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Is Seeing Believing? Photographs, Eyewitness Testimony, and Evidence of the Holocaust¹

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During World War II, the first media outlets to publish photographs of the Nazi mass murder of Jews and others were Soviet newspapers and magazines. The problem with Soviet photographs was that the Soviet media were considered unreliable from a Western standpoint, because unlike in the West, which perceived a clear ideological differentiation of art from photojournalism, Soviet photography blurred that distinction. According to Western standards of evidence, Soviet photography could never be taken seriously as photojournalism, precisely because the photographer was always metaphorically present. Since Soviet photojournalism failed the test of the documentary imperative, it rarely convinced people of the truth of its subject matter. In this epistemological context when photographs might fail to convince, the act of physically bearing witness, of seeing with one's own eyes, became the most important way of proving to a disbelieving public the veracity of Nazi atrocities.

Keywords: Holocaust; Photography; evidence; Soviet Union

During World War II, the most violent war in history, information circulated about wartime acts that were simply unbelievable – that the Germans and their allies were committing mass murder of civilians and, in some cases, were doing so in mass killing complexes called extermination camps. How did people know whether or not to believe what they were hearing, in the case of rumors, radio reports, or political speeches? Or what they were reading, in the case of newspaper articles, pamphlets, or books? Or seeing, in the case of posters, cartoons, or, most convincingly, at least from the presumption of believability, photographs?

The first media outlets to publish photographs that visualized these seemingly outrageous stories about Nazi mass murder of Jews and others people had been hearing were Soviet newspapers and magazines, which started publicizing Nazi atrocities from the first days of the German–Soviet war in June 1941. Through the autumn, Soviet press outlets circulated photographs of Nazi war crimes on international wires in the hopes of bringing the United States into the war. However, the Soviet media failed to achieve this goal and the United States only entered the war in December after it was itself bombed.

The problem with Soviet photographs was that the Soviet media were considered unreliable. Western press agencies were suspicious of Soviet sources, and dismissed images published in Soviet newspapers or coming over the wires from Soviet

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sources as “propaganda,” a dirty word in the West which suggested manipulating an objective truth for political purposes.² In other words, like Soviet print and radio, Soviet photographs were presumed to be lies, manufactured to produce a specific political outcome. But Soviet photography’s provocation to Western sensibilities went deeper than the crass disappearing of out-of-favor leaders from photographs, a practice that later came to stand for all of Soviet photography.

According to Communist ideology, there was no such thing as objective news, only information shaped by class conflict and, in particular, by the class that dominated society. Western, capitalist newspapers were driven by a market economy that led them to publish sensationalist stories to please the lowest common denominator, which would drive subscriptions and advertising. Stories critical of the ruling power or events supporting workers’ issues like strikes rarely made it into the daily news, because, according to Communist critics, the Western press concealed as much as it revealed. Communist newspapers and magazines aimed to edify, not entertain, and to interpret the world from the perspective of the working class under the leadership of the Soviet state and its vanguard Communist Party.³ Soviet newspapers and the photographs they published were indeed propaganda, but that word to the Communists carried no negative connotations. Propaganda was not just a tool of politics, but was also a philosophical approach or more broadly an epistemology, in which all culture was an epiphenomenon of a new social structure of society and, therefore, needed to better reflect that new social structure.⁴

Therefore, through the 1920s, Soviet photographers debated what it meant to take pictures in a post-revolutionary world. For example, art photography as a distinct genre eventually disappeared in the early 1930s during the Cultural Revolution, when hierarchies of high and low culture were flattened, many art photographers’ careers were destroyed under accusations of “formalism,” and “bourgeois specialists” were rendered useless.⁵ More important than any aesthetic transformation from the 1920s to the 1930s, however, was the increasing demand that photography be “in service of the Revolution.” In the 1930s Soviet photography, building on the long tradition of socialist art and photography more broadly, became globally influential through the use of image–text montage and radical Constructivist aesthetics. Through their flagship illustrated journal *USSR in Construction*, which appeared in four languages, Soviet photographers and other visual artists threw down the gauntlet about the relationship between representation and reality. They demanded that art serve larger social functions, something that informed many photographic and artistic movements worldwide of the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ At the same time, Soviet photographers feverishly debated the license a photographer could take in making a photograph tell a particular story. Some photographers – like Emmanuel Evzerikhin, who was fired for turning a factory clock back to give the impression that a factory’s employees were all at work on time – got in trouble with Soviet newspaper editors and other photographers for taking too much license and “lying” with their photographs.⁷ This Soviet philosophy of photography did not suddenly change with the outbreak of war against Nazi Germany.

In the West, photojournalism earned the label of “journalism” once there was a presumption that the camera was a tool of documentation that mimetically represented external reality. Photography’s privileged ontological status depended on its presumed indexicality. Unlike in the Soviet Union, where distinctions among various genres of photography collapsed in the 1930s, photographers, critics, and museums in the United States during the interwar period became ever more vigilant about distinguishing between genres. Art photography presumed artistic licence and aestheticization of

the world and the photographers themselves played a central role in elevating photographic images to the ranks of painting and sculpture.

As important as the people taking the pictures were the institutions helping define for the public how one should receive a particular image. New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) wanted something it called "art photography." It acquired its first photograph in 1930 and established a separate photography department in 1940.⁸ Documentary photography, meanwhile, used images as a form of social critique; the photographer's social and political standpoint became crucial. For both of those genres the photographer was paramount – as artist, social critic, or both. On the other hand, photojournalism – which MOMA rejected but on which newspapers depended – aimed to render the photographer's craft invisible. Western photojournalism sought to transform the camera from an artist's paintbrush into a craftsman's tool. If art photographers "made" pictures, then photojournalists "took" photographs. According to historian of photography Barbie Zelizer, during World War II American photographers earned the right to call themselves photojournalists with the attendant demands of ontological truth and objectivity that applied to print journalists working for the American press. Ultimately, photojournalism sought to render the photographers themselves invisible. The work of photographers embedded with the Western Allied militaries often went unattributed, as editors published their photographs with the anonymous attribution "Signal Corps," the military unit in charge of photography.⁹

And herein lay the problem. The Soviet blurring of photographic genres meant that during the Second World War Soviet photographs were not considered reliable from a Western photojournalistic standpoint. The central issue was not simply the overt manipulation of photographs for political purposes, although this certainly occurred. Rather, the issue was the tension between a viewer's presumption of a photograph's veracity and the Soviet challenge to that presumption.¹⁰ According to American standards of evidence, Soviet photography would never be taken seriously as photojournalism, precisely because the photographer was always metaphorically present. Therefore, although the practice of Soviet and American photojournalism may have looked similar – a man, and sometimes a woman, with a camera walking around taking pictures of things – Soviet photography and American photojournalism deployed different frameworks through which to understand an image. The key question was whether or not the magical click of the camera shutter was the moment a photograph was created; American photojournalism said "yes" while the Soviets said "no." Since Soviet photojournalism failed the test of the documentary imperative, it rarely convinced people of the truth of its subject matter. This posed a problem when the Soviet government and its media publicized Nazi atrocities, since, until 1945, all sites of Nazi atrocities were liberated by the Red Army and were photographed by Soviet photographers. Few people, including Soviet readers of newspapers, believed the photographs.

In this epistemological context when photographs might fail to convince, the act of physically bearing witness, of seeing with one's own eyes, became the most important way of proving to a disbelieving public the veracity of Nazi atrocities. Therefore, from the first moment of liberation, when in early 1942 the Soviet media circulated photographs of the Nazi mass murder of Jews and others at Kerch in southern Russia, writers covering liberation emphasized the importance of seeing the aftermath of mass murder *first hand*. The act of bearing witness – to corpses, to human remains, to clothes, and sometimes to empty ravines – became so important that the Red Army turned Majdanek, the first extermination camp on Polish soil to be liberated,

in July 1944, into a pilgrimage site for German prisoners-of-war (POWs), local Poles, foreign journalists, and Soviet soldiers, who needed to see in order to believe.¹¹

In January 1942, Soviet troops discovered the killing fields at Kerch, a Crimean city on the Sea of Azov, which had been held by the Germans for six weeks. In that time, the German occupation forces rounded up thousands of Jews in Sennaya Square for deportation to forced labor; at least that is what they told those rounded up on the square. In fact, they marched them to the outskirts of town to a trench near the suburb of Bagerov and shot an estimated 7000 people. After the January 1942 liberation of the city and its environments, including the trench, photographers and writers were brought to the scene to document the atrocity. Journalists' reports published in major Soviet press outlets described how the German and other Axis armies mass-murdered peaceful Soviet citizens, among them Jews.¹² As a way of proving to readers and other residents the truth of the journalist's words, the Soviet media circulated photographs, both accompanying the articles in newspapers and in broadsides plastered in town squares. Residents of newly liberated Kerch (a short-lived liberation, since the Wehrmacht retook the city a few months later) saw photographs by Dmitrii Baltermants on walls in the city square bearing witness to the bloody aftermath of what happened to the city's residents when they were supposedly marched out of town for "forced labor."

Witnessing happened not just in the form of print and photojournalism, but also in poetry, some of which shaped how the Soviet Union understood Nazi atrocities. The poet Ilya Selvinsky saw the site first hand as he accompanied the troops liberating the city. In January 1942, he recorded in his diary,

I got to Kerch with the landing troops of the second echelon. The city is half-destroyed. That's that – we'll restore it. But near the village of Bagerovo in an anti-tank ditch – [were] 7000 executed women, children, old men and others. And I saw them. Now I do not have the strength to write about it in prose. Nerves can no longer react. What I could – I have expressed in verse.¹³

And so he did in his poem "I Saw It" ("Ia eto videl"), which appeared in *Bolshevik* on January 23, 1942.¹⁴ The poem opens with a challenge to the reader: "It's possible to ignore gossip, / or to distrust newspaper stories, / but I saw it with my own eyes. / Get it? I myself." In this brave poem, Selvinsky suggests that not only did Western press outlets distrust Soviet newspapers; so too did Soviet readers. He poetically emphasises the power of sight, arguing that he alone is a reliable witness. The poet forces us to ask, when mass murder has taken place, what stories do we believe? Only those things we see with our own eyes? What about a reliable witness like Selvinsky? Why should we believe him or the magazine *Bolshevik*, in which his testimony appeared? Do we need a photograph as evidence or, especially in the Soviet case, are photographs too compromised from the standpoint of documentation to be believed?

In this space of epistemological doubt about the veracity of photographs, Selvinsky, like nearly all those reporting on the immediate discovery of Nazi atrocities, reassured readers by using the singular first person, "I." He described that which was unbelievable to the imagined reading audience and to the writer, poet, and photographer himself.

In late 1942, in an effort to more systematically document Nazi war crimes and genocide, the Soviet government established the extraordinary commissions, whose goal was to gather evidence at these large-scale crime scenes with future war crimes trials in mind.¹⁵ The commissions brought together forensic scientists to gather physical

evidence and help interpret it, along with members of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), who interviewed witnesses to the crime (and, more ominously, to have those witnesses prove their own innocence of the crimes). In addition to the scientists and NKVD interrogators, a commission photographer documented the crime scene as it unfolded. In order to bring the extraordinary commission photographs closer to Western notions of objectivity in photography, the collection of images at each site was unattributed and formulaic.¹⁶ From their images providing an overview of the place to forensic close-ups of skulls with bullet holes, extraordinary commission photographers documented crime scenes from the Kuban region of Russia and throughout Ukraine, including the most famous site of Nazi atrocities in the Soviet Union – Babi Yar.

These commissions, established out of a forensic impulse to gather evidence for war crimes trials against Germans, also had the power to obscure evidence – including evidence of Soviet crimes. For example the Red Army occupied eastern Poland between September 1939 and June 1941 and thereby expanded the Soviet borders. The NKVD committed crimes there that echoed those crimes committed during the 1930s on territory that had always been part of the Soviet Union, evidence of which the commissions hid.¹⁷ Most notoriously, Katyn, a forest in the Smolensk region of Russia, was the primary site where in 1940 the NKVD executed thousands of Poles, mostly officers. The Germans discovered Katyn in April 1943 and began circulating their own forensic photographs of the site to convince Europe that the “other ally” was more genocidal than the press claimed Nazi Germany to be. Germany even brought several groups of observers, including American POWs, to the area, so they could bear witness first hand to Soviet crimes and therefore encourage their governments to fight on behalf of the Axis, whose fortunes had taken a turn for the worse at Stalingrad.¹⁸ The Red Army recaptured the area in January 1944 and began a new media campaign to blame Katyn on the Germans.¹⁹

Here, we reach the limit on the power of photographs to document: German photographs circulating as evidence of Soviet NKVD crimes looked just like Soviet photographs of German Einsatzgruppen, SS, and Wehrmacht crimes.²⁰ The only difference was how those presenting the photographs wanted the viewing audience to understand them. After all, photographs without context can only provide the same views of skulls with bullet holes or of buried corpses. When looking at a forensic photograph, how was one to know what crime took place and, more importantly, who committed the crime that led to the scene in front of the camera?

Forensic photography took on a larger role as news about the liberation of the first death camps (*lageria smerti* in the Soviet wartime press) began circulating in November 1943, with images of Nazi Soviet POW camps on Soviet territory like Khorol' in the Poltava region. As with Selvinsky at Kerch, the text accompanying the photographs was in the first person singular, in this case, an eyewitness who had survived the camp and testified about what had taken place.²¹ It was not until the Red Army crossed the pre-1939 frontier into German-occupied Poland that death camps became major media events and pilgrimage sites. After all, at least in theory, once on Polish territory that had been solely under German occupation, there could be no doubt about who committed the crime.

Soviet soldiers of the Third Belorussian Army in July 1944 could be forgiven for thinking that what they had just come across in the Polish city of Lublin was another POW camp as rows of barracks stretched off into the distance. But even before Soviet soldiers entered the site they, and the local Lubliners, could see the smoke

stack towering over the camp. The sight of chimneys, still standing in burned cities after a Luftwaffe firebombing, had become a common experience for soldiers on the Soviet western front. But there was no evidence that Lublin had been firebombed. This was more smoke stack than chimney, suggesting that what they were approaching was a factory, perhaps with housing for slave laborers who operated it.

As the soldiers entered the camp, they saw, beneath the smoke stack, rows of ovens with piles of bones and other human remains spilling out, and it began to dawn on them just what they had liberated: what the press called a “death factory,” in Russian *fabrika smerti*, with all of the grim oxymoron that the name implies and to differentiate it from the death camps found earlier. Towering over the “factory” were industrial chimneys, not in service of steel production, but to incinerate the bodies of those killed by shooting or gassing. It took three weeks for researchers to fully understand what Soviet troops had just carried out – nothing less than the liberation of Majdanek, the notorious Nazi extermination camp at Lublin designed for industrial killing.

After Soviet troops liberated Lublin it took researchers and journalists nearly three weeks to make sense of what had happened at Majdanek. Originally constructed as a POW camp for Soviet soldiers in 1941, Majdanek eventually became part of the network of six Nazi extermination camps, all in German-occupied Poland. In the winter of 1941–2, camp authorities began to use Zyklon B gas in a makeshift gas chamber to murder prisoners deemed too weak to work. After installing permanent gas chambers and crematoria, the deportation and mass gassing of Jews at Majdanek began in October 1942 and continued until the end of 1943, even as the camp also maintained a permanent prisoner population. On November 3, 1943, in Operation *Erntefest* or *Harvest Festival*, special SS and police units shot 18,000 Jews just outside the camp, and the bodies were buried or cremated inside Majdanek. After that, Jews were no longer the majority of those imprisoned or killed there, although the gas chambers continued operating until early July 1944, just before the arrival of Soviet troops.²²

The idea of a facility designed for industrial murder using a cyanide-based pesticide was completely foreign to the Soviet soldiers who discovered it, so journalists reported extensively. Like at Kerch, those who wrote about Majdanek, whether Soviet, British, or American, often did so in first person singular. In the Soviet press, photographs accompanied the first-hand liberator testimony with the goal of documenting everything that made Majdanek horrifyingly unique. Konstantin Simonov, reporting for the Red Army newspaper *Red Star*, published the first news reports with extensive photographs on August 10.²³ As historian Anita Kondoyanidi writes about his experience, “As Simonov was writing down the surviving prisoners’ testimonies, his mind refused to accept the reality of what his eyes and ears took in, so he emphasized that he understood why some readers would not believe in the camps’ existence without seeing them first hand.”²⁴

Kondoyanidi writes that Simonov’s “mind refused to accept the reality of what his eyes and ears took in,” suggesting that the senses of sight and sound collected data about external reality. Unlike the data collection function of eyes and ears, however, the mind makes sense of data based on past experience. At the same time, the mind cannot make sense of that which it has not yet experienced. Simonov himself, a war correspondent, who had spent more than three years documenting unprecedented violence and therefore someone who had plenty of experience with unnatural death, found it difficult to incorporate Majdanek’s radically new sensory data into his own previous experience. Therefore, he understood why his primarily Soviet readers, who lacked his deep experience with war, would need to see the camp “first hand.”

If racially motivated mass shootings at Kerch and Babi Yar were unbelievable and demanded first-person testimony, a place like Majdanek was so much more so with its unprecedented technology of death. All Soviet journalists followed Simonov and emphasized the fact that they had seen Majdanek for themselves.²⁵ On August 11, the well-known Soviet filmmaker and occasional journalist Roman Karmen sent a story over the wires. Karmen's story appeared a few days later in the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party USA, which picked up Soviet stories off the wires more readily than the non-Communist American press. "In the course of all my travels into liberated territory," Karmen reported,

I have never seen a more abominable sight than "Maidan" near Lublin, Hitler's notorious *Vernichtungslager* – extermination camp – where more than half a million European men, women, and children were massacred. Even now when SS guards no longer call to each other from the watchtowers and there are no more barking dogs, I cannot believe my own eyes walking through Maidan. It is difficult to believe it myself but my eyes cannot deceive me. I see the human bones, lime barrels, chlorine pipes and furnace machinery. I see the enormous dumps of shoes, sandals, and slippers in men's, women's, and children's sizes bearing the trademarks of a dozen European countries.²⁶

In this opening passage, Karmen, whose "eyes cannot deceive" him, uses the word "see," "sight," or refers to his eyes six times. Karmen contrasted the horrors of Maidan with Babi Yar, liberated eight months earlier in November 1943. In light of what he had now just seen, he dismissed Babi Yar as "a country cemetery compared with Maidan."²⁷

Samarii Gurarii, who worked for the daily Soviet state paper *Izvestiia*, photographed German POWs holding gas canisters imprinted with the German words *Giftgas* or "poison gas" and *Zyklon*. While readers understood the use of poison gas on a battlefield, they would need to turn to Evgenii Kriger's accompanying article to learn that at Majdanek the SS had deployed it in "extermination chambers" that functioned like a conveyer killing off prisoners with ruthless efficiency. As Kriger himself entered a gas chamber, which the Germans had disguised as a shower, he wrote, "I read the graffiti scrawled on the walls and the random drawings that were the last traces of lives extinguished."²⁸

Karmen's painful description in the *Daily Worker* must have been particularly chilling to an American audience not used to reading about, let alone seeing, Nazi atrocities up close and personal. Under the sub-heading "Huge Crematorium," Karmen spared no detail in describing the killing process; however, he switched to a third-person authoritative narrator:

Groups of 100 people would be brought here to be burned almost alive. They already had been stripped and then chlorinated in special gas chambers adjoining. The gas chambers contained some 250 persons at one time. They were closely packed in a standing position so that after they suffocated from the chlorine, they still remained standing. Executioners then would enter, remove the suffocated victims, some of whom still stirred feebly and place the bodies in special carts. The carts were dumped into a roaring furnace heated to 1500 degrees centigrade. The whole thing was organized with diabolical efficiency.²⁹

Karmen carefully used the passive voice, rather than using a subject, in this case "fascists," "Hitlerites," or, more rarely by 1944, "Germans," what one might have expected in a Soviet newspaper shaping the story to particular wartime ends. Karmen concludes this horrific, and as later research would show not completely accurate,

description by assuring readers, “It is difficult to believe it myself but my eyes cannot deceive me.”³⁰ Karmen and Simonov, like Selvinsky before him, knew that readers, whether Soviet or American, might be wary, expecting to be deceived by rumor, story, and even photographs, especially by 1944 in light of the Katyn controversy.

For both American and Soviet readers, Karmen understood that it was politically expedient to turn camps on Polish soil into iconic sites of Nazi atrocities, rather than sites on Soviet soil, to avoid the possible implication that what people were seeing could have been carried out by the Soviets themselves. Photographs of Nazi POW camps looked too similar to Soviet gulags, which were heralded in the Soviet press of the early 1930s as places of re-education, but which the Stalinist state had built into a complete system of slave labor over the 1930s. The gulags had become killing fields in 1937–8. First-hand accounts only increased in importance in a universe in which everyone was committing atrocities.

As a filmmaker himself, Karmen knew that images were used to tell a particular story and that ever since the Enlightenment sight had been privileged as the most reliable means of acquiring empirical knowledge. Therefore, one’s eyes – and in this case the eyes of a Soviet filmmaker trained to play with the boundaries between visual representation and external reality – were the most reliable means of acquiring knowledge, and therefore eyewitness accounts the best form of proof.³¹

Recognizing the need to have as many people as possible see the site, the Soviet army brought German POWs to Majdanek to bear witness to their war crimes. As Simonov notes in his memoirs, “I want to tell this as a witness: soon after the liberation of the camp a few thousand German frontline soldiers, taken as prisoners in battle near Lublin, were led through every inch of Majdanek on orders of the Soviet military leadership. There was a singular goal – to give the POWs the opportunity to be convinced of what the SS had done. I saw with my own eyes that even they could not have imagined what was possible.”³² Simonov describes a two-stage process of witnessing. The first shows the Germans not believing the photographs of their own country’s atrocities and therefore being brought to the site to witness with their own eyes. The second is Simonov’s own witnessing, of watching the emotional response in German soldiers’ faces as they too came to believe the truth of what photographs and rumors had said – and in some cases, acts in which German soldiers took part – as they finally realized that the mass murder of civilians for antisemitic, racial, and anti-Polish reasons was a Nazi policy that mobilized the entire state’s resources.

As photographs from Majdanek arrived in Moscow by airplane from the front, they were put on the news wires and circulated to the American allies, but for the most part, they languished in newspaper and state archives. Editors and government officials in the Office of War Information, who stared dumbly at these unbelievable images, were unsure of what to do with this shocking material and editors were too afraid to publish the photographs, since they came from the Soviet press. Soviet press reports about German atrocities were often presumed to be propaganda, and many American newspaper editors thought that Karmen’s descriptions of the industrial process of murder that had appeared in the Communist *Daily Worker* were simply too obscene to be true. Despite these reservations, on August 13, the *Los Angeles Times* ran Karmen’s article that had appeared in the *Daily Worker*, but not without commentary from the editors: “The only war correspondents permitted to accompany the Russian armies except for occasional conducted tours of the front are Russian. One of these Russian correspondents has written the following special dispatch on the German crematory at Lublin.”³³ The editors’ message was indirect, but clear – dear reader, we

cannot confirm what Karmen is writing, because he's not one of our own. The *Los Angeles Times* ran the article without photographs. Similarly, before its reporters gained access to the site, the *New York Times* published a short piece, "Soviet Writer Relates Story of Lublin Natives" – not about Majdanek but about how Simonov wrote about the camp for *Red Star*.³⁴

It was not until late August 1944 that Soviet occupation forces opened the camp up to Western journalists. Since Soviet photographs were not convincing, perhaps *non-Soviet* eyewitness accounts would be. "I have just seen the most terrible place on earth," wrote William Lawrence in his August 30 *New York Times* article about Majdanek, the first by a foreign correspondent. He spared no detail in describing what made it so terrible: "I have seen the skeletons of bodies the Germans did not have time to burn before the Red Army swept into Lublin on July 23." Later in the article, he emphasized the sense of doubt that a reader might have and tried to put their doubt to rest by reiterating his reliability as an eyewitness: "After inspection of Maidanek I am now prepared to believe any story of German atrocities, no matter how savage, cruel, and depraved."³⁵ Although it had received Soviet photographs of the site over the wires, the *New York Times* ran Lawrence's stories without them. *Life* published a series of Soviet Majdanek photos on August 30, the only major American press outlet to do so.³⁶

In addition to allowing foreign journalists, the Red Army brought local residents to Majdanek in mid-August. Photographs of that day show visitors mourning losses, dressed in their Sunday best. Perhaps they were searching for dead relatives and grieving their own losses. Maybe they came to see what had taken place in their own backyard, since Majdanek sat right at the edge of Lublin. Soviet authorities invited local residents to tour the site so that Poles would see Majdanek as their own, a place where Germans victimized the Polish people. They hoped the local population would forget, or perhaps blame the Germans for, atrocities like those at Katyn and see the Red Army's return in 1944 as liberation rather than reoccupation.

If the dramatic tension of discovering an extermination camp wasn't enough, the Soviets choreographed the ultimate witness-bearing drama. Local Poles, as well as Majdanek survivors, confronted German POWs who were touring the camp on the same August day. Alexander Werth, a BBC correspondent based in Moscow, reported on the encounter: "A crowd of German prisoners had been taken through the camp. Around stood crowds of Polish women and children, and they screamed at the Germans, and there was a half-insane old Jew who bellowed frantically in a husky voice: '*Kindermörder, Kindermörder!*' and the Germans went through the camp, at first at an ordinary pace, and then faster and faster, till they ran in a frantic panicky stampede, and they were green with terror, and their hands shook and their teeth chattered."³⁷ It is unclear whether Werth reported this first or second hand, since although Soviet journalists were on site documenting the drama, foreign journalists as a group were only given access later. Pictures from that dramatic day suggest a more complicated story than Werth's. Mikhail Trakhman photographed Polish residents bearing witness more ambiguously – yes, as angry victims mourning the dead, perhaps even their own dead, but also as bystanders who, on that hot August day, simply watched the frightened German POWs march by, just as they might have watched the smoke rise from the furnaces at Majdanek.

But it was not just victims and perpetrators who were brought to Majdanek to comprehend what had taken place. Soviet soldiers were brought to Majdanek on a "pilgrimage of hate," to become eyewitnesses to Nazi war crimes, and then by bearing witness

to the crime, rile up their anger as the Soviet army pressed west. Retrospectively, the commander of the 3rd Ukrainian Front, V.I. Chuikov, declared that this strategy paid off:

Every Soviet soldier and officer shuddered as he walked by the storehouses of clothing stripped from children and old men and women who had been done to death here ... shuddered at the thought that this could have been the fate of his family, too.³⁸

After his visit to the camp, one Sergeant Remizov said, "Lublin's death camp, which I visited yesterday, made me hate Nazis even more. A horrifying picture of German atrocities summons us to a decisive and merciless fight against the fascist beasts."³⁹

With Majdanek behind them, Soviet troops continued to push Axis forces westwards. Budapest and Warsaw were liberated in late January 1945, Vienna in April, and, after a searing battle that killed upwards of 350,000 people, Berlin fell in early May.⁴⁰ By that point Soviet troops had liberated the sites of all six extermination camps, just as the American and British armies were first discovering concentration camps in Germany.

The swift Soviet advance in July 1944 had prompted Majdanek's German administration to flee before they could destroy the camp, but the other death camp sites liberated that month – Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka – had long since fulfilled their grim purpose and been razed, leaving little trace of what occurred there. On January 20, 1945, the Red Army reached a fifth camp, Chelmno, which had also been dismantled. The only other extermination facilities found intact were at Auschwitz, but Auschwitz had something Majdanek mostly lacked: survivors. Whereas Majdanek had a few hundred, Auschwitz had thousands.

At death camp sites like Treblinka, there was little moving imagery to be photographed, and no reason to make it a wartime pilgrimage site for hate. Since they were mostly empty, there were no first-hand journalistic reports from Treblinka or Sobibor describing "the most terrible places on earth." The official Treblinka report appeared on August 24, 1944, right around the same time that Majdanek was becoming a pilgrimage site.⁴¹ Photographs of Treblinka show burned-out landscapes dotted with chimneys, the only remnants of a camp dismantled by retreating forces. Journalists did not see anything.

In the presence of absence, Soviet journalist and writer Vasily Grossman, along with other forensic investigators working for the extraordinary commissions, interviewed the few remaining Treblinka survivors in order to recreate what had taken place.⁴² They also took pictures of the site with the goal of documenting the remnants of the camp. In an act of imaginative recreation, Grossman, who was preparing his own journalistic account of Treblinka, did something stunning: based on what he had heard from those who survived, both victims and perpetrators, he sketched two maps of the camp.⁴³ His sketch, with notations in Russian, shows both the layout of the camp as well as the path a victim would have taken upon arrival with big black arrows pointing the way. From the train tracks, a victim would walk through an 18-foot-high fence to the barracks. From there, they were led to a changing barracks, in which they would get undressed before moving onto the "path of no return." This path led to the "baths," which Grossman put in quotes to emphasise the grim irony of what actually happened in them. From the baths, the corpses would be incinerated in the ovens and the remains then scattered in the burial pits nearby.⁴⁴ It was a map of hell indeed, based primarily on

the memories of those who had survived. The second sketch shows where Ukrainian collaborators and SS officers oversaw Treblinka's mass murder operations.⁴⁵

The result of his research was the November 1944 publication of *Treblinka Hell* (*Treblinskii ad*) in the Soviet literary magazine *Znamya* and its near immediate translation into English and Yiddish. Most consider Grossman's work the first full-length account of Nazi atrocities against Jews and others based primarily on eyewitness testimony. Although the long-form essay (and eventual book) included a few photographs, it did not include Grossman's map of the camp. Perhaps such recourse to creative imagination might have undermined the book's goal of establishing the veracity of the crimes at Treblinka using eyewitness testimony.

Soviet forensic photography that documented crime scenes, whether taken by Soviet photographers whose work was attributed or by anonymous extraordinary commission photographers, failed the test of indexicality. Instead, first-person eyewitness testimony was privileged over Soviet photography. As Selvinsky pointed out in his 1942 poetic response to Nazi genocide at Kerch, readers may disbelieve rumors, newspaper articles, or even photographs, but the eye cannot deceive.

Despite the photographs' aesthetic qualities, neither Soviet readers nor American editors believed these first images we have of Nazi genocide taken from the vantage point of liberators. In the Soviet press, alongside the many stunning photographs of battle scenes and the grim results of genocide, editors often relied on first-hand accounts of journalists, survivors, and others to tell readers that these individuals had seen what was being described *with their own eyes*. In the American press, few Soviet photographs ever appeared. It was not until American and British photographers arrived at Dachau and Bergen Belsen in April 1945 that Holocaust photographs began widely circulating. Those photographs could be believed, precisely because the Western press had established the artificial distinction between art photography and photojournalism, allowing readers of American and British daily newspapers to believe the photographs that they were seeing.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Thank you to Dr. Victoria Khiterer for inviting me to give the keynote address at the 32nd Biennial Millersville Conference on Holocaust and Genocide, which gave me the opportunity to think about issues of evidence. Thanks also to the editors of *East European Jewish Affairs* and the anonymous reviewers, who helped me refine the argument of this article. A different version of this article appeared as "Is Seeing Believing?" in *Memories of the Holocaust and Genocide*, ed. Victoria Khiterer (New York: Cambridge Scholars, 2014).
2. For the most egregious examples of the Soviet manipulation of photographs for political purposes, see David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan, 1997). The National Gallery of Art in Washington recently mounted an exhibition on a similar theme which embedded Soviet photographic manipulation in a larger history of the altering of photographs in the age before Photoshop. For more on the exhibition, see <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/press/exh/3506.html>.

3. On the role the Soviet newspaper played in building Soviet society, see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin: Soviet Public Culture from the Revolution to the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
4. On the origins of Soviet propaganda, see Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). On Soviet visual culture and the question of belief more broadly, see Margarita Tupitsyn, *Glaube, Hoffnung – Anpassung: Sowjetische Bilder, 1928–1945* (Essen: Museum Folkwang 1995).
5. Tupitsyn, *Glaube, Hoffnung – Anpassung*.
6. See Erika Wolf, “When Photographs Speak, to Whom Do They Talk? The Origins and Audience of SSSR na stroike (USSR in Construction),” *Left History* 6, no. 2 (2000): 53–82.
7. See David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), chapter 2.
8. On the MOMA’s photography division, see <http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/photography>. See also John Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).
9. Because the veracity of photography has been challenged as a result of poststructural theory, there is greater emphasis on identifying not only the subject of the photograph (what is in the picture), but who took it and why. Nonetheless, to this day, despite much research, many Signal Corps photographs are still unattributed. On the history of the Signal Corps and how photography became one of its most important missions in World War II, see Rebecca Robbins Raines, *Getting the Message through: A Branch History of the US Army Signal Corps* (Washington: Center of Military History, 2011), 255–304. See also Barbie Zelizer, “From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now,” in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photograph*, ed. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Urbana–Champaign: University of Illinois, 1999), 98–121.
10. For more on Soviet theories of photography, see Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924–1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
11. In this way, Majdanek was not unlike a place like Dachau, which American occupation forces turned into a pilgrimage site for locals and for visiting American officials who did not believe reports that had been appearing in the press. Unlike Polish locals, who were brought to Majdanek to see their own people’s victimization, the Americans brought German locals to Dachau as perpetrators of the crimes to which they were bearing witness. On the history of Dachau, including its instrumentalisation after World War II, see Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933–2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
12. See *Ogonyok*’s press coverage of Kerch, which appeared over the course of six weeks from mid-January to early March 1942.
13. Ilya Selvinsky, *Wartime Diaries, January 1942* as cited in Maxim Shrayer, *I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 36.
14. For more on Selvinsky and how Soviet Jewish poets bore witness to the Holocaust, see Maxim Shrayer’s important reading of Selvinsky, *I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).
15. “Chrezvychnaia komissia po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistkikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov,” *Pravda*, November 2, 1942. For more on the establishment of the commissions, see Marian Sanders, “Extraordinary Crimes in Ukraine: An Examination of Evidence Collection by the Extraordinary State Commission of the USSR, 1942–1946,” PhD dissertation, Ohio University, 1995.
16. See Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, chapter 5.
17. On the extraordinary commissions, see Marina Sorokina, “People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR,” *Kritika* 6, no. 4 (2005): 797–831. See also Kiril Feferman, “Soviet Investigation of Nazi War Crimes,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no. 4 (2003): 587–602.
18. See for example the National Archives and Records Administration, Summary of Events, “Records Relating to the Katyn Forest Massacre,” <http://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/katyn-massacre/> (accessed 20 June 2014).

19. Anna Cienciala and Wojciech Materski, *Katyn: A Crime without Punishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
20. The similarity of NKVD and Wehrmacht photography led to a major controversy surrounding the important exhibition of Wehrmacht photographs of wartime atrocities. Some of the photographs exhibited as documenting German army atrocities were in fact NKVD photographs. See Omer Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003) for a summary of the exhibition and the surrounding controversy. Thanks to David Ciarlo for drawing my attention to the controversy.
21. "Death Camp: Excerpt from a Doctor's Notes [Russian]," *Ogonyok*, November 20, 1943. On the photography at Khorol' and Maly Trostinets, the larger death camp, at which Minsk's Jewry were murdered, see Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, chapter 5.
22. "Majdanek," *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
23. Simonov's stories first appeared on August 10–12, 1944 in *Krasnaia zvezda* and were immediately translated into dozens of languages and circulated around the world. According to Karel Berkhoff, they were also read on the radio on three evenings at 8:40 p.m. See Konstantin Simonov, "Lager unichtozheniia," *Krasnaia zvezda*, August 10–12, 1944. Simonov's complete account was published in English and can be found in Ilya Ehrenburg and Konstantin Simonov, eds, *In One Newspaper: A Chronicle of Unforgettable Years* (New York: Sphinx Press, 1985), 405–30. On the radio readings, see Karel Berkhoff, "Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population: The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941–1945," *Kritika* Vol. 10, no. 1, Winter 2009: 92.
24. Anita Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps," *Russian Review* 69 (2010): 446.
25. Boris Gorbатов, "Lager na maidaneke," *Pravda*, August 11, 1944, p. 2.
26. Roman Karmen, "Lublin Extermination Camp Called 'Worst Yet' by Writer," *Daily Worker*, August 14, 1944, 8.
27. Karmen, "Lublin Extermination Camp," 8.
28. Evgenii Kriger, "Nemetskaia fabrika smerti pod Liublinom," *Izvestiia*, August 12, 1944, 2; and August 13, 1944, 2. Photographs by Samarii Gurarii.
29. Karmen, "Lublin Extermination Camp," 8.
30. Ibid.
31. On the power of sight, and then its denigration in light of the horrors of two world wars and the rise of French poststructuralist theory, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994). On Roman Karmen, see Patrick Barb  ris and Dominique Chapuis, *Roman Karmen, Une L  gende Rouge* (Paris: Seull, 2002).
32. The original reads, "Khochu rasskazat' kak svidetel': vskore posle osvobozhdeniia lageria neskol'ko tysiach nemetskikh soldat-frontovikov, vziatykh nami v plen v boiakh pod Liublinom, byli po prikazu nashego komandovaniia provedeny cherez ves' Maidanek, cherez vse ego ob'ekty. Tsel' byla odna – dat' im vozmozhnost' samim ubedit'sia v tom, chto zdes' delali esesovtsy. Pristustviiia pri etom i vidiia litsa soldat, ia ponial, chto oni do etogo ne predstaviali sebe, chto takoe mozhet byt'. Vo vsiakom sluchae, mogu skazat' eto o bol'shinstve soldat." For the full text of Simonov's memoirs, see http://militera.lib.ru/db/simonov_km/2_20.html (accessed May 12, 2013).
33. "Writer Describes Nazi Murder Plant in Poland," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1944, 5.
34. "Leon Blum Death in Camp Reported: Soviet Writer Relates Story of Lublin Natives Who Said They Saw Ex-Premier," *New York Times*, August 11, 1944, p. 17.
35. William H. Lawrence, "Nazi Mass Killing Laid Bear in Camp," *New York Times*, August 30, 1944: 1.
36. "Lublin Funeral: Russians honor Jews whom Nazis gassed and cremated in mass," *Life*, August 30, 1944.
37. Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1984), 895.
38. V.I. Chuikov, *Konets Tret'ego Reikha* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rosiia, 197), 49, 50.
39. Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience," 451.
40. As many scholars have shown, the Soviet invasion of Germany was brutal, defined by mass rape, theft, and looting. See among others Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York: Picador, 2006).

41. USHMM RG6.023, file 1434, Soviet Report on Treblinka.
42. These interviews included 13 of the estimated 100 survivors from the August 2, 1943 Treblinka revolt. On the Treblinka revolt, see <http://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/miles-lerman-center-for-the-study-of-jewish-resistance/medals-of-resistance-award/treblinka-death-camp-revolt> (accessed June 10, 2014). On Soviet investigators' use of the testimony of the 13 revolt survivors, see the Extraordinary Commission Report on Treblinka, USHMM RG06.023, file 1434.
43. In addition to the extermination facilities, Treblinka also had a labor camp near the extermination facilities which operated into July 1944, long after the extermination facilities had closed down. See <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005193> (accessed 28 June 2013).
44. Vasily Grossman, USHMM RG22.006.02, folder 5 (RGALI 1710, op. 1, d. 110, pp. 1–55.) The sketch map is on page 5. Much of the report was based on the testimony of 13 Jewish survivors who fled the camp during an armed uprising one year earlier, on August 2, 1943.
45. His act resembles postwar Jewish memorial practices collected in *yizker bikher*, Yiddish for “memorial books.” *Yizker bikher* were produced in small print runs by global residents of a particular town and frequently relied on photographs, memories, and recollections to recreate a town's geography and its Jewish institutions. In many *yizker bikher*, there are hand-drawn maps showing a town's Jewish (and non-Jewish) institutions. Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, eds, *From a Ruined Garden, 2nd Expanded Edition: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).