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## **FORGOTTEN DOCUMENTS OF WAR**

### **Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War and the Holocaust**

*R. Wayne Parsons*



*Dimitrii Baltermants, "Attack"*

Think of photographs of World War II. If you're like me, first up are Joe Rosenthal's picture of the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima and Robert Capa's shots of the D Day landing in Normandy. But there are others, equally good, some of which you can see at the exhibition *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War and the Holocaust*, an exceptionally strong show due to the high artistic quality of many images, the undeniable importance of the subject matter, and the fact this material has largely been overlooked in the West.

Given the enormity of the subject the show cannot claim to be comprehensive, even with approximately 60 photographs on display. But there is enough here to fully engage you for the better part of an afternoon,

and the high quality of the imagery more than compensates for areas left unexplored. Most of the images document the war. One exception is a small selection of pre-war photos that set the stage for what follows by placing these photographs in the context of pre-war 1920s and '30s constructivist and socialist realism aesthetics. The photographic style of this latter work emphasizes dramatic contrasts between light and dark, strong composition, and in some cases motion and speed, essential characteristics of warfare. Georgii Zelma's dramatic photo of a Soviet tank in action in the Battle of Stalingrad illustrates these concerns perfectly.

There is also a small selection of photographs from Nazi concentration camps, especially Auschwitz. Most Americans probably do not realize that the Soviets were the first to arrive at Auschwitz, Majdanek, and other camps in Poland. We have seen so many photos of these horrors that these images don't have as much impact as those depicting aspects of the war less familiar. But mention must be made of a singular image by Vladimir Yudin of a prisoner in regulation striped camp garb at newly liberated Auschwitz searching through a massive pile of eyeglasses confiscated from victims herded into the gas chambers. The prisoner is looking for a pair of glasses that will work for him – he needs to see. The wall label notes the photographer's desire to make a larger point: "to see clearly — to bear witness." This show fulfills that purpose.

Here in the US Dimitri Baltermants is the best-known of these photographers, and based on the work in this show it is easy to see why. He had an exceptional ability to compose photos that succeeded artistically but also conveyed the essence of the moment. With its black figures of soldiers silhouetted against a white sky, his 1941 image "Attack" expresses the urgency of combat and plays up the stark all-or-nothing aspect of war. By positioning the camera low in a trench with the soldiers passing above, Baltermants adds a heroic element to the behavior of these soldiers, ordinary men who have been thrust into a brutal world not of their making.

One further image demanding comment is Mikhail Trakhman's photo of a woman and her daughter. While life as usual carries on in the background, they pull a package through the frozen streets of central Leningrad on an improvised sled. Closer inspection reveals the package, which we first assume might be a sack of potatoes or wrapped household

goods, is in fact a shrouded corpse. During the 900 day Nazi siege of Leningrad more than a million residents died, mostly from starvation; the chilling message of this image is that death became so commonplace that pulling a corpse through the streets attracted no special attention.



*Dimitrii Baltermants, "Behind Enemy Lines" 1941*

Despite our tendency to root for the Soviets in these photos (they were our allies, remember), we see several examples of the heavy hand of the totalitarian system, at times to almost comic effect. One of the most famous photographs of the end of the war in Europe is Evgenii Khaldei's shot of Soviet troops raising their flag over the ruins of the Reichstag. In one version, however, a watch on the arm of a soldier is airbrushed out. As ordinary Russian soldiers could not afford wrist watches, wearing one could be seen as evidence of looting by Soviet soldiers – not something the censors were willing to allow!

Surprisingly, exhibition materials do not satisfactorily address the Jewish theme in the show's title. Were there no non-Jewish Soviet war photographers of comparable merit? Are we to conclude that photographs by Jewish war photographers differ in style or substance from those of their non-Jewish peers? Perhaps these questions are simply too big to be addressed in a modestly-sized exhibition.

Curated by David Schneer and Lisa Tamiris Becker, this exhibit is based on the collection of Teresa and Paul Harbaugh, Denver collectors who have built one of the world's largest collections of Soviet photographs spanning the entire history of that now-defunct empire, including a large number from the Second World War. Surprisingly the exhibition text, while

mentioning the Harbaughs as the source of the exhibited works, does nothing to explain the Harbaughs' collection and their history as collectors. Given this couple's dedication to their cause and undeniable generosity, one hopes this omission will be corrected. Instead of following the latest art-world fads, collectors like the Harbaughs have built substantial collections around overlooked materials, creating essential archives for historians, curators and art lovers, preserving for posterity imagery that might otherwise be lost.

The press release for this exhibition describes it as "breathtaking and heartbreaking," words that are fully apt. This is a sobering exhibition, not because the images are horrible or gruesome or sensationalistic (they generally are not), but because these photographs document the terrible human cost of this war – or of any war, for that matter.