Soviet Jewish Photographers Documenting World War II

By AARON HOWARD • Thu, Apr 18, 2013

As artists and journalists, Soviet Jewish photojournalists played a huge role in visually documenting the construction of the new communist state, beginning in the 1920s. And, when the German invasion of Russia sought to obliterate that state, and particularly Soviet Jewry, it was mainly Jewish photojournalists who documented Nazi atrocities and established a new genre of photography.

Soviet images of World War II largely are unknown in the United States. However, a new exhibition, “Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War and the Holocaust,” displays 58 examples of war photography as seen by Jewish photographers. The exhibition opens April 25 and runs through Oct. 27 at Holocaust Museum Houston, 5401 Caroline St.

On loan to HMH by the CU Art Museum, University of Colorado Boulder, the exhibition was curated by David Shneer, director of the program in Jewish studies at the University of Colorado, and Lisa Tamiris Becker, director of the CU Art Museum. The exhibit was inspired by Shneer’s book, “Through Soviet Jewish Eyes” (Rutgers).

Shneer’s fundamental thesis is that Soviet photojournalism, from its beginnings in the early 1920s until the mid-1940s, was a medium largely built by Jews who came from modest-sized towns in southern Russia. These photographers moved to Moscow, obtained employment as editors and photographers in the new field of photojournalism and documented the building of the new Soviet society.

“In the Soviet Union, Jews were working for the state. Their job was to elevate society, not to be critical of the society. Political and social context is everything,” said Shneer. “In the Soviet Union, the Jewish photojournalists were there to create the dominant story and that plays out in the war photography.”

When World War II began, Jews were highly represented in the fields of professional photojournalists, journalists, filmmakers and print-media editors. Many of the practitioners were relatively assimilated Soviet Jews who told a universal story of atrocity and tragedy, said Shneer.

This happened for three reasons:

1) There was a constant editing out of the word “Jew” and of Jewishness from both public and internal sources, in order to downplay the Jewishness of Nazi atrocities. Starting in 1942, Stalin sought to marginalize Jews and emphasize Russian nationalism in a shift from internationalism to nationalism. Jewish professionals first came under suspicion, then dismissal, from 1943 onward.

2) The media in the Soviet Union (and often in the United States) understood that portraying the
war as “too Jewish” might have negative consequences for mobilizing the civilian population. Thus, there was a tendency to emphasize the Nazis as enemies of all mankind (contrasted to particularizing Jews as victims) in order to broaden support for the anti-Nazi struggle.

3) Many Soviet Jews were more interested (and believed) in seeing themselves as part of a larger Soviet collective, especially during a time of great suffering. They fought the war not as Jews but as Soviet citizens.

As integrated into the Soviet nation as Jews were, they were aware of being singled out as racial enemies of the Nazis. When Jews talked to each other in the Soviet Yiddish press, Jewish military heroism was the most common topic. The second most popular topic was the atrocities against the Jewish people.

Soviet Jewish photojournalists documented the mass murder of Jews, beginning in January 1942, seven months after the German invasion. They photographed a field outside Kerch, the day after Soviet forces liberated the town. There, the Einsatzgruppen had taken some 7,500 of the town’s Jews to an anti-tank ditch and shot them in cold blood. “Kerch became the symbolic reference point for Nazi atrocities, the place at which Soviet witnesses saw with their own eyes and their own cameras that the rumors, innuendo and even the published trophy photographs were true,” writes Shneer.

The published photographs of Kerch launched what Shneer calls a new genre of photography: the Nazi atrocity photo essay. The goal of the photographer was to bear witness to the crimes of mass murder.

In July 1944, Soviet army units liberated Majdanek, a major Nazi extermination camp within view of the city of Lublin. While Americans associated extermination camps with images of Auschwitz or Dachau, Soviet citizens learned to see the camps through the representations of Majdanek.

“There are photos of the Soviet liberation of Majdanek, one of the camps most intact at the time of liberation,” said Shneer. “When I looked at the photos of Majdanek published in the Soviet press, three of the four photographers were Jewish, including the most famous photojournalist of that era, Evgenii Khaldei.”

Through the use of iconic images and inventive photocomposition, Soviet photography moved from the realm of forensic documentation to photojournalism at Majdanek, claims Shneer. For example, Samarii Gurarii photographed a warehouse overflowing with empty shoes – piles of shoes, symbolic of the absence of people who once had worn them. He also photographed a mound of gas canisters, the poison used to exterminate hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Jews.

Although the photos of Majdanek caused shock waves in the Soviet Union, coverage outside Russia was scant. The British thought the photos might be Soviet propaganda. Even though foreign journalists were brought to the site a month after liberation, no major English-language daily in the United States ran a single photo of Majdanek.

“I’m interested in the story of these photographers,” said Shneer, “but the exhibition has a different mission, because it is visual, not textual. Moving from the book to the exhibition was fascinating for me. In mounting an exhibition, you can only say what you have photographs of. You need material and that limits the possible.

“All of the material for the exhibition, every single image in the show, came from one private collection located in Denver. I discovered Paul and Teresa Harbaugh early on. They have one of the largest collections of Soviet photography in private hands in the world. They are brilliant collectors and they have a great reputation in Moscow as a couple that cares about the people involved in photojournalism.

“The photographs drive the exhibit. These are photojournalists, not art photographers. A photojournalist always knows his work will be reproduced in a magazine, not a museum wall. The vintage material, the holy grail of photography, was absent in the sense of the existence [of] original prints that you want to put on a museum wall. Photojournalism put in a museum changes the experience of the image.”

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The exhibition will remain on view through Oct. 27 in the museum’s Central Gallery. The public is
invited to a free reception from 6-8 p.m. on May 16. Admission is free, but advance registration is required for the reception. RSVP at hmh.org/RegisterEvent.aspx.