion of Socialist Realism was not supported by visual material, some of the images that were printed simultaneously can be taken as examples for what the journal’s stance was at that time.

67. Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953*, 172. The authors reprint a draft letter written by Gorky to the Party’s Central Committee; it was not published until 1990.
68. “God bor’by za kachestvo,” 2.
It was not only unclear what amounted to a realist photograph; it was also unclear what visual characteristics constituted a good photograph. Definitions of “good” photography all relied on descriptions of the photograph’s content and theme (exemplary proletarians, daily life in the USSR, reality), or the photographers’ clear command of technique, but rarely touched upon the issue of style. In practice, Soviet Photo reproduced images that spanned a variety of styles, artistic quality, and subject matter. For example, in early 1934 it remained common to contrast the old and the new, like the “them-and-us photographs” of the early 1930s (figs. 5.6 and 5.7). In New houses supplant hovels (Ivanovo), the light defines the old wooden houses on the right, while the new buildings on the left are in shadow and out of focus. In Novaia Gorlovka: Flowerbeds laid near the shafts, the caption calls attention to flowerbeds in the foreground while cooling towers—a symbol of industry and construction—dominate the sky and go ignored. Neither photograph is visually compelling; in fact, they seem to undermine more than comply to ideological demands of content. As though to increase the lack of clarity about what photographs should show and how, the same issue of Soviet Photo contains a long article by Lev Mezhericher on photographer Abram Shterenberg, praising the progress he made since his days as a member of October and suggesting that, with less emotion to his otherwise realist images, he would do well.69 Ten images accompany the article, which aims to contrast Shterenberg’s older photographs (captioned with the year he made them) with current examples (figs. 5.8 and 5.9). It is clear why the portrait of a crying toddler would not have fit Soviet Photo’s or Mezhericher’s expectations: it portrayed a scene of childhood that elicits emotional responses while saying nothing about the USSR’s current society and politics. More importantly, however, Mezhericher’s commentary sows confusion: Melons makes better use of the frame, composition, and light/dark contrast than the two previous images of Socialist construction, but

Mezhericher called it “realist”.

But Melons appears distinctly formalist. Nothing in the photograph reveals the setting, time, or even the physical position of the camera vis-à-vis its subject. Perhaps this was why Mezhericher called on Shterenberg to educate himself in matters of Socialist construction and class war.

All four of these images from one issue of Soviet Photo contradict the editorial’s call for the combination of photojournalism of Soviet life today and artistic quality. The very photos that the journal chose to emphasize undermine its goals because the first pairing shows Soviet life without effectively emphasizing progress, and the photographer praised for “realism” exhibits none. These photos by Chernov, Markov, and Shterenberg hardly seem to have come from the same journal that showcased well-lit and focused Party sessions or grandiose, modern building projects. The contrasting quality among Soviet Photo’s choices did not disappear with its shift away from amateur photography, nor because of the 1932 decree. The photographs in Soviet Photo communicated on two different levels, for two different audiences. On one, exemplary and prominent work could be reproduced from major artists’ collections, or reprinted from photo-books and other publications such as USSR in Construction. Such reproductions kept readers up-to-date on prominent work and acceptable aesthetic trends. On another level, Soviet Photo also represented the mainstream, comprising of adequate (but not always good) works by newspaper or journal correspondents. Like the photographs by Chernov and Markov, these types of images captured current scenes from the USSR or, like Shterenberg’s, they surveyed a longer oeuvre.

That Soviet Photo regularly reproduced a range of photographic styles debunks the stereotypical image of a homogenized Stalinist art scene. The inconsistent character of this journal raises a number of questions. Since it, like USSR in Construction, represented an official stance on what was allowable in the field, does it mean that there were different standards for different artists

70. Ibid.
and different publications? Was enforcement lax? Were the editors so committed to representing all of the USSR’s photography that they were willing to compromise on style, content, and quality? While each of these factors is surely part of the reason for such widely varied photographs, the most likely one reason is that Soviet Photo continued to see Soviet photography as a work in progress. Nobody had to lie and claim that all of it was good, because printing bad examples presented opportunities for self-criticism and showed where improvement was needed. Given the reliance on captions and explanatory texts, words could enhance a photograph that was more documentary than artistic, or more artistic than documentary. Just as bad photographs had been used to teach amateurs what or how not to photograph in the 1920s, bad examples could still be useful under Socialist Realism later.

Thus, Socialist Realism initially led less to homogenization than to the acceptance of more variety. That is, rather than trying to enforce newer or tighter standards, editors expanded their standards of what and who was acceptable. This is most visible in the critical re-evaluation of the landscape genre. In the preceding years, landscapes had garnered negative reactions, if appearing in journals at all; now the genre was redefined and supported with visual material for readers to parse on their own. While landscape was previously associated with dubious traditions, such as Pictorialism and pre-revolutionary professional art photography, it now became a route by which “artisticness” could re-enter photographic work. This transformation was possible by virtue of its history as ‘art photography’ and the parallels to painting, which became increasingly important as more and more articles tried to define whether photography was “art,” and what could make it “art” at all. Not every critic was in favor of landscape’s rehabilitation, presumably because of the genre’s pre-revolutionary history, but many did, and as a result landscape photographs that were unacceptable in 1934 practically became canonized just three years later. 71 In 1936 Soviet Photo even

71. This observation has also been made by Sokol’skaia, who does not venture to analyze why the genre was
held a contest on the “Spring Landscape” (see Appendix C).

Lyrical and pictorial, the landscape was largely maligned in the 1920s and early 1930s as un-Soviet, probably because it did not represent proletarian workers, building projects, and the like. In the summer of 1929, for example, a Soviet Photo editorial warned photographers not to get distracted by lyrical or beautiful landscapes. Instead, they should seek and capture that which characterized the Socialist reconstruction of the countryside and that which hindered it. Landscape photography was alternately called “unnecessary” and associated with countryside amateurs; attributed to professionals who were hostile, or at best indifferent, to the life of the masses and therefore could not achieve artistic quality; it was also associated with the bourgeois in general. Pastoral landscapes could not possibly play an important role when it was possible to photograph factories instead.

But the actual photographs in Soviet Photo tell a different story, one that complicates the blanket rejection of landscape photography in writing. During the first three years of publication, multiple landscapes appeared on the cover and one contest focused on the theme “Winter.” The exhibition Ten Years of Soviet Photography in 1928 was a turning point, after which landscape continued to appear in photographs as exercises involving light and dark (figs. 5.10 and 5.11). Soviet Photo’s official explanation for the continued publication of landscapes, despite their resounding rejection in the exhibition’s aftermath, was that these images were useful as lessons for beginning photographers. Grigorii Boltianskii explained away workers’ landscape photographs as a part of their experimentation, influenced by the bourgeois and pre-revolutionary (largely Pictorialist) Russian

72. A painter’s landscapes could be a reason for sending him or her on a brigade journey. See Friedman, “The Artist Brigades,” 42.
Photographic Society (RFO). 75

The only exception to this rejection of landscapes existed in very rare images of collective farms, especially during the height of the Soviet government’s forced collectivization campaign, in which peasants had to move to large collective farms or risk severe punishment. *Soviet Photo* frequently demanded more images of the new collectives and of grain procurement. Collectivization was accompanied by a great deal of violence in the countryside and for this reason, almost no photographs of the actual collectivization process were printed. In order to ensure that these landscape images would be of high quality, *Soviet Photo* eventually provided instructions on foreground/background focus, what kinds of light filters might be useful, and more; however, it was clear that the landscape had to be politicized and subordinated to the all-important subject of collective farms. 76 Boris Kudoiarov, a former member of October, received high praise for a photograph showing how collective farming was integrated into its surroundings and the broader economy (fig. 5.12). An extended caption in lieu of a title reads,

B. Kudoiarov arranged the most important elements of the theme “Kashin factory, Moscow region” according to their importance. In the foreground collective farmers deliver flax, in the middle ground [others wait after their] long trek with the flax, in the background the factory operates (smoke rises from the chimneys) to process this raw material. This kind of image, with its three-planed composition [based on fore-, middle-, and background], clearly depicts the organic connection between the factory and the surrounding collective farms providing raw material. 77

In other words, the landscape is so fully integrated into production that it disappears. The usefulness of the land and its part in the production process supersedes the conventional aspect of landscape photography.

The first sign of reconciliation to traditional landscape photography appeared after the

77. The caption’s author coined the phrase “three-planed composition” (“trekhplannaia kompozitsiia”).
declaration of Socialist Realism as the USSR’s official artistic method. It was now represented as an important genre for photographers to master and its low status was addressed, for example, in an article by V. Grishanin entitled “The Right to Landscape.” Not only could the Soviet landscape be separated from its bourgeois forebears in art history, but throwing it out was—he judged—like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Moreover, Grishanin claimed that artists such as Boris Kudoiarov, Semyon Fridlidan, and Max Alpert, all of whom were frequently printed in Soviet Photo, were not the only photographers to produce valuable landscape images. He argued that artists such as Iurii Eremin, who was associated with Pictorialism, also produced work of importance, if for no other reason than educational. He claimed that the real work of art lay in “being capable of seeing” (umet’ videt’), and thus the right kind of landscape fostered the viewer’s ability to see right, that is, to see the land as a politicized, Soviet object. Grishanin’s article is remarkable for how it represents Soviet Photo’s about-face attitude toward the genre of landscape. But even more surprisingly, Grishanin, as one of Soviet Photo’s most prominent writers during the “proletarian episode,” had written negatively about the “right” in Soviet photography. He had previously criticized Pictorialists like Eremin, whom he now reservedly rehabilitated.

But if the Soviet landscape should distinguish itself from the Pictorialist landscape, what differentiated Kudoiarov’s winter scene from Eremin’s Gurzuf coast (figs. 5.13 and 5.14)? The first was received positively and the second negatively. On the whole, the two photographs are very similar, with a tree in the foreground framing the view down or over a hill into the distance. Eremin’s soft focus recalls pictorial photography, which may explain why his image was negatively received. Yet there is nothing particular in either photograph that would identify them as capturing the reality of everyday life in the USSR.

79. In a sense, it was even a return to the approach that Soviet Photo had taken from 1926 through 1928, when Nikolai Troshin’s series “Paths of Photo Culture” recommended learning from art historical examples.
Eremin’s photograph was called an “étude” in *Soviet Photo*’s brief critical review of that month’s prints, thus implicating it in another tradition that, like the landscape, was subjected to reworking at best and at worst, total rejection. An étude was, to speak broadly on how the term was used in *Soviet Photo*, not only a study but a scene from life, with or without people, inviting reflection. It often elevated the domestic sphere or showed pauses in activity, such as women sitting in a field rather than working. “Étude” had been a pejorative term since the 1920s, associated with the accusation of being an “artist-photographer” and showing excessive attention to artistic concerns rather than social ones. For example, the term was taken as an insult by photojournalist Roman Karmen when he complained that anything showing an artistic eye—no matter the subject—received the label “étude” or “aestheticism”. Photo-études were criticized for looking petty-bourgeois and not showing any connection to everyday life. Sergei Morozov wrote to warn against their “recidivism” in 1934. The opposite of a photographic étude was the protocolary image. One had too much art and the other, too little.

Kislov’s *Étude of Dneprstroj*, printed in the same issue as Kudoiarov’s and Eremin’s landscapes, has all the elements one would expect *Soviet Photo* to laud: foreground, receding space, and background with human scale indicated by the crane operator’s door on the lower left; the crane’s geometry contrasting the blur of flowing water; the dam’s rhythmic vertical supports integrated into its curve through the landscape and across the picture plane; nature’s might harnessed by a large-scale building project of the Soviet state; construction in progress and visible results; and grandiose scale (fig. 5.15). Kislov’s photograph demonstrates that pre-revolutionary or artistic genres could be recuperated and used for contemporary purposes, showing an aspect of

82. S. Morozov, “Razgovor po sovesti: Obsuzhdaem st. L. Mezherichera ‘Zatianuvsheesia zatish’e’ (S.F. No. 3)”, *Sovetskoe foto* no. 6 (September, 1934): 4, 6.
Soviet life, or rule, and doing so with just the right degree of attention to aesthetics. It appears surprising for Kislov to call the photo an étude, but the title reveals his wish to place it within a particular artistic trajectory, associating it with a lesson. Although the editors chose not to review this image, it exemplifies their priorities in landscape photography.

Not everyone saw this rehabilitation as an unconditional positive. One subscriber from Krasnoyarsk named A. Vorob’ev warned in a page-long letter that the new acceptance of landscapes would lead to the acceptance of études, and that Mezhericher would then have to restart his campaign against photography’s “right” wing. But even a reader such as Vorob’ev acknowledged that the landscape’s disappearance from the press represented a loss, and that the youngest generation of viewers may be able to accept it without historical bias. He also suggested that landscape photography allowed citizens to learn about the whole country. Vorob’ev proposed Isaac Levitan, a nineteenth-century Russian realist painter, as a positive example. Levitan (1860–1900) was a member of the Wanderers (Peredvizhniki) and headed the landscape painting course at the Russian Academy of Art beginning in 1898. Vorob’ev thus invoked a landscape tradition that had deep associations with Russian national identity and in which aesthetics played a key role.

A further contributor, Mikhail Namrush, warned that Grishanin’s “Right to Landscape” must not become a “right to lyricism” or else the people in an image could threaten to become less important than the landscape elements. Still, since Soviet people of all walks of life experienced landscapes, they must accordingly be represented in Soviet photography. Namrush was quick to clarify that the Soviet landscape he envisioned held significant space for human actions. In defining five types of landscape, he made three of them human-made (the last even emphasizes human presence):

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84. A. Vorob’ev, “Kakoi peizazh nam nuzhen,” Sovetskoe foto no. 1 (January 1935): 28f. It is entirely possible that this contribution was written under a pseudonym by a person close to the editorial board.
1. A conventional landscape showing fields, the sea, mountains, forests, and so on;
2. The industrial landscape;
3. The landscape of the collective farm;
4. Urban landscape;
5. The ethnographic landscape, showing some part of the USSR together with the ethnic group that populated a particular region.

In response, the editors added a note warning that Namrush risked condemning landscapes that were made well but could not fulfill these criteria of “usefulness.” Suddenly, and in a total reversal of their earlier position, the editorial board seemed prepared to go further in the direction of lyrical or pre-revolutionary photography than its own readers and contributors. In order to not let it appear as though they were re-instituting lyrical or bourgeois photography, *Soviet Photo* needed to present it as an integral part of Socialist Realism.

However, the shift to acceptable landscape was not nearly as radical or as fast as Vorob’ev or Namrush feared. For instance, Mezhericher illustrated his January 1935 article “On Realism in Soviet Photo-Art” with two photographs by Arkadii Shaikhet, including a landscape, *In the Mountains of Tadzhikistan: Return of Red Army Soldiers from a March*, and a portrait, *The Uzbek Worker Akhrarova from the Tashkent Textile Plant* (figs. 5.16 and 5.17). The captions of both images identify the subjects as Soviet, which allows the reader to interpret how their subjects are Soviet. In the first image, the Red Army soldiers proceed across the landscape and thus mark it as Soviet and in the second, a factory employee shows a happy face as she bears the fruits of production. The landscape is a necessary aspect of depicting what these soldiers or workers do. Quoting Central Committee members Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek, Mezhericher taught his reader how Socialist Realism was different from realism. Bukharin had said,

It differs more than anything else because of the art’s material... Socialist realism differs from simple realism in that the representation of Socialist construction, the struggle of the proletariat, the new man, all the various means and instruments of our era’s great historical process are always at the center of attention.\(^{88}\)

And Radek:

We call this realism “Socialist,” because it is not simply a photograph of life. It is founded on the understanding of where the world is headed. The world is headed toward the victory of Socialism, and only an artist who understands where the world is headed is able to portray the basic direction of this development in great works.\(^{89}\)

The Tadzhik landscape and Uzbek worker are individual elements in the process of Socialist construction and Socialism’s victorious march. The landscape still remained problematic when it did not contain a visible element out of Soviet life, but in just a few years Iurii Eremin would become an example for how attitudes shifted.

The reintroduction of landscape photography was related directly to the question of whether photography could aspire to be an art form. The answer depended largely on whether a given author thought that Soviet photography was living up to its Socialist Realist potential. Photo art (fotoiskusstvo) appeared as an acceptable term at the advent of Socialist Realism in 1934; the suspect “artist-photographers” of only a few years earlier were now called “photo-specialist artists” and “photo-masters.”\(^{90}\) There was a new emphasis on learning from older masters, an emphasis on hierarchy of ability. At first glance, this may seem similar to the idea of learning lessons from art history in the 1920s. However, it was new that Soviet Photo’s authors advocated learning from older people, not only older art. This shift signals a changing attitude towards artists’ individuality and a possible acceptance of artists whose backgrounds were bourgeois or pre-revolutionary, since “master” carries the weight of its association with Old Masters and the Western European art

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88. Originally published as Nikolai Bukharin, “Poeziia, poetika i zadachi poeticheskogo tvorchestva s SSSR. Doklad tov. N. I. Bukharina na vsesoiuznom s’ezde sovetskikh pisatelei,” Pravda no. 239 (August 30, 1934): 5f.
historical canon. A figure such as Eremin, whose photograph of Gurzuf received negative criticism, was thus praised later on as a master of landscape photography who could teach the younger generation.91

Landscape’s rehabilitation did not only take place in Soviet Photo’s pages. It was part of what appeared to be a broader loosening of control over photography, although that initial impression will prove to be misleading. The exhibition Masters of Soviet Photo Art (Vystavka masterov sovetskogo fotoiskusstva), which ran from April 24 through May 11, 1935, was the product of wide-ranging collaboration, and initiated a long series of contradictions. The works it featured—from Eremin’s landscapes to Rodchenko’s and Langman’s formalist works—suggest that the new standards for Socialist Realism had no impact. The eighteen-member exhibition organizing committee was largely comprised of functionaries in various state organizations, with Grigorii Boltianskii from the photo-circle movement serving in the presidium (a woman named Olga Boltianskaia worked alongside him). Five of the eight selection committee members (otborochnaia komissiiia, the jury) came from the presidium, but were joined by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Semyon Fridliand, and Lev Mezhericher, who by then was already on Soviet Photo’s editorial board. While Fridliand’s participation is no surprise given his generally acceptable attitudes about photography, Rodchenko’s is, and like his activity on Soviet Photo’s editorial board, Rodchenko’s participation in the exhibition planning has remained unacknowledged. Rodchenko’s involvement in the exhibition is obvious even from published materials (his name appears at the front of the exhibition catalog and he later defended it in print from criticism). In large part this omission from scholarship can be traced to Alexander Lavrentiev, who is the artist’s grandson, owner of the Rodchenko-Stepanova archive, and a prominent scholar of Rodchenko’s work. He omits Rodchenko’s jury service from his own research on the exhibition,

probably because it does not fit the standard narrative of the artist’s exclusion and repression under Stalin.92

*Masters of Soviet Photo Art* included contributions from twenty-three photographers and three organizations (Soiuzfoto, Intourist and Moskoopkul’t). The anonymous author(s) of the catalog introduction contrasted it to the 1928 exhibition *Ten Years of Soviet Photography*, which showed 7,000 works from all areas of photographic work, while the current exhibition focused on art photography by Moscow-based photographers and contained fewer than 500 works. The exhibition’s thesis was that photography had surpassed the stage of being a purely mechanical process to become something truly creative. The author(s) also emphasized the importance of artistic photojournalism. In summarizing the history of Soviet photography, the introduction raises the issue of the conflict between October’s formalists and the members of ROPF. It almost reads as though Socialist Realism provided the opportunity for conflict resolution between these “old schools” and the new school of current Soviet photography:

> In light of the great and deep issue of Socialist Realism the inadequacies and weaknesses of the old school and the new school of Soviet artistic photography become clear; on the other hand, their singularity also emerges—that both schools, when considered together, comprise the unity, growth, and richness of the perspectives of Soviet photographic art.93

The tasks of the old schools were to give up their escapism and formalism, while the task of the new school was to move beyond simple “documentary, cliche, naturalism, wiliness.” While acknowledging that Soviet photography still had a ways to go, the introduction concludes with the observation that the new and old schools had already begun to approach one another—“not as a compromise, but organically.”94

Thus, the exhibition united the work of pre-Revolutionary masters like Eremin, formalists like Rodchenko and Langman, and photographers like Fridliand and Shaikhet who were described as photojournalists, while labeling the whole an indication of photography’s new unified direction. Although the exhibition catalog did not include more than one plate per photographer, these plates alone indicate how varied the included works were, including unreformed formalist and Pictorialist works. Eliazar Langman’s *Comrade Ordzhonikidze at the Opening of the Kramatorsk factory* was surely made on the 1932 journey to Kramatorsk that resulted in his professional censure (fig. 5.18). It is strange enough that a photograph from that project would be in exhibition and get printed on a full page of the catalog. But what’s more, the photograph looks distinctly formalist. The low angle offers an unusual view onto the underside of Ordzhonikidze’s chin and the heads of three other people on the tribune are at the height of his stomach and hips, while the microphone towers above his head. His rounded stomach is better lit than his face. The railing at the front of the tribune is at a tilt to the photograph’s edges and the banner behind Ordzhonikidze is so slanted that it is not even clear how it would have appeared to an attendee in front of the raised platform. Compositionally, the figure of the speaker is actually nestled into a small nook between the railing and the banner. Furthermore, the cut-off slogan on the banner (we can surmise “in the construction of industry” on the bottom two lines but the top is too truncated) recalls criticisms of formalist photographs in 1931, during the creative discussion. Members of October had been criticized for cutting off slogans and placing them in inappropriate contexts.\(^95\) Langman could easily be accused of doing the same here. Also, as in many formalist photographs, the human figures are portrayed such their actual spatial relationship is indeterminate—whether standing in a rough group, in two rows, lined up, and so forth. Three or four years earlier, it would have been unimaginable to present this photograph so prominently and call its maker a master of Soviet photography. Formalism had not only survived, but at this moment

\(^95\) L. Mezhericher, “Razvertyvaem tvorcheskuuiu diskusiiu: Obsuzhdaem itogi moskovskoi vystavki fotoreportazha,” *Proletarksa foto* no. 1 (September 1931): 8–12.
it appeared to find its way into the establishment.

Iurii Eremin’s *Moonrise* was in the exhibition but not the catalog. It merits discussion because it became a point of contention later on (fig. 5.19). The moon backlights some filigree grasses or stalks, creating an atypical silhouette because the background is dark and the stalks are thick dark lines with light edges. In the photograph’s hazy focus, the flowers’ rounded edges recall the curve of a quarter moon, echoing the moon in the sky. The blurred edges and focus on the natural world fail to relate at all to the declared tasks of the Soviet photograph, like showing current life and Socialist construction, engaging Party-minded subjects and attitudes, and so on.

How is it possible that an image such as *Moonrise* or *Comrade Ordzhonikidze* could be presented in *Masters of Soviet Photo Art*? Was it the result of Rodchenko’s position on the jury (and the participation of an older-generation Pictorialist, A. Grinberg)? Were photography’s advocates seeking to establish a historical pedigree for the medium? Was nobody paying attention? Or was there a vacuum of applicable guidelines despite the fact that Socialist Realism was supposed to unify artistic production and give it a single, definitive direction?

*Masters of Soviet Photo Art* refutes the claim that 1930s Socialist Realism had a canon or was a visual style imposed on all officially approved work. Moreover, the exhibition was not an exception, but a continuation—or perhaps a consequence—of the search for a new direction in art that began in the latter part of 1934. The exhibition further benefitted from the fact that Socialist Realism’s basic elements were theoretical, so the jury would have had few (if any) stylistic guidelines. Finally, the inclusion of formalists or Pictorialists was not exceptional because it was one of numerous occasions when officials clearly approved of their work. Another indication of this official approval came in the form of an invitation for Eremin and Anatolii Skurikhin to have an audience with Central Committee member Nikolai Bukharin in May 1935. Bukharin was editor of the newspaper *Izvestiia*, which issued the invitation. (Bukahrin also invited Rodchenko to the audience, but
Rodchenko reportedly could not attend, so another editor received him the next day instead.

Eremin and Skurikhin reported that Bukharin viewed and critiqued many of their photographs, and he tasked them with business trips to far-off regions in the USSR. He wanted to see their work upon their return. On one hand, it is clear that Rodchenko and Eremin were often marginalized in the 1930s because their work did not conform to what was most desired for press photography. On the other, it is difficult to reconcile this marginalization with their successes and prominence. Their status was not consistent. On one side were Bukharin’s invitation, Masters of Soviet Photo Art, Rodchenko’s editorship of Soviet Photo, and his and Langman’s work for USSR in Construction, all of which indicate official approval.

On the day of the opening three jury members introduced Masters of Soviet Photo Art in Pravda. The authors Lev Mezhericher, Grigorii Boltianskii, and M. Grinberg (not to be confused with the Pictorialist A. Grinberg) put the selection of photos in terms of the strengths and weaknesses in current Soviet photography. The authors briefly note that formalism and naturalism could not be a part of Socialist Realism, but praise the exhibition for being Socialist Realist on the whole. They also note that the photographs currently being shown in workers’ salons were dominated by landscapes, portraits, still lives, and personal themes, and that this was a reason for including the Pictorialists. This article highlights a major difficulty in determining what Socialist Realism was because official definitions of Socialist Realism emphasized content and subject, while formalists and Pictorialists (whatever their subjects) could not quite look Socialist Realist, and inappropriate genres were tolerated due to their popularity among workers. There was no clarity about which of these categories was most important.

The reviewers who wrote for Izvestiia and Literary Newspaper (Literaturnaia gazeta) referred

96. Iu. Eremin and A. Skurikhin, “Vstrecha s N. I. Bukharinym,” Sovetskoe foto no. 7 (July 1935): 6f. Skurikhin had begun as an amateur and correspondent and then rose to work for USSR in Construction and Pravda.
more explicitly to the political stakes of one’s style. One pointed out that the exhibition showed
formalist and naturalist (that is, Pictorialist) photographs and claimed that the “process of further
development and reconstruction of all creative groups in Soviet art photography in the spirit of
Socialist Realism should be accompanied by a persistent struggle with formalism and naturalism.”
Thus, formalism and naturalism continued to be political mistakes even though their usefulness for
the further development of photography could be openly acknowledged. The former Novyi lef author
Leonid Volkov-Lannit wrote a long, generally positive and balanced review but also included
language connecting photography with its political stakes: “Neutral’ sentiments infect the artist with
representational indifferentism.” An artist’s noncommittal political sentiments would influence his
work and make it look indifferent to Soviet life or work. A reader might surmise that by the same
token, an artist’s leanings could be read in the work. It is not clear whether Volkov-Lannit meant to
single out formalists, Pictorialists, both, or neither.

Izvestiia’s reviewer claimed that the exhibition was very well visited, but the relative number
of discussions printed outside of, and for, Soviet Photo seem to indicate that interest was largely
confined to the photographers’ own peers. M. Grinberg, who exhibited his own work, was chief
secretary in the Central Committee of the Union of Cinema and Photo Workers, and he co-authored
the Pravda announcement, “From the viewpoint of Socialist Realism,” in which he reviewed what
Socialist Realism was and how the works in the exhibition did not fulfill his expectations of
appropriate content. Socialist Realism, he wrote, should show current Soviet reality, which the
exhibition had by and large failed to do, and the artist must take part in Soviet life and his art,
“reflecting the heroics of our life, should be full of a different kind of beauty, one that comes from
the vivacity and optimism” of the USSR’s construction.

nastroenii zarazhaiut khudozhnika izobrazitel’nym indiferentizmom [sic].”
Grinberg took issue with the exhibition’s themes, saying that they were not oriented towards events (sobytiinyi). For example, Rodchenko’s photographs of the Volga Canal showed important subjects but not events. Finally, Grinberg shifted from content to style when he reminded his readers about the two dangers of formalism and naturalism. Here he reproached Langman for his formalist photographs. Semyon Fridliand, himself a jury member, called the combination of lyrical, formalist, and production photographs in Masters of Soviet Photo Art “unprincipled.” Reviews like these two, where the authors’ intentions are opaque, present difficulties in analysis. Perhaps Grinberg and Fridliand knew that the tone in the arts was shifting again and decided to establish a position more in line with it. Perhaps they were indicating that their voices as members of the jury had not been respected, or they only held ceremonial roles. Perhaps they were simply practicing self-criticism. In a photography scene dominated by state agencies and reflecting the day’s political maneuverings, the motivations of a single actor can seem impossible to discern. Grinberg’s and Fridliand’s reviews are best taken as signs that detailed discussion was only desired in the specialist press, and of a broader shift in reception among those specialists. These reviews also show that even officials in the photography scene improvised their definitions.

Soviet Photo printed several reviews in series, almost as a list, in August. They encompass a diversity of reactions, but are notable less for thoughtfulness than for how they confirm that these individual positions had not changed under Socialist Realism. Sergei Morozov, who was generally one of Arkadii Shaikhet’s supporters, wondered whether the surprisingly poor selection from among his work was the fault of the jury’s oversight or the artist’s poor sense of what to submit. Shaikhet, in turn, took Rodchenko’s side against some criticism previously lobbed by Mezhericher, suggested that Langman should study his subjects better, and wanted specific criticism on each of his photographs from Morozov. Boris Ignatovich accused the organizers of working with a “closed list”

of participants that excluded young photographers (presumably including himself), prompting Mezhericher to accuse him of returning to the rhetoric of pre-1932. A. Grinberg, who had also served on the jury, claimed that the exhibition should have shown more contemporary subjects like the building of the “New Moscow.” M. Grinberg closed the discussion by brushing away all the criticisms as having bypassed the main point: that despite the improvements that were still needed, *Masters of Soviet Photo Art* had successfully raised the awareness for, and status of, photography.\(^{102}\) With all these viewpoints and few in-depth discussions of the actual works as a group—or even a description of what the exhibition looked like—the response was as equivocal as the selection of works had been.

Rodechenko had the last word about *Masters of Soviet Photo Art*. He angrily rejected the way that Mezhericher lumped him and Eremin into one politico-aesthetic category, pointing out that the fault in the renewed left/right debate lay with Mezhericher himself for raising the terms again. He questioned all the criticisms of his photography, given that it had been printed in all the major newspapers and illustrated journals, just not in *Soviet Photo*. He also argued that if his photography was stylistically and ideologically wrong, Mezhericher should have said something during the jury’s selection period. Rodechenko went on to criticize that images were labeled “Socialist Realist” without having to contain visually identifiable Soviet elements. He condemned *Soviet Photo’s* critical practice as “formalist, irresponsible, and unprincipled.” Finally, he invited all photojournalists to conduct criticism in a friendly manner and work together toward forming Socialist photography.\(^{103}\)

Rodechenko’s review, like the others, cannot be used to examine the reception of the exhibition in the usual art historical sense because speech was not free. Just as the photographs

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themselves were presumed to hold political meaning, so did any critic’s printed statement. Instead, these texts serve to illuminate what range of responses was permissible and how the discourse on photography changed, if it did, following the exhibition. *Masters of Soviet Photo Art* began and ended in a stalemate of old and new schools of photography, but on the level of discourse, the labels left and right, formalist and naturalist had risen back to the surface. The conflict-ridden exhibition outcome was that photographers had not united, they followed no general aesthetic line, and appeared not to receive consistent guidelines from the state agencies that were nominally in control. The newspaper reviews and Rodchenko’s closing article all acknowledge these circumstances. Rodchenko’s article in particular recalls self-criticism: he was a member of the collective of photographers who called out their own (or their collective’s) errors and pointed out how improvements could be undertaken. Considering this self-defense and his text “Reconstruction of the Artist” through this lens offers a productive way of understanding the role he played in an unfree art world, and how a person in his position could find ways of appearing to conform enough. To be clear: I do not claim that Rodchenko or anyone else was able to retain his or her own voice through these review articles or self-critical statements. But they used them to position themselves as artists because doing so was a matter of political, and therefore professional, survival. While these texts evidence the pressure that the state put on artists, they also show that artists were not powerless to answer.

When Rodchenko presented “Reconstruction of the Artist” at the Moscow Cinema House (*Dom kino*) and in *Soviet Photo* he used it to address his work generally and not to respond to *Masters of Soviet Photo Art*. Eremin, who came after him, titled his contribution “Landscape and Exotica,” in which he responded to criticisms of the photograph *Moonrise* from the exhibition. Eremin still stood by his early fixation on landscape. He told of receiving a Leica in 1926 with the charge to

104. The discussion was held on six evenings that only partially overlapped with the exhibition run: April 13, 19, and 22, and May 3, 9, and 14, 1936.
photograph people, and that he had done so since. He recalled how painful it was to have to leave
behind the photography of old gardens, which he saw as work done for posterity, and how struck he
was by Mezhericher’s accusation that he was counter-revolutionary. Eremin recalled a recent trip to
the Dagestan region, on which Bukharin had sent him, and the cultural customs he saw there.
Then—and here the reader learns that the Soviet Photo article is a record of what was said in front of
an audience—Mezhericher interrupted with test-like questions (“And what did you feel when you
saw their lives?”). Eremin quickly answered Mezhericher’s questions and then re-emphasized his
intention to continue working on landscapes. Unlike Rodchenko, Eremin did not say he was
reconstructed as an artist:

As for reconstruction, for those people who see it lightly, reconstructing oneself is an easy
business. [...] One could say, of course, why should I photograph moonlit landscapes,
because we are not accustomed to sighing for the moon. But I love nature and I think that
even the driest of people in [state-sponsored] vacation homes love to stroll under the moon,
enjoy looking at the moon and even kiss under the moon. I will continue to work even more
persistently on creating artistic Soviet landscapes and expressions of our flourishing
country. 105

In a sense, Eremin’s response is similar to Rodchenko’s defense of formalist perspectives. Each
artist argued that his subject or his perspective was legitimized by its belonging to some aspect of
Soviet citizens’ lives. It was a transparent, and not altogether successful, attempt to fit their work
into a dominant framework. Seen in the historical and cultural context, it looks like a flimsy excuse.
Yet it would be simplistic to conclude that Eremin and Rodchenko failed to grasp, or did not care
enough about, how serious and constrictive the definitions of Soviet photography were. Both
pretended to brush away volumes’ worth of discourse that defined parameters for the Soviet
photograph rather than formulate an equally extensive rebuttal. Given that there was a distinct
danger of losing commissions or coming under more pressure to conform, it may well have been
wiser to pay lip service to ideology than to expand on their respective aesthetic approaches.

At the same time as Eremin’s and Rodchenko’s practiced self-criticism in their public statements at the Cinema House, self-criticism was becoming a method of the Party Purge and the Terror. As Oleg Kharkhordin has observed,

Sometime in the mid-1930s a deadly configuration fused the practices of self-criticism and purging and assigned them both to a subject that until then had not used them to their fullest extent—the kollektiv. According to doctrinal writings, the kollektiv knew a lot and did a lot; now it was entrusted with the activity of knowing itself in order to cleanse itself. [...] Heretofore self-criticism was primarily practiced by the Party [...] During the years of the Great Terror this procedure changed: each kollektiv had to decide which of its members were to blame for any failures in production and act accordingly. The whole collective body had to participate in the process of deliberation and then seal its results by vote. The reality of who was at fault [...] was to be established and approved by the organization itself.106

Kharkhordin establishes that the “merger of self-criticism and purge” began in 1933, as instructed in Party pamphlets, and it was implemented more consequentially beginning early in 1937.107 But to what extent was this development in the Party’s activity really a model for an event like a discussion among photographers at a cultural institution? It can, for example, help understand the format of discussion evenings at the Cinema House by providing a possible comparison for the event. Still, there is no indication that the Cinema House evenings resulted in votes against anyone. The Party or a collective could vote to expel members but it is not clear that the assembled photographers were all members of a particular collective from which one could be expelled. Censure was meted out by one’s employer, as happened to Langman. If that is the case, then the consequences of the evenings’ criticisms are softened considerably but are also difficult to gauge. It is well known that some photographers were repressed, but it is difficult to know what form these repressions had and who, exactly, decided upon or enforced them—a kollektiv, an arm of the state arts bureaucracy, specially assigned members of the political police, and so on.

As Soviet Photo unintentionally made clear, at the Cinema House Eremin used the structure of the evening’s discussion to deflect criticism and at the same time he played with the standards that

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107. Ibid., 154–161.
were applied to photography. He submitted *Bazaar in Samarkand* for discussion and it was criticized for the hazy air and light, for looking romantic and exotic, and for being shot too close up (fig. 5.20).

The specific activities of the people in the photograph are unclear and their dress appears traditional. Yet, when he had to address the photograph’s inappropriateness, Eremin offered the patently absurd answer “It’s obviously a communal farmers’ market” (*Eto zhe kolhoznyi rynok*), and the audience laughed. 108 This is a far cry from the model Kharkhordin describes, in which self-criticism and collective censure were the methods of purge. We cannot know now whether Eremin was facetious or whether he turned the tables on his critics by forcing them to undertake the comical exercise of explaining the obvious: in what ways a traditional Central Asian bazaar and Soviet communal farm activity do not look alike. Regardless, it is hard to read this discussion and find that Eremin was only repressed with no chance to respond, as some scholarship would have it. 109

Nonetheless, the narrative of total aesthetic control combined with the direct threat to one’s safety has established itself in art history writing. As Olga Sviblova tells it,

Iurii Eremin locked himself in the bathroom of a large communal apartment and defiantly made prints of his favorite Pictorialist photographs in tiny format. Heavily criticized photographs could be enough proof to justify repressions, and developing them in small format was a possibility to avoid [repression] and simultaneously a protest against the imposed Socialist Realist canon [*sic*]. It was an idiosyncratic gesture of resistance. 110

Of course, a photographer might lock himself into the bathroom not only to avoid disturbance during work, but because light would interfere with the developing process if someone opened the door. More to the point, however, is a comparison with how other photographers worked at the same time. When Margaret Bourke-White wanted to develop some 800 negatives in Moscow at the end of her 1930 journey, she was surprised to find that using a private bathroom, which she had

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hoped would help her avoid the inconvenience of waiting on a time slot in a shared laboratory, was
difficult because it was a luxury. As she described it, “even those who were recognized throughout
Russia as the greatest of Soviet camera artists did not have a corner that was enough their own so
that they could lend it to me.” Eremin could have avoided developing and printing in shared labs
in order to avoid scrutiny, as Sviblova suggests, and perhaps he did not have permission to use labs
reserved for formally approved photojournalists. This would indeed be evidence of his
disadvantaged, marginalized position in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it could have allowed
him to work at his own pace and do as much or as little as he wanted, and it may even be an
indication that he had the freedom to commandeer a bathroom long enough to develop
photographs. Given the material shortages of the time, it is also worth considering whether he had
the privilege of private equipment. One thing is certain: Eremin’s resistance was public and
determined. He recounted having an opportunity to conform and emphatically choose not to do so.
This example helps break down the received history that Soviet artists in the 1930s were either
browbeaten into submission to the state’s wishes or fell into obscurity. Eremin both resisted official
pressure where he could and maintained a public profile, moving in a gray area of uncertain political
status on one hand, and continued commissions on the other.

Eremin’s public resistance to the demands placed on Soviet photography happened at a time
when the rejection of formalism and naturalism was renewed in all of the arts. Prominent articles in
Pravda rejected opera, theatre, and cinema work by Dmitrii Shostakovich, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and
Sergei Eisenstein respectively. Painters and photographers did not find themselves quite so
prominently targeted, but were still impacted because, as had happened in the past, what applied to
one field applied to others as well. As Platon Kerzhentsev, one of the USSR’s top arts officials,
explained, it would be a “gross mistake” (grubaia oshibka) to think that these critical newspaper

111. Margaret Bourke-White, Eyes on Russia (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 128.
articles are only about film and opera. They were in fact, he explained, about the fact that Soviet art should be true, understandable, and simple (правдивый, понятный и простой) and that one should not replace these things with a petty-bourgeois emphasis on innovation (новаторство). The problem with innovation, Soviet Photo expanded, was that it would lead to exaggerated “originalism for the sake of originality.” This criticism is familiar from the negative polemics published against October in 1931–32 and it reinforces the fact that, although Soviet Photo acknowledged that one could not mechanically apply the measures and norms of other arts to photography, the journal did just that by borrowing standard anti-formalist and anti-naturalist language.112

Like the formalist-proletarian creative discussion of the early 1930s, the anti-formalist campaign of 1936 was adopted by Soviet Photo but not in any way initiated there; however, it was able to attach directly to the discussion of formalism, which had never fully stopped, only drastically slowed after the 1932 restructuring decree. In 1936, Grishanin listed five characteristic points of formalism:

1. condescends to the real world
2. rejects the world as a whole and excerpts just an element of it, such as light, sound, surface, etc.
3. ignores the idea behind the content or combines it with one’s own indifference to lived reality
4. made only for the artist’s own audience, not the broader masses
5. denies the creations of the people as something just trying to be art.113

As we see in these points, the basic criticisms of formalism had remained the same: distance from the people and overweening interest in artistic aspects.

In line with the early-1930s juxtaposition of left and right, with Proletarian Photo in the center, it was now formalism and naturalism that supposedly opened up the middle ground for Soviet Photo.

Naturalism did not correspond entirely to what was called the “right” in photography at the decade’s beginning, although there was overlap in some of the photographers who were named and in the accusation that they were apolitical. Rather than being associated with pre-Revolutionary movements such as Pictorialism, naturalism, according to its detractors, made a different ideological mistake: it failed to include identifiably Soviet elements in straightforward realist images. A naturalist image failed to be propagandistic because the photographer had simply accepted what was before the lens without considering how to add elements that would make the right, strong statement. To practice realism, on the other hand, was to make a choice from among all the things that one could depict.

As Commissar for Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii had already established, a Socialist Realist artist not only recognized the world, but sought to change it because he knew that nature and human society existed in a dialectical relationship. Naturalism was not dialectical, so it could not be ideologically appropriate in a Marxist system. Grishanin, who wrote prolifically on the subject, developed a list of naturalist characteristics:

1. disregard for artistic form
2. no culture of tonal, linear or perspectival composition
3. primitivism, superficiality of observation, random depiction of facts
4. naked informationalism (golaiainformationnost’) and indifference to the idea underlying the image
5. contrivance or adaptability (prisoposoblenchestvo), vulgarity (poshost’), distortion of reality.

For Grishanin, the greatest threat was now naturalism, not formalism as before. While he praised the Leica, he also noted that it made it possible to take photographs without thinking about it, as was
not the case when using older cameras requiring greater technical literacy.\textsuperscript{118} Whether Grishanin meant it that way or not, his criticism of the Leica as an enabler implicated naturalism with Western influences as well.

The renewed discussion of formalism and naturalism did not just find reflection in a number of political newspapers and specialized journals. It also directly involved photographers at the discussions held at the Cinema House, as we have seen with the examples of Rodchenko and Eremin. The photographers in attendance represented all possible directions of art photography. Soviet Photo’s report on the discussions was superficial, critiquing certain works, as we have already seen, but not offering the level of detailed definitions that Grishanin did in his own article.\textsuperscript{119} In general, the published sources make it difficult to discern what, if any, direct consequences came about from the formalism-naturalism discussion. The discussion was not fruitful as pertained to Socialist Realism, because it provided only the simplistic negative definition that Socialist Realism could be neither formalist nor naturalist.

Sergei Morozov rose to greater prominence with a number of significant and less polemical articles in the wake of the formalism-naturalism discussion. He noted that the Cinema House discussions had been weak in terms of establishing a set of positive characteristics for realism and only poorly illuminated the question of “nationality in art” initiated by Pravda. While Morozov revisited the discussion of formalism and warned that factography, as one aspect of it, was not yet finished, he also praised Rodchenko and Langman for decidedly turning towards realism. Morozov even declined to name any naturalists and disagreed with Grishanin and Mezhericher, who had warned that naturalism lay in the nature of the photographic medium; Morozov attributed it to the artist’s decisions.\textsuperscript{120} Following this introductory discussion, he focused his consideration of Socialist

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} S. Morozov, “Na putiakh k realizmu, k narodnosti: K itogam diskussii o formalizme i naturalizme v fotoiskusstve,”
Realism on two major factors, the question of nationality (narodnost’) and what he termed the “culture of the photo-artist” (kul’tura fotokhudoznika).\textsuperscript{121}

For Morozov, the primary definition of nationality was that it must show the victorious people of the USSR. Expanding on that point with an example, he went on to state that nationality meant photographing people living a distinctly Soviet life or engaged in Soviet activity as in Georgii Petrusov’s \textit{Lunch on the Field} (fig. 5.21). In Petrusov’s photograph, farmers enjoy their meal while sitting in gender-segregated groups at the edges of large picnic blankets. Their farming equipment and the necessary horses are in the background, as is a small wooden hut with a flag, a large portrait of Stalin, and a slogan. We see a Soviet collective farm with all the former peasants eating together under Stalin’s gaze, presumably after working together. Morozov’s second definition of nationality was the “expression of the deepest ideas, aspirations, and feelings that are associated with the people and the most typical manifestations of life.”\textsuperscript{122} Morozov acknowledged that Soviet photojournalism had not yet arrived at that capability, but saw promising work in that direction by Max Alpert, Arkadii Shaikhet, and Sosfenov. And while he admitted that the issue of photographers’ cultural level had already been exhausted (naskuchivshaia fraza), Morozov still found it necessary to return to it. He emphasized that technical training would not suffice and that the history of art was important if photographers wanted to avoid making “static” work. Finally, Morozov confirmed that the answers to all the open questions in photography were to be found in photographers’ journeys (komandirovki) to capture major subjects.\textsuperscript{123} In effect, Morozov was able to provide an underlying idea to photography (nationality expressed according to some artistic principles) and a method (major excursions to important places) without hemmings in the stylistic possibilities.

\textsuperscript{121} Sovetskoe foto no. 5–6 (May–June 1936): 3–10, 15–16.
\textsuperscript{122} S. Morozov, “Na put’akh k realizmu, k narodnosti,” 9.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 10, 16.
Reconciliation

In 1936 and 1937, two things happened to resolve some of the major debates in Soviet photography. Sergei Morozov began a reconsideration of documentary photography, with implications for propaganda and art photography, and *USSR in Construction* printed photographs that appear as a throwback to Pictorialist, pre-Five-Year-Plan styles. An examination of these two incidences further undercuts the long-held notion that the introduction of Socialist Realism meant the exclusion of other artistic methods or styles. But Socialist Realist practice led not so much to enforced conformity as to the absorption of earlier positions.

Morozov’s reconsideration of documentary photography is convoluted and peppered with terms that were heavily invested with meaning in the context of *Soviet Photo*. As a result, it reads like he first carefully weighed how to associate photographers’ names with reportage, artistic photography, Soviet photography, photo-reporter, document, and formalism. Then, despite the syntactical tangle that resulted from years of wrangling over these words’ meanings—or perhaps because of it—Morozov established a clear distance between his position and the formalism-naturalism debates and the “previous tendency of certain Soviet photographic theorists to associate the creative problems of photo art with the issue of documentary photography. This tendency revealed one type of formalism.” In essence, he was saying that theorists writing for *Soviet Photo* who wrote negatively about documentary were wrong, and in fact were formalists themselves. For Morozov, such theorizing “arrested the development of Soviet photo art.”

Morozov then praised documentary in press photography:

> ... in that field [photographing events], we demand of photography a sharp eye, watchfulness, flexibility, technical knowledge, and composition. P. Novitskii, F. Kislov, N. Petrov, V. Musinov, V. Temin, who have varied qualities and length of experience, are excellent photojournalists. They do not set their minds on schemes requiring lengthy consideration. Their strength lies in the ability to come to grips with the historical, unrepeatable minute.

Furthermore,

Soviet documentary photography is growing. Photo-reportage is mastering new methods: high flexibility, the capturing of images at a distance by camera and so on. The informational photograph has become the foundational mode of newspaper illustration.¹²⁶

Morozov tried to establish a positive association with documentary rather than rejecting the photographers or their work. Instead of using Socialist Realism to close down the possibilities of photography, Morozov then opened them further by suggesting that documentary was a first step to making not (only) propaganda images, as others has argued before, but art: “...the discussion is about the big themes of the photo-kartina, about the works carried out by artists, which by virtue of their impact on the viewer could be compared to the works created in the other arts.”¹²⁷ Morozov’s writing not only established a different language for discussing photography, removing the specific political language that accompanied criticism during the cultural revolution. He also used this argument to reconcile existing paradigms (documentary) with the return to more conservative artistic modes. Large-scale commemorative paintings (kartiny), reminiscent of the art historical tradition of history painting but adapted for the Stalinist context, were the favored genre in the 1930s in the USSR, so by using the term foto-kartina Morozov sought to establish a direct connection between photography and the more highly respected medium of painting. This represents a different understanding of the term than when it was used in the late 1920s, when foto-kartina had been used to speak of a photographic picture in the context of Western art history.¹²⁸ Morozov was as political as his predecessors but redirected discussion.

Morozov appeared to rehabilitate documentary while pushing photojournalism to the sidelines, not writing anything truly negative about it. Implicitly, he argued that one should see the photographer as a creative artist, not as an extension of the mechanical apparatus of the camera;

¹²⁷ S. Morozov, “Protiv kanonov v fotoiskusstve,” 3.
¹²⁸ See the discussion of the 1928 series “Paths of Photo-Culture” in Chapter Three.
hence his rejection of Grishanin’s and Mezhericher’s claims that naturalism was inherent to photography. Thus, the maker of a foto-kartina would not be excessively dependent on the apparatus, like a formalist (factographer) or naturalist. Morozov wrote numerous foundational works on the history of Soviet photography in the post-World War II era, thus his attempt to align photography with art, rather than journalism, had its roots in discussions from the mid-1930s but continued even after the war.  

In a second example for how Soviet photography re-established rejected traditions, Eremin’s Gurzuf appeared as a high-quality, full-page print in USSR in Construction in the summer of 1938 (fig. 5.22). A little over a year had passed since he was called out for naturalism at the Cinema House discussion evenings, and three years had gone by since that exact photograph was especially criticized in Soviet Photo for being a landscape étude. Of course, in USSR in Construction it was still the same image. It was printed mirror-inverted from the version in Soviet Photo and with more intense tonal contrasts in an issue devoted to Artek, a summer camp near Yalta for exemplary Pioneers, young children in the Communist Youth. Artek is not visible in the background; in fact, the higher quality of this printing even makes a church discernible in the background. Other images in that issue show idyllic scenes of seashore relaxation. Eremin’s photograph is a part of that idyllic image, not a contrast to it, nor a warning, nor a symbol of the past. It is impossible that the editors of USSR in Construction could have missed the criticism of Gurzuf, or of Eremin himself, in Soviet Photo. The decision to include it constituted a rehabilitation of that particular photograph, and it also promised a more open approach to landscape photography. Gurzuf’s context—a reportage about a typically Soviet institution (summer camp) for exemplary Soviet children—seems to compensate for its failure to look Soviet in and of itself. The photograph also shows that USSR in Construction, whose byline cast it a “journal of a new type,” was not opposed to including old work in reportages about

current-day projects and places.

Was this—old material, improvised contexts—the editorial practice of the USSR’s most lauded, and purportedly most advanced, illustrated journal, both before Socialist Realism (recall the worker from Prokhorovka in Chapter One), and after? Scholars use *USSR in Construction* to gauge what photographic Socialist Realism looked like and meant in the 1930s, and given the prominence and oeuvre of many head artists and photographers, it truly was at the artistic forefront. It was visual propaganda with a modernizing and forward-looking aesthetic. But where old photographs were used without compunction and were not marked with the years they were actually taken, the emergent image is also composite, compromising—not morally but in the sense of not following a stylistic dogma—and heterogeneous. Eremin clearly dissented from the state’s position on what photography should be and do, but the official art scene could accept his work and effectively present it as Socialist Realist. What does this tell us about photography and publishing practices in the USSR in the 1930s more broadly? Were sanctioned practices not fully in step with official rhetoric? Was Eremin’s inclusion a cynical, pre-emptive strategy to silence his dissent by making his work appear to conform to official preferences? The answer is probably neither, but somewhere in between factors like these, Eremin’s status as a senior member in the field, and the case-by-case decisions that editors at *USSR in Construction* made.

In addition to their uses in re-establishing landscape and portraiture genres for Socialist Realist work, the *Worker from Prokhorovka* and *Gurzuf* are two photographs that may represent a broader point, namely the re-orientation along the lines of mass taste. In its earlier years *Soviet Photo* repeatedly implored amateur photographers to renounce landscape and conventional portraiture. Occasionally an author might acknowledge that these pleas were ignored and the journal was failing to reform tastes. Yet not even the nation’s most prominent editors for the illustrated press abstained. Now the landscape was embraced in both *Soviet Photo* and *USSR in Construction*. This acceptance, as
much as any official rhetoric, demonstrates that a major visual aspect of Socialist Realism came from below, and had never disappeared during the whole period of trying to recast viewers’ (especially amateurs’) tastes. Soviet Photo re-embraced more than just visual practices, too: in 1937 the journal provided instructions on how to print portraits with brome oil, returning to a technique that had been rejected in the late 1920s because of its associations with Pictorialism, romantic images, and the studio-based professional work of the pre-Revolutionary era. Socialist Realism permitted, perhaps even demanded, that photographers and publishers give in to what the public had apparently never stopped preferring.

With photographic Socialist Realism, there was room for a photographer to maneuver but no predictability. For USSR in Construction to print Gurzuf did not mean that Eremin had become an official artist. In order to understand the positions that figures such as Eremin, Rodchenko, Langman, and others occupied in the mid-1930s, we must keep in mind that nothing was black-and-white and their status was constantly shifting. Although in the mid-1930s Soviet Photo, and by extension the state, criticized figures such as Rodchenko and Eremin, there also seem to have been conciliatory moments. Soon after the Cinema House discussion evenings, Eremin was once again sent on a photographic journey, this time to Central Asia, and he published articles on his travels. Rodchenko had difficulty finding work and securing income—but when he did work, it was prominently published. He was criticized by Soviet Photo’s authors—but occupied a position on the editorial board. He was shut out of the main artists’ union—but got elected president of a city artists’ committee. He was a jury member for Masters of Soviet Photo Art. Eremin was criticized as a throwback—but perhaps he could teach young photographers about landscape. He could not

131. One was even put into print; see “O formalizme i naturalizme v fotoiskusstve: Diskussiia v Dome kino,” Sovetskoe foto no. 4 (1936): 18.
develop his photographs in a group laboratory—but others might have seen his access to a bathroom and equipment as a privilege. He had to answer publicly for his romantic images—but seems to have had the audience at the Cinema House on his side. He was honored by Bukharin’s invitation and sent on important journeys. These shifts were perverse, they evidence the way in which the state played with artists, alternatively applying pressure and bestowing opportunity. Still, Rodchenko and Eremin knew they were walking fine lines and did so with humor, as when Rodchenko photographed and exhibited the seat of a worker’s pants seen from below, or in Eremin’s answer “It’s obviously a communal farmers’ market.”

Sergei Morozov’s 1936–1937 interventions showed that orienting photography ever more strongly along the lines of contemporary painting provided a way out of the stylistic conflicts that had run in circles ever since the debate surrounding the now-defunct October. But his interventions also shifted attention away from what makes the medium unique. In the course of these new definitions and priorities, older photographers and artists like Eremin, Rodchenko, and Langman were still marginalized but not muzzled. The formalist, or Pictorialist, or landscape photograph could find more acceptance at the same time as the photographers of these images occupied precarious positions. As long as a dissenting photographer did not have opportunity to publicize his or her own theoretical or analytic work, counter-arguments were stifled because the dominant rhetoric had already subsumed them. By absorbing contradictory stylistic or genre positions, the official line of Socialist Realism actually had a method for erasing contradiction but it lacked theoretical depth.

When Socialist Realism was declared the official method for the arts in the summer of 1934, Soviet Photo was the only professional and popular journal left in which it was theorized and where editors used examples of good or bad photographs to teach readers. Close reading of Soviet Photo

1934): 19f.
through 1937 shows that while Socialist Realist theorists pushed for certain standard elements such as Party-mindedness or efficiency, these were insufficient for building an understanding of what Socialist Realist photography could look like. Work structures (brigades, journeys) and reports about it were a stronger way of conveying the method and its results. The renewal of debates on formalism and naturalism did not offer fruitful fodder for the further development of Socialist Realism, but appeared instead to hinder it. With the reevaluation of landscape photography, photographers and theorists could justifiably claim that Socialist Realism had brought about a change in their practice. What they never resolved was the fundamental question of how or whether Socialist Realism could and should balance content and theme, visual style, and the invisible aspects of how a photographer went about his commissions.
Conclusion: Why Stop in 1937?

At a May 1937 meeting of the cumbersomely named “Central Office of the Creative Photo Section of the Central Committee of the Union of Cinema and Photo Workers” (Tsentral’nyi biuro tvorcheskoj fotosektsi TsK soiuza kinofotorabotnikov), Grigori Boltianskii spoke at length about the “system of counterrevolutionary Trotskyite theories” supposedly dragged into the field of photography by the “enemy of the people” Lev Mezhericher over the course of the preceding ten years. The attendees of the meeting then discussed the “unprincipled groupism and eliquishness” (besprintsipnaia gruppovshchina i zamknutost’) of the Union of Cinema and Photo Workers and, in the spirit of self-criticism, admitted to a list of failings. They included the failure to attend to amateur photographers, the incapacity of many members to work at all, and the conceit edness of the “masters” of Soviet photography.¹

Soviet Photo, which by then was the only significant forum for writing about photography in the Soviet Union, disseminated the news of Mezhericher’s fall from grace. Over the course of several months, numerous items in Soviet Photo expanded on Mezhericher’s crimes and eventually began referring to statements he made as early as 1930 in order to use them as proof against him.² Mezhericher had previously been a member of the Photo Section’s leadership (Boltianskii was its chairman) but he was removed from his post and arrested at some point in 1937; it is unclear whether his arrest precipitated his professional denunciation, or was a consequence of it. He was convicted in court—probably of counter-revolutionary activity, though the published record is

unclear—and sentenced to five years’ incarceration. In 1938 he was accused of crimes supposedly committed in the Gulag, tried again, and executed. All of these events could perhaps be taken as proof of a long-held belief about the arts in the USSR during the Purges: that debates and government decisions of the early 1930s were part of a planned long-term campaign that could only have ended with clamping down on creative freedoms, and that they bear some kind of direct connection to the repression, imprisonment, and/or death of some arts workers (like Mezhericher) during the period 1937–38. This story could be an easy cap to a long study of photography in the Soviet Union, 1926–37, and its changing relationship to the country’s politics.

Instead I have sought to show that no such historical arc exists. As the history of Soviet Photo demonstrates, the politics of the USSR’s photography scene changed dramatically—and more than once—during the first two Five-Year Plans (1928–1937), even if there were consistencies in theory or working methods. The priorities and projects of any given moment—the Union of the Pen and the Photo in late 1928, the dissolution and attempted consolidation of artistic work in 1932, or the introduction of Socialist Realism for art photography and photojournalism in 1934—were not part of a foreseeable plan any more than Mezhericher’s downfall was. While each shift in Soviet Photo’s (or the state’s) photography project defined itself in contradistinction to the trends or priorities that came before, the discussion always revolved around photography, its role, and its fundamental character. By contrast, neither the larger context nor the content of the accusations against Mezhericher was a discussion of creative principles, how to make propaganda, Socialist Realism, or another topic that could have touched upon the development of photography’s role or meaning. His fall from favor was decoupled from any discussion that dealt with the arts or aesthetics on a well-grounded, substantive level: it was part of a larger social and political context that changed rapidly.

3. http://www.vgd.ru/M/Megericher.htm, cited in Nataliia Zakovyrina, Osobennosti razvitiia sovetskoi fotozhurnalistikii 1920–1930-kh gg. i zhurnal Sovetskoe foto (Diss. kandidat nauk, State University of Saint Petersburg, 2007), 239. Zakovyrina does not cite the date she used the web link, which was no longer valid when I attempted it in 2012 and 2013.
and was unpredictable.

Mezhericher was denounced, imprisoned, and executed during the Great Terror (also referred to as the Great Purges) of 1937–38, when “citizens were exhorted to watch out for spies and saboteurs and to unmask hidden ‘enemies of the people’—a term applied primarily to disgraced Communists who had formerly held responsible administrative positions.” The Terror as a legal, social, and political phenomenon is too large and complex to discuss at any length here, but a few central facets are key to any understanding of how Mezhericher lost his position and ultimately his life, and why I argue that the professional marginalization of figures like Rodchenko and Eremin should not be associated with it—especially in the absence of specific evidence of how precisely they may have been threatened after the formalism/naturalism discussion died down in 1936.

Purges of the Communist Party ranks were not unusual in the USSR. In the pre-World War II period, they took place in 1921, 1929, and 1933–36. The Great Terror campaign of 1937–38 began after the third purge ended and had a far broader reach than a Party purge because it targeted people from the entire population. This is significant because although the 1936 formalism-naturalism debate took place simultaneously with the politically motivated violence of the Party purge, criticism of specific photographers did not necessarily (at that moment) cross over into that violence.

One of the earliest stages of a Party purge was the call for denunciations, which were presented out in the open (at meetings, for example). In the Russian Empire and the USSR there existed a long tradition of denunciation, in which ordinary people could report wrongdoing to higher authorities. It was common for denunciations to be sent to officials or bureaucrats, but they

also could appear in newspapers. Mezhericher’s exposure in Soviet Photo thus seems to conform to common practice, as does the identification of the person—Boltianskii—who delivered much of the condemning content. Furthermore, the discussion of Mezhericher’s crimes by his professional peers shows that there may have existed an institutionalized method, or even particular staff, for accumulating and reporting denunciations of photographers and photography critics, much as there was a person at the Writers Union who determined the bad fortunes of some of the writers arrested during the Terror.

What this means in the history of Soviet Photo is that after the journal became the official organ for discussions of photography, its role in publicizing (or participating in) a denunciation was a given and need not be ascribed to the editors’ slant or an influential person.

Despite the basic similarities between Mezhericher’s downfall and how a purge was conducted, the difference between the limited range of a purge’s impact and the broader reach of the Terror matters because there is a noticeable difference in how they were reflected on Soviet Photo’s pages. The Party purge of 1933–36 barely registered and when it did, it appeared even less relevant for photography than other political campaigns of the 1930s. It was mentioned with less frequency and there were few attempts to draw connections between purging Party members and taking good photographs. In 1937, on the other hand, Soviet Photo changed. The repetitive discussion of Mezhericher’s crimes was accompanied by calls for increased “vigilance” and warnings about the danger of others in the photo scene potentially acting as he did. This, and political language related to the accusation of Trotskyite action, took precedence over discussions about photography itself.

While I will not venture to speculate on why Mezhericher became a target, or what Boltianskii’s motives may have been, this much is clear: his downfall does not appear in any way to be about photography. There was no coherent discussion about how his ideas made him an enemy of the

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people.

*Soviet Photo* also ignored creative and artistic issues more broadly in 1937 and beyond. There were fewer images: the mezzotints lost their variety, and there were almost no photographs embedded in the text as illustrations, nor examples of amateurs’ work, nor items for discussion. In examples that I cited in the Introduction and Chapter One, street scenes and portraits became unsurprising and repetitive. Furthermore, although each issue contained as many credited written articles as before, they stopped offering food for thought. The articles read as though nobody wished to endanger him- or herself by promoting a viewpoint or thesis that could be interpreted in multiple ways, or could be argued against. By the end of the year, only one editor’s name still appeared on the masthead; the others had disappeared.

In Chapter Five I discussed *Pravda’s* concern and warnings regarding reused photographs and “falsified” captions. In 1937 *Soviet Photo* wrote about this issue more shrilly and raised the stakes of misrepresenting the “truth” of a photograph. S. Rubinshtein of Kiev, photographer for the newspaper *Bolshevik*, had received an assignment to photograph a family of exemplary workers (Stakhanovites) on New Year’s Eve and later reported that he found a group of people celebrating and received their permission to photograph them. *Bolshevik* accepted the photograph and prepared it for printing before someone realized it did not depict Stakhanovites. Instead it showed a group of people engaging in excessive alcohol consumption, in which the photographer himself had taken part. *Soviet Photo* commented, “This is not a mistake, but rather a crime, the conscious deception of the editors.”

What was once a transgression in captioning had become a full-blown crime. The actions of an individual were now perceived to be more threatening, not the instability of the photograph as a document.

As a consequence of the increasing silence about content, all discussion about Socialist

Realism, formalism, naturalism, documentary, and propaganda came to a standstill. There was no further development of how Socialist Realism should look or how the more theoretical aspects of the method might become visible. Readers and photographers could orient themselves along the photographs that were printed, but they were very nearly inimitable: how should an ordinary amateur or a photojournalist make portraits of Stalin and other leaders, or major industrial sites, or exemplary workers? *Soviet Photo*’s project had once been to unify the work and subjects of all the USSR’s photographers, but ten years later the result was an unachievable suggestion of what was ideal (political leaders, grand building projects), paired with reluctant acceptance of what the masses were actually doing (landscape and portraiture). Photography was finally becoming a mass medium thanks to the beginning of camera manufacture, but the best Soviet subjects were not necessarily proletarian anymore and they could not be of a mass nature because of their very focus. This is ironic, given the Soviet tenet that art must be accessible to the masses: the meaning of Stalin portraits was accessible, and the means of making one were becoming more accessible, but opportunities to do so were not. The traditions of portraiture and landscape, long reviled as bourgeois or pre-Revolutionary, were the most accessible of all.

The guidance that *Soviet Photo* offered from the start of its publication disappeared, leaving behind a journal of a different nature. *Soviet Photo* in and after 1937 emphasized visual conformity and ignored artistic debate. Its silence on matters of style, method, and their relationship to ideology was the termination of the amateur movement and creative discussion, more so than any single government decree could have effected.
Appendix A
Publishers and editors of *Soviet Photo* and *Proletarian Photo*, 1926–1938

Publishers of *Soviet Photo* and *Proletarian Photo*:

- Ogonek: April 1926–August 1931
- Zhurnalno-gazetnoe ob’edinenie: September–December 1931
- Soiuzfoto and OZPKF\(^1\): January 1932–September 1932
- Soiuzfoto: October 1932–January 1936
- Kinofotoizdat: February 1936–April 1936
- Iskusstvo: May 1936–January 1938

*Soviet / Proletarian Photo* was an “Organ of Soiuzfoto” from September 1931 through October 1938, regardless of the publisher. From 1938 through December 1940 it was an “Organ of the Committee on Cinematography under the SNK of the USSR.” The SNK was the Council of People’s Commissars and the highest government authority. Production was suspended during World War II and resumed in 1957.

Editors, in chronological order:

- Mikhail Kol’tsov: April 1926–September 1928
- S. (S. V.) Evgenov: July 1, 1929–August 1931

Managing editors and interim managing editors (zav. redaktor and vrid. zav. redaktor), in chronological order:

- V. Mikulin: April 1926–June 15, 1929
- B. Zherebtsov: September 1932–January–February 1933 (interim)
- Mikh. Vostrogin: January 1936

Editors-in-Chief (otvet. redaktor), in chronological order:

- S. A. Ianskii: September 1931–December 1933
- Ia. O. Zbinevich: January–February 1934–September 1935
- S. A. Ianskii: January 1936
- N. P. Gerasimov: February 1936–February 1938

Assistant Editor-in-Chief (pom. otv. redaktor):

- Iu. G. Prigozhin: February 1936–December 1937

Editorial board, in chronological order of membership:

- Mikhail Kol’tsov: April 1926–June 1, 1929
- G. Boltianskii: October 1928–April 1, 1929 (possibly through June 1, 1929)
- K. Chibisov: October 1928–April 1, 1929 (possibly through June 1, 1929)
- S. Evgenov: October 1928–March–April 1934

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1. OZPKF was the Society for Proletarian Cinema and Photography.
<table>
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<tr>
<td>P. Grokhovskii</td>
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<td>E. Loginova</td>
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<td>L. P. Mezhericher</td>
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Editors for the photo-technical section:
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Source: Masthead of *Soviet Photo* and *Proletarian Photo*
Appendix B: Publication statistics

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<td>1927</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14250</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3 rubles, 75 kopeks</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20583</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4 rubles, 75 kopeks</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25000</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>information unavailable</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27690</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6 rubles or $3.50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931 (&lt;i&gt;Soviet Photo&lt;/i&gt;)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24833</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6 rubles</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931 (&lt;i&gt;Proletarian Photo&lt;/i&gt;)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22000</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6 rubles</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21636</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>7 rubles</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12000</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12 rubles</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11000</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12 rubles</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11000</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15 rubles</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18500</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21 rubles</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17055</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21 rubles</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: <i>Soviet Photo</i> and <i>Proletarian Photo</i>

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1. The print run was only listed during the first half of 1929.
2. No information available on no. 2 (1937) which is excepted from the averages. Nos. 5 and 6 (1937) were combined into a single issue.
Appendix C

Contests in Soviet Photo and Proletarian Photo (1926–1937)

1926

1. For work (Za rabotoi), announced in No. 1 (April 1926), page 12; results announced in No. 3 (June 1926), page 80 and discussed again in No. 1 (January 1927), page 22f.

2. Aquatic physical culture (Fizkul'tura na vode), announced in No. 3 (June 1926), page 82; results announced in No. 6 (September 1926), page 180.

3. Life and daily life of the peoples of the USSR (Zhizn’ i byt narodov SSSR), announced in No. 4 (July 1926), page 118f.; results announced in No. 2 (February 1927), page 57f.

1927

4. Review of photography in the wall newspaper (Smotr fotografii v stengazete), announced in No. 11 (November 1927), page 357; results announced in No. 4 (April 1928), page 150.

1928

5. Winter (Zima), announced in No. 1 (January 1928), page 33; results announced in No. 5 (May 1928), page 218.

6. The portrait (Portret), announced in No. 3 (March 1928), page 129; results announced in No. 8 (August 1928), page 352.

7. Labor (Trud), announced in No. 5 (May 1928), page 220; results announced in No. 12 (December 1928), page 541.

1929

8. The October photo contest (Oktiabr’skii foto-konkurs), announced No. 1 (January 1929), page 30. The first part was for photography in the local press and the second was for photography for the development of international proletarian connections. Announcement repeated No. 15 (August 5, 1929), page 453.

9. The anti-alcohol photo contest (Antialkogol’nyi foto-konkurs), announced in No. 3 (February 1, 1929), page 95; results announced in No. 12 (June 15, 1929), page 358–363.

10. The anti-religious photo contest (Antireligioznyi konkurs), announced in No. 8 (April 25, 1929), page 258f.; results announced in No. 16 (August 20, 1929), page 486ff.

11. Ongoing photo contest on labor protection (Postoiannyi foto-konkurs po okhrane truda), announced No. 18 (September 22, 1929), page 579; results announced in No. 1 (January 1930), page 28f.

12. Photo contest on automobile travel (Avtodorozhnyi foto-konkurs), announced inside the cover, No. 9 (May 1, 1929), results announced No. 19 (October 6, 1929), page 612. Held jointly by At the wheel (Za rulem) and Soviet Photo.

13. Photography in the local press (Fotografiia v nizovoi pechati), announced No. 23 (December 1929), page 738; results announced in No. 6 (March 1930), page 166 and No. 8 (April 1930), page 227. Held jointly by the newspaper Worker-Peasant Correspondent (Raboche-krest’ianskii korrespondent) and Soviet Photo.
14. The new great contest held by *Soviet Photo* (Novyi bol’soi konkurs Sovetskogo foto), announced in No. 2 (January 1930), page 60 under the heading “For industrialization, for collectivization” (Za industrializatsiiu, za kollektivizatsiiu); results announced in No. 17–18 (September 1930) as the First of May Contest, no. 13 (Pervomaiskii konkurs No. 13), page 519.¹

15. For better laboratories in the photo circles: *Soviet Photo*’s new contest (Za luchshii kruzhkovii laboratoriiu: Novyi konkurs Sovetskogo foto), announced in No. 6 (March 1930), page 188; results not to be found.

16. Life in primary school (Byt nachal’noi shkoly), announced in No. 9 (May 1930), page 284.

17. Contest of the representatives (Kon kurs sviazistov), announced in No. 11 (June 1930), page 348.

18. Contest for the best photograph (Kon kurs na luchshii fotosnimok), announced in No. 12 (June 1930), page 379.

19. Second photo contest on automobile travel (Vtoroi avtodorozhnyi konkurs), No. 12 (June 1930), page 380. Held jointly by At the wheel and *Soviet Photo*.

20. Great October contest of 1931 [sic, 1930] (Bol’soi oktiabrskii konkurs na 1931 goda), announced in No. 21 (November 1930), page 614.

21. Socialist labor (Sotsialisticheskii trud), announced on the inside cover of No. 24 (December 1930). Held by the photography agency Unionfoto.

1931

22. Great October contest (Bol’soi oktiabrskii konkurs), announced in No. 1 (January 1931), page 31; results announced in No. 9 (May 1931), pages 201–204.

23. Contest-review of communal farm and rural photo circles (Kon kurs-smotr kolkhoznykh i derevenskikh fotokruzhkov) on the theme “Photography in the fight for collectivization” (Foto v bor’be za kollektivizatsiiu), announced in No. 5 (March 1931), page 139.

1932

24. First of May contest (Pervomaiskii konkurs), announced in S. Evgenov, “1 maia organizuem boevoi smotr dostizhenii proletarskoi fotografii,” No. 3 (March 1932), pages 2–10; results announced in No. 6 (June 1932), page 58.

25. Contest of Proletarian Photo’s community distributors (Kon kurs obshchestvennykh rasprostranitelei zhurnal’ Proletarskogo foto), announced in No. 11 (November 1932), page 63.

26. Photo correspondents’ October contest (Oktiabr’skii konkurs fotokorov), announced in S. Evgenov, “1 maia organizuem boevoi smotr dostizhenii proletarskoi fotografii,” No. 3 (March 1932), pages 2–10; results announced in No. 12 (December 1932), page 11. Held by the newspaper *Photo Correspondent* (Fotokor) and Proletarian Photo.

1933

27. Preparation to carry out the spring sowing season of the first year in the second Five-Year Plan (Podgotovka k provedenie vesennei posevnoi pervogo goda vtoroi piatiletki), announced in No. 2 (March–April 1933), page 8.

1934

No contests were held by *Soviet Photo*.

¹ *Sovetkoe foto* arrives at different numbers for the contests, claiming that this is only the thirteenth, not the fourteenth. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that some previous contests were held jointly.
1935
No contests were held by Soviet Photo.
The journal Let's Build (Stroim) and the newspaper For Industrialization (Za industrializatsiin) held the contest “The 100 Best Photographers of the Soviet Union,” announced in no. 6 (June 1936), page 31.
A contest sponsored by Pravda for photojournalists that was announced in no. 8 (August 1935), page 1. Some of the winning photographs were later printed in Soviet Photo.
The Moscow committee for the Communist Youth League (Komsomol) and other Moscow organizations held a contest for the best photograph taken by a child. Announced in no. 9 (September 1936), page 6.

1936
28. Young photographers’ contest (described, not titled), results announced in No. 2 (February 1936), page 26–28.
29. Portrait of the Stakhanovite (Portret stakhanovtsa), announced in No. 2 (February 1936), page 28. Held by the agency Soiuzfoto, the Central Committee of the Professional Union for Cinema and Photography Workers (TsK profsoiuza kinofotorabotnikov), and the editors of Soviet Photo for “photomasters/artists,” photojournalists, and amateur photographers.
30. Life has gotten better, Comrade. Life has gotten merrier (Zhit’ stalo luchshe, tovarishch. Zhit’ stalo veseelee), announced in No. 2 (February 1936), page 33. Held by Soiuzfoto, the Central Committee of the Professional Union for Cinema and Photography Workers, and the editors of Soviet Photo for “photomasters/ artists,” photojournalists, and amateur photographers.
31. Spring landscape (Vesennii peizazh), announced in No. 2 (February 1936), page 28. Held by Soiuzfoto, the Central Committee of the Professional Union for Cinema and Photography Workers, and the editors of Soviet Photo for “photomasters/ artists,” photojournalists, and amateur photographers.
32. First of May contest (Pervomaiskii konkurs), results announced in No. 5–6 (May–June 1936), page 38.
33. Moscow, capital of the Soviet Union (Moskva—stolitsa Sovetskogo soiuza), announced in No. 7 (July 1936), page 9; results announced in No. 3 (March 1937), page 6. Held by Soiuzfoto.
Results were also printed in Soviet Photo from a contest held by the OGPU factory in No. 1 (January 1936), page 9–16.

1937
34. Contest for photography textbooks (Konkurs na uchebniki po fotografii), announced in No. 7 (July 1937) on the inside cover. Held by Soiuzfoto and the journal Art (Iskusstvo).
35. Contest for the construction of photo equipment (Konkurs na konstruktsii fotoprindelzhsnosti), announced in No. 9 (September 1937), page 21. Held by Soiuzfoto.
Appendix D
“Schema of differentiations of photographic activity in the USSR,” compiled by L. Mezhericher.
*Sovetskoe foto* No. 8–9 (November–December, 1934): 20.
See page 241 for a key of organizations that are not explained within the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Active organizations</th>
<th>Form of production</th>
<th>Center of planning</th>
<th>Necessary cadres for the whole group</th>
<th>How are the cadres prepared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A. Social-propagandistic 1. Photo information 2. Photo publishing matters</td>
<td>Soiuzfoto, photo depts. of newspapers and magazines, Soiuzfoto’s photo circles for wall newspapers, Mosgorkino, OPTE, Detkommissiia, Intourist, co-op organizations</td>
<td>Photo-reportage chronicles for the printed press; postcards; albums; showcases, series, miniatures, portraits, posters</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1. Photo-reporters 2. Photo editors (<em>Bildredaktor</em>) 3. Photo-monteurs 4. Retouchers</td>
<td>Nobody prepares them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### II. Technical and Material Basis for Photographic Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Active Organizations</th>
<th>Form of Production</th>
<th>Center of Planning</th>
<th>Necessary Cadres for the Whole Group</th>
<th>How are the Cadres Prepared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### C. Scientific-technical, industrial & applied

1. Scientific-technical
   - [1] Scientific institutes, factory labs, technical colleges, scientific expeditions
   - [3] Photo depts. of construction and municipal organizations
   - [4] Aerofotos’emka

2. Auxiliary-artistic and museal
   - [1] Lab photos, documentation, expeditions
   - [2] Reproductions, portraits
   - [4] Cartography

3. Construction
   - None
   - [1–4] 1. Specialists for metal spectrometers; x-ray; nature, court, aerial photography
   - 2. Reproducers
   - 3. Photo-archivists
   - 3. and 4. Nobody prepares them

4. Aerial
   - [1] Fotokhimtrest
   - [2] VOOMP [...]
   - [3] Workers’ cooperatives, salvage shops
   - [4] NIKFI

#### D. Production

1. Photographic materials
   - [1] Plates, paper, chemicals
   - [2] Cameras, lenses
   - [3] Tripods, baths, lights, etc.

2. Cameras
   - [1] GUKF
   - [2] NK-Tiazhprom
   - [3] None
   - [4] GUKF

3. Equipment
   - [1] GUKF
   - [2] Tsentrosoiuz (see E-3)

4. Scientific research
   - 1. Moscow Technical University (MVTU)
   - 2. Publisher and printing house Mospoligraf-institut

#### E. Commodity distributors

1. Editors & publishers for photos, publications
   - [1] FOKKhT [factory in Kiev] for materials
   - 2. Central Union of Consumer Cooperatives (Tsentrsoiuz)

2. Supply of the market
   - 1. Photo merchandiser
   - 2. Sales clerks at photo shops

3. Nobody prepares them
Key to organizations:
Mosgorkino (box A-3): the Moscow city council’s cinema trust.
Vsekompromsovet (box B-5): unknown.
Vsekokhudozhnik (box C-3): the All-Russian Artists’ Union (Vserossiiskii soiuz kooperativnykh toverishchestv rabotnikov izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva, 1928–1953).
IMEL (box C-3): the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, Moscow (1921-1991).
Aerofotos’emka (box C-3): probably a state organization for aerial photography.
Fotokhimtrest (box D-3): an organization that ran factories for photographic equipment, including negatives and photographic paper.
VOOMP (box D-3): the Union of Optico-Mechanical Companies, Leningrad.
NIKFI (box D-3): the Institute for Scientific Research in Cinema and Photography (Nauchno-issledovatel’skii kinofotoinstitut, est. 1929 in Moscow).
GUOKF (box D-5): the General Directorate for the Cinema and Photo Industries (Glavnoe upravlenie kinofotopromyshlennosti pri SNK, 1933–1935).
NKTiazhprom (box D-5): the People’s Commissariat for Heavy Industry (Narodnyi komissariat tiazheloi promyshlennosti).
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*Sovetskii fotograficheskii almanakh 2: Izdanie zhurnala Sovetskoe Foto.* Moscow: Ogonek, Ltd, 1929.

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*Sputnik fotokora na 1932 god.* Moscow: Zhurnal’nogazetnoe o’edinenie, 1931.


Tarabukin, Nikolai. *Iskusstvo dnia: Chto nuzhno znat’, chtoby sdelat’ plakat, lubok, reklamu, smonitoravit’ knigu, gazetu, afishu, i kakie vozmozhnosti otkryvat’ fotomekhanika.* Moscow: Vserossiiski Proletkul’t, 1925.


Figure 0.1
Anonymous, no title
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 9 (September 1927): 278.
Fig. 0.2
A. Rodchenko, *Muscovite building (Moskovskii dom).* Sovetskoe foto no. 9 (September 1927): 274.
Fig. 0.3
Left top: V. Chemko, *Dive into the water* (*Pryzhok v vodu*)
Left bottom: A. Rodchenko, *On the Moscow River* (*Na Moskva-Reke*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 9 (September 1927), 280f.
Fig. 0.4
V. Mikosha, *Parade of Physical Culture on Red Square (Fizkul’turnyi parad na Krasnoi ploshchadi)*
Extended caption: Third prize in the contest by Sovuzfoto and Rabochei Moskvy. “Moscow: Capital of the Soviet Union”
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (March 1937), frontispiece recto.
Fig. 0.5
A. Rodchenko, *Physical Culture Performers on Red Square* (Физкультурики на Красной площади)
Extended caption: Second prize in the contest by Союзфото and Рабочий Москов. “Moscow: Capital of the Soviet Union”
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (March 1937), frontispiece verso.
Fig. 0.6
N. Kuleshov, Café Summer (Kafe leto)
Extended caption: Second prize in the contest by Soiuzfoto and Rabochei Moskvy: “Moscow: Capital of the Soviet Union”
Sovetskoe foto no. 3 (March 1937), unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 0.7
I. Akulenko, *Okotnyi row (Okhotnyi riad)*
Extended caption: Third prize in the contest by Soiuzfoto and *Rabochei Moskvey*: “Moscow: Capital of the Soviet Union”
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (March 1937), unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 0.8
P. Masiagin, *Moscow by night (Moskva noch’iu)*
Extended caption: Third prize in the contest by Soiuzfoto and *Rabochei Moskvy*: “Moscow: Capital of the Soviet Union”
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (March 1937), unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 0.9
N. Granovskii, Manege Square (Manezhnaia ploschad’)
Extended caption: Second prize in the contest by Soiuzfoto and Rabochii Moskvy: “Moscow: Capital of the Soviet Union”
Sovetskoe foto no. 3 (March 1937), unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 0.10
Roman Karmen, *Conveyer at Izvestia’s printer (Konveer v tipografii Izvestii)*
Fig. 0.11
S. Luchininov, Paper (Bumaga)
Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (January 1931): 46.
Fig. 0.12  
V. Shishkin, *Company Newspaper (Mnogotirazhka)*  
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3–4 (February 1931): 94.
Fig. 1.1
Iossa, untitled
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 2 (May 1926): cover.
Fig. 1.2
N. Skriabin, *Homeless (Besprizorny)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 2 (May 1926): 42.
В этой таблице за единицу принимается сила света летнего солнца в 12 час. и в другие месяцы и часы сила света умножается (уменьшается) пропорционально числам, помещенным в соответствующих графах.

Вместо этой или подобных таблиц полезно было бы воспользовать в себе ненадолго определить одну ли либо высоту солнца над горизонтом или солнца на этой высоте, на которой солнце находится в 12 час. (на широте Москвы) за единицу, а солнца в зависимости от времени года и часа ли—это величина, легко определяемая, та же уж не вполне или скорее иного разности 30 и 60 (при мерных). В промежутку числа—цифры будут колебаться от 1 до 30. Такой подход будет удобен тем, что не будет зависеть от географической ширины места.

Что касается облачности, то она изменяет силу освещения, примерно, от 1 до 10.

Дальнейшая поправка производится на:

III.—5 постепенно и на плотность (густоту) светофильтра (двухкратный, троекратный и т. д.)

IV. 7 чувствительность пластика.

Так, как чувствительность пластика, крепость светофильтра, диафрагма, светосила, сила света в зависимости от времени года и часа солнца—это величина, легко определяемая, то все уменьшить или увеличить экспозицию следует лишь к уменьшению или увеличению объективной длины, а к той или другой группе и к определению облачности.

Пример:

Крестильская нить; светосила объектива Ф. 6, 3

Апрель 3 час дня.

Летние облака по всему небу.

Диафрагма—вторая.

Светофильтр—двойной.

Чувствительность пластика—170 X и D.

Строка вычисление экспозиции.

Крестильная нить 1/50 (при светосиле Ф. 6, 3).

Время года X 3 (умножение на 3).
Fig. 1.4
“Primitive forms”
“Primitivnye formy,” Sovetskoe foto no. 6 (March 1930): 163.
Fig. 1.5
“Who to learn from”
“U kogo sleduet pouchit’ sia,” Sovetskoe foto no. 6 (March 1930): 164.
Fig. 1.6
Photo-newspaper “Woman worker’s eye” (Foto-gazeta “Glaz rabotnitsy”) and
Women workers of the photo circle “Red Banner” reading their paper (Rabotnitsy f-ki “Krasnoe znamia” za
chtemiem svoei gazety)
Sovetskoe foto no. 19 (October 6, 1929): 605.

Fig. 1.7
Anonymous photo newspapers
Fig. 1.8
B. Al'bitskii (Baku), *Oriental motif* (*Vostochnyi motiv*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 2 (February 1927): 35.
Fig. 1.9
B. Al’bitskii (Baku), The Parting East (Ukhodiashchi vostok)
Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (February 1927): 59.
Fig. 1.10
F. Fain, All in the past (Ves’ v proshlom)
Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (February 1927): 60.
Fig. 1.11
F. Fain, *Gypsy women (Tsyganki)*
*Sovetskoе foto* no. 2 (February 1927): 61.
Fig. 1.12
S. Vladimirov (M), *Believers cut down the forest, and the godless plant (Whitsunday) (Veruiushchie les vyrubaiut, a bezbozhniki sazhaiut [Troitsyn den’])*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 16 (August 20, 1929): 490.

Fig. 1.13
S. Vladimirov (M), *Believers cut down the forest, and the godless plant (Forest Day) (Veruiushchie les vyrubaiut, a bezbozhniki sazhaiut [Den’ lesa])*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 16 (August 20, 1929): 491.
Fig. 1.14
V. Savchenko, Giant mockup of the Metropolitan on Okhotnyi riad (Gigantskii maket metropolitena v Okhotnom riadu)
Proletarskoe foto no. 6 (June 1932): 10.
Fig. 1.15
V. Savchenko, *For the USSR’s technical-economic independence (Za tekhniko-ekonomicheskuiu nezavisimost’ SSSR)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 6 (June 1932): 12.

Fig. 1.16
Kaloshin, *Moscow by Night on May 1: Shining Metropolitan Map (Pervomaiskaia Moskva noch’iu. Svetiascheiaas ia karta metropolitena)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 6 (June 1932): 38.
Fig. 1.17
I. Alekseev, *Photographic portrait of Comrade Stalin (Fotoportret t. Stalina)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 6 (June 1932): 15.
Fig. 1.18
“Reviews of photographs”
“Otzyvy o snimkah,” Sovetskoe foto no. 9 (September 1927): 282f.
Fig. 1.19
F. Kislov (M), *Conversation (Beseda)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 16 (August 20, 1929): 513.

Fig. 1.20
Left: Foto-kruzhok tramvainogo parka im. Smirnova (Leningrad), *Gossiping aunties (Kumushki)*
Right: M. Grinev (Batum), *In Batumi Harbor (V Batumskom portu).*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 8 (April 25, 1929): 246f.
Fig. 1.21
N. Tatarchenko, *Grandfather and grandson (Ded i vnuk)*
First prize in the contest “For work”
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (June 1926): 80.
Fig. 1.22
F. Sindev, *Uzbek man repairing a porcelain dish (Узбек за починкои фарфорои посуды)*
Second prize in the contest “For work”
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (June 1926): 81.
Fig. 1.23
V. Loboda, On the field (étude) (Na pole [etüd])
Note: photoreportage exhibition (vystavka foto-reportazhi)
Sovetskoe foto no. 3 (June 1926): 69.
Fig. 1.24
Dorothea Lange, *Migrant agricultural worker’s family, Nipomo, California*, 1936.
Fig. 1.25
Anonymous, no title
Sovetskoe foto no. 8 (November 1926): cover.
Fig. 1.26
Albert Renger-Patsch, Working hands: a potter, snapshot of motion (Rabota ruk v goncharnom proizvodstve. Momental’nyi snimok vo vremia vrashcheniia posudy; original title: Schaffende Hände. Töpfer, Momentaufnahme während der Bewegung, 1925)
Sovetskoe foto no. 10 (October 1927): 294.
Fig. 1.27
“Photo Ballast”
“Foto-balast,” Sovetskoe foto no. 9 (May 1, 1929): 286f.
Fig. 1.28
A. Shaikhet, *Hands of the Lathe Operator and Hands of the Artisan (Ruki tokaria and Ruki remeslennika)*. Sovetskoе foto no. 23 (December 1929): 720.
Fig. 1.29
Examples of “High Art”
Obraztsy “vysokego iskusstva,” Sovetskoe foto no. 17 (September 8, 1929): 533.
Fig. 1.30
V. Savel’ev, *Woman worker from Prokhorovka* (Rabotnitsa s Prokhorovki)
From an exhibition of photoreportage
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (June 1926): 75.
Fig. 1.31
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Mother (Mat)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 10 (October 1927): cover.
Fig. 1.32
S. Ivanov, Portrait (Portret)
Sovetskoe foto no. 7 (April 1930): 203.
“Is it necessary to learn portrait photography”

Fig. 1.34  
V. Savel'ev, *Shock worker-textile worker from the Tryokhgorny Factory (Udarnitsa-tekstilshchitsa s trekhgonoi manufacturer)*  
*SSSR na stroike* no. 4 (1931): 40.
Fig. 2.1
S. Fridliand, *Worker-correspondent brigade (Rabkorovskaia brigada)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 5 (May 1932): 32.
Fig. 2.2
B. Ignatovich, *Details of machines* (*Detali mashin*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 18 (September 22, 1929): 618.
Fig. 2.3
S. Fridliand, *Hauling grain (Podvozka kbleba)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 20 (October 20, 1929): 619.
Fig. 2.4
A. Shaikhet, *Mass excursion of photo-correspondents and photo-reporters to Moscow factories and works (Massovaia vylazka fotokorov i fotoperopterov na moskovskie fabriki i zavody)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 1 (January 1932): cover.
Fig. 2.5
M. Kalashnikov, *Electric drilling in the Donbass (Elektroburenie v Donbasse)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 2 (February 1932): cover.
Fig. 3.1
Top left: A. (Aleksandr) Rodchenko, *From the window of house no. 17 on Miasnitskaia St. (Iz okna doma No. 17 po Miasnitskoi ul.)*
Bottom right: A. Rodchenko, *Courtyard of house No. 17 on Miasnitskaia St. (Dvor doma No. 17 po Miasnitskoi ul.)*
Fig. 3.2

Caption: “A tunnel is being built below the square for the safe crossing of pedestrians” (Pod ploschadju stroitsia tunnel’ dla bezopasnogo perekhoda peshehodov)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 3 (March 1928): 119.
"Ours and Abroad"

Fig. 3.4
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Glass and Light (Steklo i svet)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (July 1928): 315.
Fig. 3.5
G. Petrusov (Moscow), *Electrical smelting oven at the factory Elektrostal’ [Electric Steel] (Elektroplavil’naia pech’ na zavode “Elektrostal’”)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 201.
Fig. 3.6
N. Belotserkovskii and N. Lishko, untitled
_Sovetskoe foto_ no. 20 (October 1929): cover.
Fig. 3.7
S. Blokhin, *At the factory Elektrostal*’ [Electric Steel] (Moscow region): Steel founder at work (Na zavode “Elektrostal” [Moskovskaia oblast’]: Stalevar za rabotoi)
Proletarskoe foto no. 7-8 (July-August 1932): 24.
Fig. 3.8
S. Blokhin, Steel founder Lukashov ("Hammer and Sickle"): He is studying to be an engineer at the industrial complex (Stalevar Lukashov ["Serp i molot"]: Uchitsia v zavodskom kombinate na inzhenera)
Proletarskoe foto no. 7-8 (July-August 1932): 23.
Fig. 3.9
S. Blokhin, Shock worker from the factory “Hammer and Sickle”
Proletarskoe foto no. 7-8 (July-August 1932): cover.
Fig. 3.10
Dmitrii Debabov
Left: The changing ages (Smena epokh)
Right: Photojournalist at work (Foto-reporter na s’emke)
Heading (at the fold): “Competition of photo-journalists” (Sorevnovanie foto-reporterov)
Sovetskoe foto no. 24 (December 1929): 757f.
Fig. 3.11
T. Bunimovich (Moscow)
Top: Paving streets in the new workers’ city, Armenikende (near Baku) (*Asfal’tirovanie ulitsy v novom rabochem gorodke – Armenikende [około Baku]*)
Bottom: At the asphalt plant (*Na asfal’tovom zavode*)
Heading: “Competition of photo-journalists” (*Sorevnovanie foto-reporterov*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 23 (December 1929): 714.

Upper caption: “Unemployed people on the theatre steps (Berlin)”

Bottom caption: “A brigade of miners from the ‘Freedom’ mines starts for work (Donbass, Makeevka)”

*Proletarskoe foto* no. 3 (March 1932): cover.
Fig. 4.1
Olga Ignatovich, *At one's studies (Za ucheboi)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 1 (September 1931): 36.
Fig. 4.2
Eliazar Langman, *Lace-maker (Kruzhkhnitsa)*
Fig. 4.3
Boris Kudojarov, Comrades Stalin, M. Gorky and Enukidze at the parade of physical culture, Moscow, 5 August 1931
(T.t. Stalin, M. Gor'kii i Enukidze na fizkul'turnom parade: Moskva, 5 avgusta 1931 gg.)
Proletarskoe foto no. 1 (September 1931): 29.
Fig. 4.4
P. S. Petrokas, *Portrait of the Bread Factory (Portret khlebozavoda)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 1 (September 1931): 12.
Fig. 4.5
Fig. 4.6
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *At the Sawmill (Na lesopil’nom zavode)*
*Proletarskoe foto* no. 1 (September 1931): 53.

Fig. 4.7
Installation view of *Exhibition of the October Photo Section*, Moscow Press House, May 1931
Fig. 4.8
Left: Eliazar Langman, untitled
USSR im Bau no. 7 (1932): 4.

Fig. 4.9
Eliazar Langman, untitled
USSR im Bau no. 7 (1932): 5.
Fig. 4.10
Eliazar Langman, untitled
_USSR im Bau_ no. 7 (1932): 8.
Fig. 4.11
Top: Eliazar Langman, untitled
_USSR im Bau_ no. 7 (1932): 11.
Fig. 4.12
Eliazar Langman, *One of the best shock-workers, Comrade Imambaev, visiting Comrade Kuzishtabaev, the famous man from Karaganda*
(Odin iz luchshikh udarnikov tov. Imambaev v gostiakh u znatnogo cheloveka Karagandy tov. Kuzishtabaev)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 10 (October 1935): 15.
Fig. 4.13
Eliazar Langman, *Camel herd (Verbljuż’ë stado)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 10 (October 1935): 13.
Fig. 4.14
Eliazar Langman, *Camel herd (In der Kamelfarm bei Tschimkent)*
*USSR im Bau* no. 11 (November 1935): n.p. [10].
Fig. 4.15
Bottom:
Eliazar Langman or D. Shulkin, *In the library of the Issaev State Farm, Kokpektin Region* (In der Bibliothek des Issajew-Staatgutes im Kokpektiner Bezirk)
*USSR im Bau* 11 (November 1935): n.p. [38].
Fig. 4.16
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Jump (Pryzhok)*
.Caption: “From the exhibition of works at the Cinema House--for the discussion on photo art's paths” (*S vystavki rabot v Dome kino--k diskussii o putiakh fotoiskusstva*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 4 (April 1936): 34.

Fig. 4.17
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Leaps (Skachki)*
.Caption: “From the exhibition of works at the Cinema House--for the discussion on photo art's paths” (*S vystavki rabot v Dome kino--k diskussii o putiakh fotoiskusstva*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 4 (April 1936): 35.
Fig. 5.1
M. Kalashnikov, *17th Congress of the Great Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Presidium* and
*17th Congress of the Great Communist Party (Bolsheviks), In the meeting hall (XVII s”ezd VKP(b), Prezidium and XVII s”ezd VKP(b), v zale zasedanii)*
*Sovetskoе foto* no. 2 (March–April 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.2
M. Kalashnikov, 17th Congress of the Great Communist Party (Bolsheviks), They are listening to Comrade Stalin’s speech and 17th Congress of the Great Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Comrades Manuil’skii and Budennyi in the meeting’s couloir (XVII s”ezd VKP(b), Slushaion doklad tov. Stalina and XVII s”ezd VKP(b), Tt. Manuil’skii i Budennyi v kuluarakh s”ezda) Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (March–April 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.3
M. Kalashnikov, 17th Congress of the Great Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Comrades Stasova and Sever’ianova (XVII s’ezd VKP(b), Tt. Stasova i Sever’ianova) Sovetskoe foto no. 2 (March–April 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.4
P. Novitskii, *Icebreaker Sibiriakov in the ice (Ledokol Sibiriakov vo l'dakh)*
Proletarskoe foto no. 1 (January–February 1933); cover.
Fig. 5.5
P. Novitskii, *At the shores of Kamchatka (U beregov Kamchatki)*
Fig. 5.6
D. Chernov, *New houses supplant hovels (Ivanovo)* (*Novye doma vytesniaiut lachugi [Ivanogo]*)
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 1 (January–February 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.7
Fig. 5.8
A. Shterenberg, Portrait of a Child (year 1927) (Portret rebenka [1927 g.])
Sovetskoe foto no. 1 (January–February 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.9
Bottom: A. Shterenberg, *Melons (Dyin)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 1 (January–February 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.10
Anonymous, no title
Sovetskoe foto no. 9 (September 1928): 389.
Fig. 5.11
M. Petrov (Leningrad), *Fluid sands in the Karakum Desert (Podvizhnye peski v pustyne Kara-Kuma*) (top) *Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (April 1, 1929): 210.
Fig. 5.12
B. Kudoiarov, untitled
Proletarskoe foto no. 5 (May 1932): 11.
Fig. 5.13

B. Kudoiarov, *Winter Landscape (Zimniy peizazh)*

*Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (October 1934): unpaginated (binding error).
Fig. 5.14
Iu. Eremin, Gurzuf
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 7 (October 1934): 7.
Fig. 5.15
F. Kislov, Étude of Dneprstroii (Étude Dneprostroia) 
Sovetskoefoto no. 7 (October 1934); 24.
Fig. 5.16
Fig. 5.17
Fig. 5.18
Fig. 5.19
Iu. Eremin, *Moonrise (Voskhod lany)*
*Sovetskoe foto* no. 5–6 (May–June 1936): 8.
Fig. 5.20
Iurii Eremin, *Bazaar in Samarkand (Bazar v Samarkande)*
Fig. 5.21
G. Petrusov, *Lunch on the Field (Obed v pole)*
*Sovetskoje foto* no. 3 (March 1936), 14.
Fig. 5.22
Iu. Eremin, *Gurzuf*
*SSSR na stroike* no. 8 (1937): pagination unknown.