11. Soviet Holocaust Photography and Landscapes of Emptiness

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I used to live in the cities,
And happily lived among the living,
Now on empty vacant lands
I must dig up the graves.
Now every ravine is a sign
And every ravine is now my home.

—Ilya Ehrenburg, "Babi Yar," 1944

On 22 June 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union, launching a war that claimed about twenty-seven million Soviet lives. On 9 May 1945, with Soviet army troops in Berlin, the Germans capitulated, and the Soviets celebrated. In between, Soviet journalists and photographers were charged with telling the story of the war to the public as it was unfolding. Soviet photojournalists had to make sense of the war visually and walk a fine line between the many overlapping stories that the press had to tell: the triumph of Soviet heroism, the population’s persistence in the face of potential defeat, and Nazi atrocities committed against the Soviet population generally, and its Jewish population specifically.

Nazi atrocity and Holocaust photography are generally defined by two canonical sets of images. The first are perpetrator photographs taken by the Nazis themselves, like the photograph of the young Jewish boy with hands raised from the Warsaw Ghetto, whose photo was taken as part of the Stroop Report, or the grim pictures of Einsatzgruppen shooting campaigns on the eastern front. The second set of images are so-called liberation images coming from photographers documenting Dachau and Buchenwald and other concentration camps that American and British armies liberated in April 1945. These two bodies of photography usually illustrate permanent exhibitions in Holocaust museums and are the ones most often studied by those who write about Holocaust photography.1 By moving beyond the canonical and looking

1 See cultural theorists such as Ulrich Baer, Spectral Evidence: Photography of Trauma (Boston, 2002); Andrea Liss, Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust (Minneapolis, MN, 1998); Brett Kaplan, Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust
at Soviet liberation photography that was widely circulated from early 1942 on, we have a better understanding of how the Holocaust was visualized in the Soviet Union as it was unfolding and of how the Soviet population made sense of the unprecedented violence that the war brought to the western regions of the Soviet Union. We will see that the Soviet press used images propagandistically to mobilize the population to fight a war that in its early years was going terribly. The press and its photographers suggested to readers that German occupation would in no way bring peace. Perhaps more important, documenting Nazi atrocities with the seductive, seemingly mimetic power of a camera gave the Soviet Union forensic evidence of war crimes committed against the Soviet people. Finally, the aesthetics of liberation photography from the East European borderlands reveal a radically different Holocaust landscape from that of concentration camps with emaciated survivors.

The Soviet press published gruesome images of Nazi atrocities from the first days of the war, nearly all taken by photographers working for the Germans or German soldiers themselves. Not infrequently, after a German soldier was killed in battle, Soviet troops would find the bodies and retrieve the cameras documenting the atrocities. They were then delivered to the relevant Soviet authorities, in this case the political commissar of the unit, as “trophy photographs.” Most major Soviet press outlets published photographs like “Punishment in Poland,” which appeared in Ogonek, the leading illustrating magazine in the country (Figure 11-1). These so-called perpetrator images—those taken by the Germans and their accomplices, initially coming out of Poland—shaped the Soviet understanding of the Nazi extermination campaign from its first days. It documented the naked brutality of the Nazis, who openly and proudly murdered civilians, including women and children, and it suggested to the Soviet reading audience what Soviet citizens’ fate might be if they did not fight against the German war machine.

Soviet photographers did not witness scenes of Nazi atrocities with their own eyes until late 1941, when the Red Army began reconquering cities near Moscow that had been under Nazi occupation for a brief time. Most of what Soviet photographers saw were gruesome scenes of corpses in the streets, public hangings, looting, and burning—Nazi atrocities that had everything

for only six weeks. In the first week of December, the Gestapo, the German State Secret Police, registered 7,500 Jews who remained in the city after the arrival of German forces. It then ordered Kerch's Jews to Sennaia Square, from which they were deported to an antitank ditch on the outskirts of town and shot. On 31 December, the city was one of the first places with a significant prewar Jewish population to be liberated from Nazi occupation. This made it one of the first places where Soviet soldiers, journalists, and photographers saw the effects of Nazi occupation and the war against European Jewry with their own eyes.

Baltermants's plane landed at an airfield on the outskirts of town near a place called Bagerov Trench (Bagerovskii Rov). The photographer saw older women and families wandering around crying, searching for something (Figure 11-2).


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4 There are conflicting stories about the Nazi mass murders at Kerch. Andrej Angrick's work on Einsatzgruppen D, which carried out the murders, is based on German archives and trial testimony taken in the 1960s. His report says that only 2,500 Jews were murdered in that first week of December. The remainder was murdered in the reoccupation of the city in June 1942. See Andrej Angrick, Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord: Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941–1943 (Hamburg, 2003). Soviet sources, based on survivor testimony, put the number at 7,000–7,500. See Leonid Mel'kov, Kerch: Povest’-khronika v dokumentakh, vosspominaniakh i pis’makh uchastnikov geroicheskoi zashchity i osvobozhdeniia goroda v 1941–1944 godakh (Moscow, 1981). According to one survivor, Jews were rounded up over the course of two weeks and trucked out to Bagerov trench to be shot. Sinti/Roma (Gypsies) were then rounded up and brought to the same site to be shot. See “Testimony of Neisha Kemilev,” Yad Vashem Archives, group M33, file 88, p. 102.

5 The cities to be liberated before Kerch were primarily in the Moscow region (Klin and Volokolamsk) and did not have large Jewish populations, as well as Rostov, which was occupied for too short a time for mass executions. For a list and dates of cities liberated by the Red Army, see militera.lib.ru. For the demographics of prewar Soviet Jewry, see Mordechai Altshuler, Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust: A Social and Demographic Profile (Jerusalem, 1998).
And then, amid the wailing, Baltermants saw dozens of corpses littering the bleak, frozen wintertime landscape. “Were they [the bodies of] Red Army soldiers or prisoners of war?” he asked himself. “The clothing on the corpses suggested that they were civilians, brought out to this field and shot en masse.” His colleague Lev Borodulin recalled many years later, “Now we know exactly whose corpses those were, but in that distant January 1942, one had to guess: were these Red Army soldiers or prisoners; how did all these relatives get here; if they were Communists, how come there were so many; and if they were Communist Youth, how come there were so many small children?”

On that frozen field near Kerch, Baltermants and the other photojournalists assigned to Kerch became the first liberators to photograph the mass murder of Jews by the Nazi special killing units, the Einsatzgruppen, on Soviet soil. Baltermants knew that he was not just photographing for tomorrow’s newspaper but was bearing witness to something important. He used two rolls of precious film to photograph the scene before him. After delays due to the exigencies of transporting film across long distances during wartime, two months later, several of his photographs were published in Ogonek.

Evgenii Khaldei, an up-and-coming photographer working for the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), had been sent south after his tour of duty with the Northern Fleet and was also one of the first to bear witness to Nazi mass murder in Kerch (Figure 11-3). “The trench was two kilometers long,” opens the section of his diary about the discovery at Bagerov Trench of the Nazis’ mass murder of Jews. Khaldei refers to them in his diary as the “7,000 women, children, and elderly,” omitting the word “Jew.” Khaldei interviewed townspeople about the Germans’ six-week occupation of the city, and he also went directly to the trench to interview witnesses. We know, then, that at the time, Khaldei understood that these were Jewish bodies and that Nazi atrocities targeted Jews differently from others. But both his diary and the framing of the pictures in the press elided the Jewishness of the event.

Although Baltermants and Khaldei were among the first photographers at the scene, the first Kerch photographs to appear in the press were by another Jewish photographer working for TASS, Mark Redkin. His photos appeared in Ogonek on 4 February 1942. On the top, the magazine published a landscape
of bodies strewn along an antitank ditch at the center of the composition. Two Soviet soldiers standing on the right investigate the scene as the white of the sky and the white of the snow in the ditch blend together in the top left. The photo beneath the landscape image shows a close-up of the dead, in this case a mother surrounded by dead children. At the time, no one could have imagined a more horrible image, especially one captured by Soviet photographers as opposed to German trophy photographs.

The caption beneath the photographs suggests how Redkin and the Ogonek editors placed the photograph within an evolving narrative of the war and of Nazi atrocities: “Hitler ordered his bandits to annihilate the peaceful Soviet population. Wherever the Germans found themselves, they murdered thousands of women and children. The bodies of the murdered were dumped in a pit (top of the photograph). Among the murdered were many women and children (lower part of the photograph). The Hitlerite thugs showed no one any mercy.” The caption writers obscured the perpetrators of the crimes. In one sentence, it is followers of Hitler, in another Germans. And no mention is made of the fact that most of the dead women and children so grotesquely splashed on the pages of the magazine were Jewish.10

![Figure 11-3](image.png)

**FIGURE 11-3.** Evgenii Khaldei, “Kerch,” January 1942, image scanned from original negative. Courtesy of Fotosoiuz, Moscow.

10 Angrick suggests that the roundup and mass murder of the city’s remaining Jewish population took place over three days, 3–5 December 1941 (Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord, 356).
One month later, Ogonek followed up its earlier Kerch photographs with a two-page layout of photographs by Baltermants and Israel Ozerskii, and an article by the journalist I. Antselovitch. The paragraph introducing the large photo layout: “These photographs were taken at a moment after the German occupiers drove [the people] out to this place. Seventy-five hundred residents from the very elderly to breast-feeding babies were shot from just a single city. They were killed in cold blood in a premeditated fashion. They were killed indiscriminately—Russians and Tatars, Ukrainians and Jews. The Hitlerites have indiscriminately murdered the Soviet population in many other cities, villages, and the countryside.”

It is clear from the caption that by the 1940s, the use of ethnicity in the captions to the photographs reflects a larger shift in the way populations were categorized, away from class background from the 1920s and 1930s to ethnic and racial definitions of identity. Jews were clearly included among Soviet ethnicities. In addition, photographers were also expected to keep careful track of the names and ethnic identities of the people they photographed. So Baltermants would have known the ethnic identity of those bearing witness to the crime and, probably, of the victims in his photographs. Many years after the war, Baltermants claims to have understood that the German occupiers did not, as the caption states, kill Kerch residents “indiscriminately.” He recognized that Jews and other politically suspect people were targeted for murder. From an interview with Baltermants recounting how he took the Kerch photographs, “In the fall of 1941 the Germans drove 7,000 residents—partisans, Communists, and Jews—to the trench. They drove out whole families—women, the elderly, and children. They drove all of them to an antitank ditch and shot them.”

The writers, photographers, and editors insinuated in other ways that this was a massacre of Jews. In Figure 11-2, the photographer has pictured a woman wailing over a pile of corpses, the first photograph in a two-page montage, captioned as “Residents of Kerch Search for Their Relatives. In the photo: V. S. Tereshchenko digs under bodies for her husband.” The photo editor has embedded a second photograph next to Tereshchenko’s, occupying the same visual field on the page, whose caption reads, “On the right: the body of 67-year-old I. Kh. Kogan.” By placing these two photographs side by side, the editors suggest that the Jewish Kogan (Russian for Cohen) is, in


13 Nikitin, Rasskazy, 153.
fact, the husband for whom the very Ukrainian-sounding Tereshchenko was searching. Although this couple reflected the idealized Soviet multiethnic family, the fact could not have been lost on the reader that after the Nazis left town, the Ukrainian Tereshchenko was alive, and the Jewish Kogan was dead.

Finally, the Ogonek editor back in Moscow and Antselovitch hint at the Jewishness of the story when Antselovitch says that according to orders from Berlin, the first to be shot were “Soviet citizens of one particular ethnicity.” In an effort to universalize Nazi atrocities, Soviet editors rarely labeled the victims of Nazi atrocities explicitly as Jews or included Jews in a list of peoples who were targeted. Although some readers may have missed the allusion, many, Jews among them, would have understood exactly which ethnicity the writer had in mind.

From the published record and from many internal memoranda between editors and photographers working for the Soviet press, it is clear that photographing Nazi atrocities was a central mission for Soviet photographers. The impetus to document atrocities only increased with the founding of the Extraordinary State Commission for the Establishment and Investigation of Atrocities Committed by the German-Fascist Invaders and Their Accomplices in November 1942. This was the official state body charged with investigating and documenting Nazi war crimes and then circulating the material for war crimes trials and for public propaganda purposes. These commissions investigated crimes that took place in each and every city that the Red Army liberated, although Marina Sorokina and Niels Paulson argue that the primary purpose of the extraordinary commissions was not to discover the truth of the crimes but to deflect attention from the Soviets’ own war crimes and to publicize Nazi atrocities as part of the Soviet propaganda campaign.14

In most liberated cities, the investigators—along with journalists and commission photographers, whose names did not make the front page of the Soviet press—found pits, ravines, or trenches on the outskirts of town where the mass murders took place and the victims were haphazardly buried. The name of Kiev’s Babi Yar, referenced in the quotation from Ehrenburg’s poem that opens this article, was only the most visible site of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union and its Jewish population after the city’s liberation on 6 November 1943.15 These pits were regarded as crime scenes, and it was


15 The Extraordinary Commission files document more precise locations of the Nazi shootings and almost always include a pit near town. In Lugansk, then called Voroshilovgrad, mass burial pits were found at Ivanishchev Ravine; in Artemovsk at Chasov Ravine, and so on.
the extraordinary commission’s task to prepare materials for war crimes trials against the Germans and their collaborators. Commission photographers, who were not generally the same as the well-known photographers working for the central press, were thus documenting crime scenes. They were forensic photographers.

In most liberated cities, Extraordinary Commission investigators excavated the sites where the mass murders had taken place. Photographers documented both the investigation and the crime scene. Because of the repetitive nature of the photographs, Extraordinary Commission photography became more “generic” as city after city had its war crimes’ scene photographed.

As we will see, the genre of Soviet forensic photography developed by commission photographers intersected with the more crafted aesthetic conventions of Soviet photojournalists when certain liberation sites made it to the front pages of the newspapers. Whereas commission photographers aimed their work at a narrow audience of those reading crime reports, photojournalists were telling a compelling story for a wide public. Together, the two define Soviet Holocaust liberation photography.

Soviet Holocaust liberation photography most often began with a “general view [obshchii vid]” image. Some are empty landscapes meant to be filled in by a reader’s imagination or by articles accompanying the photograph. Others, like Baltermants’s photographs from Kerch, include either mourners or researchers. Carol Zemel has written about American liberation photography: “Nowhere is the Nazi reduction of persons to despised matter more visible [than in images of tumbled heaps of corpses piled in the camps]. In some, the disturbing presence of the bodies is alleviated by the view of Allied soldiers—merging the viewer with the rescuer once again, and providing some sense of closure, some end to the tale.”16 Because the commission photographer documented crimes for a private audience, closure was not necessarily the goal of these photographs. Instead, the photographer bears witness, and documents others bearing witness, to crimes, not to a human story about loss.

After the “general view” image, commission photographers frequently produced close-ups of the work being done at the crime scene. In documenting the September 1943 liberation of the eastern Ukrainian city of Artemovsk, the photographer took pictures of: “a row of children,” “a mother with two children who have been shot,” and “excavations.” The first two closely match the Redkin photographs from Kerch, showing that commission photographers and photojournalists were not necessarily photographing in entirely different

genres. The final one, excavations (raskopki), is the least descriptive and most haunting title of them all.

To conduct its research after a city was liberated, the extraordinary commission exhumed bodies from the ravines, trenches, and pits that dotted the blackened landscape of Ukraine to determine what happened. Researchers counted bodies, checked clothing, examined bullet wounds to determine how and when people were killed. Like forensic researchers who study murder scenes day in and day out, these photographers captioned their photographs in a hauntingly dry manner. Such photo essays of general views, close-ups of corpses, and landscapes of exhumed bodies appear over and over again in Extraordinary Commission reports.

On 20 November 1943, shortly after the liberation of Kiev and the discovery of Babi Yar, Ogonek published photographs from a Nazi camp for Soviet POWs called Khorol' in the Poltava region. It was Ogonek’s first use of the term “death camp” (Figure 11-4). The photographic essay followed some of the now-established tropes from Soviet Nazi atrocity liberation photography—a large open pit, investigators sifting through remains of people. But the photographs of barracks, bones, and graffiti suggested something new to the reader. The presence of a camp suggested that the Nazis established permanent places in which to commit Nazi atrocities, not just ravines on the outskirts of town in which to dump bodies. The notion of a “death camp” as opposed to a ravine, pit, or trench, pushed the visual narrative of death in a new direction, one that would prepare the population for the future discoveries of the death camps on Polish soil.

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17 U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) RG 22.002, reel 7, page 95. The reproductions of these photographs are not of sufficiently high quality to reproduce here.
Jews in the East European Borderlands

FIGURES 11-4a-b. “Death Camp.” Ogonek, 20 November 1943
11. Soviet Holocaust Photography and Landscapes of Emptiness
When imagining extermination and concentration camps, most people think of two sites: Auschwitz, with its iconic gate “Arbeit Macht Frei,” and Dachau and Buchenwald, with piles of bodies and emaciated survivors, whom American journalists photographed extensively in April 1945. In the Soviet Union, however, the first visual images of extermination camps came not from Auschwitz or Dachau, but from the liberation of Majdanek in July 1944.

One of the things that distinguished the visual record of Majdanek from those of the dozens of other sites of atrocities was that the Soviet press, and on occasion the foreign press, published an extensive photographic record. Each major press outlet as well as the extraordinary commissions had photographers at Majdanek. Iakov Riumkin photographed for Pravda, Oleg Knorring for Krasnaia zvezda (Red Star, the Soviet army’s newspaper), Boris Tseitlin for Ogonek. Viktor Tiomin had several photos published in LIFE Magazine and the Illustrated London News. Several other photographers, including a second Izvestiia correspondent from Stalingrad, Georgii Zelma, have Majdanek photos in their archives; and one other, Mikhail Trakhman, has a whole series of hauntingly beautiful landscapes of the camp. At Majdanek, the documentary nature of the Extraordinary Commission photographs confronted the more aesthetically interesting and compelling photographs that had graced the pages of the Soviet press since 23 June 1941. Unlike in Artemovsk, where the anonymous commission photographer did not take poetic license by making beautiful photographs; at Majdanek, all the most important photojournalists were vying for the “best” photographs of the camp, the metaphoric and literal “money shot.” Soviet Nazi atrocities moved from the realm of forensic photography to that of Soviet photojournalism.

Samarii Gurarii’s photographs adorned Izvestiia when the newspaper broke the story about the camp on 12 August 1944, shortly after the well-known Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov’s long reports began appearing in the Soviet and Western press. The 12 August layout in Izvestiia occupied page 1. The photographs were arrayed as a triptych of objects or scenes that would eventually become emblematic of Nazi atrocities—piles of shoes, gas canisters, and corpses. They were clearly arranged for a Soviet audience that had become accustomed to seeing photographs of Nazi atrocities, and sometimes witnessing them when, for example, people returned home from their places of evacuation. With the discovery of Majdanek, the role of bearing witness, of showing the viewers that the nightmare of atrocities was over, became even more important.


19 Struk, Photographing the Holocaust, 141.
In the many photographs that lay in Extraordinary Commission reports from dozens of cities across Ukraine, Russia, and Belorussia, the most typical photographs are like Gurarii’s first photograph in the upper left—the witnessed uncovering of mass burial pits. The only thing that distinguishes this photograph is the large number of people witnessing the exhumation of bodies.

But Gurarii’s Izvestiia triptych forced viewers to see things they had probably never seen before: a bizarre photograph of canisters, for example, one of the few photographs in the visual narrative of Nazi atrocities that begged explanation. A reader would need to turn to the article accompanying the photographs to learn that these somber men holding canisters were in fact holding in their hands the tools that killed people. It was not a gun or a knife, something easily recognizable as a murder weapon. It was a canister of gas—in fact, a disinfectant used to kill lice—that in the case of Majdanek (and the other extermination camps that the Red Army and its photographers would soon uncover) was instead used to mass murder hundreds of thousands of human beings, most of them Jews. These canisters would have been the most difficult photographs to stand alone in 1944, because they had no meaning independent of the text explaining what they were.

The third published Gurarii photograph, of a warehouse overflowing with empty shoes, has more meaning built into the image. The image of the field of shoes became the most important iconic image representing Majdanek—the absence of eight hundred thousand people who once stood in the eight hundred thousand pairs of shoes that accompanying articles said were discovered. This new iconography broke with the images that Soviet readers had come to associate with Nazi atrocities—burial sites, burned down villages, and corpses.

This photograph (Figure 11-5) moves far beyond forensic photography. These are local Poles from Lublin, a large city that is visible just beyond the barbed wire fence of Majdanek. They are either searching for dead relatives, mourning their local losses, or present as part of a Soviet campaign to have the local townspeople bear witness to atrocities that took place in their backyards. Unlike American photos in Germany that have locals witnessing atrocities as a form of punishment, Soviet liberation photographs show Polish witnesses in times of mourning. These photographs allowed the Poles (and all Soviet readers of Izvestiia) to see Poland as a place of mourning and loss, as a victim of atrocities, not like Germany, which was a place that perpetrated violence and had earned retribution and punishment.
At Majdanek, the genre of photographing the Soviet liberators with Jewish, Polish, and other victims was taken to a new extreme. In Figure 11-6, most likely taken by the Soviet Jewish photographer Mikhail Trakhman, we see in the foreground a pile of human skulls, labeled “10,” presumably the tenth item that the extraordinary commission had marked and labeled as evidence. Just beyond the skulls are skeletons of the dead. But the point of the photograph is not the victims’ bones. The photograph is arrayed around the witnesses to the crime, Lublin residents standing and staring blankly at the pile of bones. The women are dressed modestly, mostly in black, although one woman who occupies more than her share of the visual field is dressed in white and appears to be standing on the bones. To the left is a young girl, maybe ten years old, dressed in her Sunday best, having even put on a simple gold bracelet for the occasion—an outing to a concentration camp. The faces are somber, but not that somber. It does not seem as if anyone has recently shed tears at this site. In the background, we see the city of Lublin, which fades into the distance and shadows of other townspeople who were visiting Majdanek on the day the photograph was taken.20

In perhaps the most arresting picture, Trakhman photographed townspeople visiting Majdanek. This is a different angle from the above-mentioned

FIGURE 11-6. Unattributed, but most likely Mikhail Trakhman, “Poles Watching Germans Bearing Witness to Corpses,” August 1944. Yad Vashem Archives 4212/16

20 Yad Vashem Archives, photograph 3031/13.
Gurarii photograph that was published in Izvestiia. This new angle shows an entirely different scene. Unlike the Gurarii image, which is clearly still operating in the forensic genre that puts the dead bodies at the center of the image and suggests that Poles are mourning the dead, Trakhman has put an unfolding drama among the living on display.

The sky is flat, gray, and empty. The only objects breaking up the gray expanse are two brick chimneys off to the right, jutting into the sky, one looking over the crowds, one tiny and off in the distance. Like Gurarii’s, the photograph is centered on the burial pit. But that is not what captures the eye. The trench rips the photograph in two. On the left, the townspeople of Lublin line the edge of the trench, but most of them do not look at the pit. To what are they bearing witness if not to the murdered before them? If one follows their eyes, they are looking across the pit to the right side of the frame where German POWs are being paraded by.

German soldiers were brought to Majdanek, as in this picture, to bear witness to their crimes. The BBC’s Moscow correspondent, Alexander Werth, reported: “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.” But what role do the Polish witnesses play? Unlike photographs from the Soviet Union where the investigators and mourners bearing witness to the crime are figured as “good” liberators, and unlike similar photographs from Germany where local townspeople were brought to see the dead and dying as a form of punishment, the photographer has brilliantly figured the local Poles as ambiguous characters in this dramatic encounter. They are victims mourning their dead, as in the Soviet Union. But they are also passive bystanders who simply watch the Germans parade by, just as they may have watched what was happening at Majdanek from their homes in Lublin during the war. Crossing the border from the Soviet Union into Poland made all the difference in how photographers pictured liberation.

Although the photographers may have given Poles at Majdanek an ambiguous treatment, their presence, coupled with the absence of Jews, rendered Majdanek a non-Jewish place—aside from the many Jews documenting its liberation from behind their cameras, including Trakhman and Tseitlin. In fact, Majdanek was rendered so “not Jewish” that the funeral

21 Werth, Russia at War, 895.
22 Yad Vashem Archives, photograph 4212/16.
procession photographs, another convention of Soviet liberation photography, show crowds lining the streets and rows of coffins being led to the burial ground. But rather than having a Soviet star on a staff leading the way, the Polish, mostly Catholic, crowd is led through the town by crosses and a priest making a eulogy.23

More important, however, than what Trakhman and other Soviet photojournalists photographed is what they did not picture, as Figure 11-7 suggests. As the critic Luc Sante describes in his study of urban police photography from the turn of the twentieth century: “The uninhabited pictures are pregnant with implication . . . And there are incidental factors that influence the viewer but may or may not be germane to the deed associated with the site: shadows, stains, footprints in the snow. The stains may be blood, the footprints may be those of the escaped murderer, or they may not be. Every detail of these pictures, relevant or not, has a weight, as if it had been chosen, and the compositions can seem impossibly definitive. The empty pictures may lack the unifying presence of death, but their power of suggestion derives from their preternatural stillness . . . Empty photographs have no reason to be except to show that which cannot be shown”—in this case, the mass murder of Jews and others in Trakhman’s still landscape.24


23 Photographs of the Majdanek procession can be found at the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem, photo series 3013 and in Mikhail Trakhman’s private archives, managed by his widow, Elena Sitnina, in Moscow.

The more common ravine photographs, like many that appeared in *Ogonek*, left everything to the imagination. Without a caption telling the reader that people were shot and dumped in a ravine or in the above landscape of Majdanek, a reader would be forgiven for simply skipping over a photograph of an empty landscape. The goal of such photographs was to document a crime scene, and in crime scene photography, a photographer conjures what was once in the scene, not simply what one sees in the photograph at the moment it was taken. Luc Sante argues that police photographs show “only that something happened, and that the occurrence left behind a body, a relic, or a site. Their function, therefore, must have been literally as souvenirs, memory aids, records for records’ sake.”

Janina Struk argues that the photographs of Majdanek were less compelling liberation images than those coming out of Dachau and Buchenwald. In her words, “[i]n comparison to the emotive images of human suffering which would be used to represent the camps liberated by the Western allies, those which were released to represent Majdanek showed the industrial scale of the camp—Zyklon B cylinders, the interior of gas cells, the interior of barracks, piles of shoes and boots, ashes of human remains in the crematoria, and a pile of identity cards—the kind of detailed photographic evidence that police photographers might take in the course of a criminal investigation. *Time* and *LIFE* correspondent Richard Lauterbach, one of the few foreign correspondents to have visited Majdanek, wrote that he was largely unaffected by seeing the gas-chambers and open graves.”

Seeing Soviet liberation photography as crime or police photography helps us understand why the images feel less compelling than some of the material produced in 1945 by American liberation photographers, such as Margaret Bourke-White or Lee Miller. Struk is correct in pointing out Soviet photographers’ interest in how the killing occurred. The *Ogonek* layout of Majdanek in Figure 11-8 gives an overview of the Soviet Nazi atrocity visual essay, based on the photographic genre that had been developed by the extraordinary commissions. There are photographs of the means of carrying out the atrocities—chimneys, crematoria, and, on the top right, the room where victims undressed. We then move to remnants of the actual bodies—skulls and bones from incompletely incinerated corpses. As we move from left to right, we see the remnants of the victims—passports and personal photographs, the warehouse of shoes. It is less about the identity of the victims, and more about the crime committed.

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25 Ibid., 97.
26 Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 142.
27 Similar photographs can be found in many private archives. They are also available at Yad Vashem Archives, 5318/189, as well as series 3031.
Zemel has argued that Bourke White and Miller took photographs that lent themselves to becoming icons of the Holocaust, images that were detached from any historical context and lacked temporal and spatial anchors.\(^\text{28}\)

These Soviet photographers were operating in a radically different aesthetic and political universe, one in which documentation took precedence over aestheticization, and that drew on a two-year history of Soviet war crimes photography.

In fact, in Soviet liberation photographs we seldom see close-ups of human faces. One is more likely to see a close-up of the dead than of survivors. Not until Auschwitz, which was \textit{not} widely covered in the Soviet media, did images of survivors become a dominant form of representing liberation. Unlike the other extermination camps, upon whose liberation the Red Army discovered a few dozen survivors, if any, at Auschwitz there were an estimated seven thousand survivors.\(^\text{29}\)

As we see in photographs from the Auschwitz funerals, among those walking the frozen streets from the exhumation area to the burial site were prisoners in striped clothing.\(^\text{30}\)

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure11-8.png}
\caption{FIGURE 11-8. Mikhail Trakhman and Boris Tseitlin, “Majdanek Death Camp.” \textit{Ogonek}, 31 August 1944, 8–9.}
\end{figure}


\(^{29}\) For basic information about Auschwitz, see “Auschwitz,” in \textit{Holocaust Encyclopedia} (Washington, DC), found online at www.ushmm.org.

\(^{30}\) Yad Vashem Archives, photographs 4201/36–53. The archival series 4201 contains photographs taken at Majdanek and Auschwitz that were acquired from the State Photography and Film Archive in Kiev.
The late appearance of the survivor in Soviet Holocaust photography also suggests that the figure of the survivor posed particular challenges for the Soviet understanding of the war and Nazi atrocities. For more than two years, Nazi atrocities had been presented as the total destruction of the local occupied population, of "peaceful Soviet citizens." Few of the articles that accompanied Soviet Holocaust photography asked how bystanders in the photographs managed to remain alive after Nazi occupation. Had Soviet newspapers consistently figured victims as Jews, which they did not, then one could have easily explained that those left alive were simply not Jewish. Since the published record more often framed Nazi atrocities as crimes against peaceful Soviet citizens, however, a reader could be forgiven for asking how some people survived the occupation.

The presence of survivors would have posed additional challenges for readers trying to make sense of the war. How did someone survive Nazi occupation? And, more important, who counts as a survivor, worthy of sympathy, and who a bystander—or worse, a collaborator, deserving of retribution—when "peaceful Soviet citizens" were lying in mass burial pits? Only after the military and its photographers cross into Polish territory do survivors—almost always clearly marked by their striped prisoners’ garb or their emaciated bodies—appear in Soviet Holocaust photography.

In addition to the problematic role the survivor played in the Soviet narrative, American liberation photographers at places like Dachau, Belsen, and Buchenwald had an entirely different scene in front of their cameras, which also demanded a different approach. The extermination camps in Poland did a more complete job of extermination—of both bodies and the relics of destruction—than did the concentration camps in Germany. When American liberators arrived, they found thousands of starving survivors and piles of relatively fresh corpses instead of the empty landscapes and traces of mass murders at burial sites and extermination camps.

But here we reach the limits of seeing Soviet Holocaust photography just through the lens of forensics, especially as liberation photography moved from the realm of the extraordinary commissions to photojournalism that appeared in newspapers. If each image in an Extraordinary Commission photograph was an image documenting a specific crime, as liberation photography moved into the newspapers, it became part of an evolving narrative, a story of Nazi atrocities against Jews, Soviets, and humanity. In this way, the images transcend police photography and function as memorial devices, art, and photojournalism, as much as they document the absence that viewers of these photographs had to fill in with their imaginations.

Susan Sontag, one of the best-known critics and theorists of photography, has argued that images “do not tell [people] anything . . . they were not already
primed to believe. In contrast, images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties are invariably dismissed as having been staged for the camera.\textsuperscript{31} In her words, “photographs cannot create a moral position.”\textsuperscript{32} They merely reinforce what we already believe. These are powerful, and contestable, words, but Sontag reminds us that we situate photographs in our own ideological world and amid our prior experience. A reading audience contextualizes a photograph by what it has already seen and cannot contextualize an image by what it has not yet seen.

The Soviet reading audience could integrate photographs of the Holocaust into the already developing canon of Soviet liberation photography of Nazi atrocities. American newspapers and other press outlets had shunned graphic battle images (let alone atrocities against civilians) in order to present a sanitized picture of the war effort. Because of this, in the words of the historian Paul Fussell, the American home front had a “deep deficiency in imagination.”\textsuperscript{33} That is, until Dachau, Nordhausen, and Buchenwald. Unlike Dachau photographs by American and British photographers, which documented the emotional revulsion and shock the army and these journalists felt upon discovering concentration camps, Soviet photojournalists had already spent three years both documenting and experiencing atrocities. They were the first Holocaust liberator photographers, who created a photographic genre to help them and those who would see and use their photographs make sense of the genocide that unfolded before their cameras.

\textsuperscript{31} Sontag, \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others}, 10.
