

SOVIET SNAPSHOTS

Shutter Release, September 2002

Photography in the Soviet Union was characterized by an initial exuberance of creativity followed by a distinctive formalism. After the October Revolution, an avant-garde modernism emerged that celebrated form and function. By the early 1930s, however, ideology had become paramount. Life was depicted through rose-colored lenses. Nature was frequently pictured as a force to be overcome by Herculean effort. Orthodox photojournalism took on paramount importance. Yet the photomontage emerged, a flamboyant creation. As to the photographic record, it became impossible to predict the past with surety, as ex-post deletion of purged officials from historic photographs became commonplace. Starting in the 1960s, a limited thaw allowed enough artistic license to portray more of everyday people, city and landscapes. From this liberalization emerged dissident photography, depicting lost souls in bleak surroundings, the opposite of Socialist Realism. Throughout the period of Soviet power, photographers as well as other artists were officially supported and nurtured, but it was a time of course when millions of people were imprisoned and killed under cruelly harsh conditions.

Three histories of the conflicted photography of the Soviet Union tell of irony and intractable human nature.

* * *

ALEXANDER RODCHENKO
(1891-1956)

Alexander Rodchenko was a photographer for all seasons, an innovator and master of the medium. Among his famous works, you may recall seeing some of the following: A round-faced babushka with stern gaze squints through her eyepiece, an outstanding character study exemplified to students of photographic method and history ("Mother"). An acrobat is frozen in motion in the shape of a cannonball as he sails through the air, a classic premier of action-stopping photography ("Somersault"). Colossal columns of a great building of St. Petersburg contrast to human scale, not from street level but an aerial view with striking effect ("Gathering for a Parade"). A Young Pioneer blows his bugle with all his might, the lens so close to his inflated cheeks they seem to quiver ("Young Trumpeter"). A woman carries her child in the shadows of massive concrete steps, the photograph consisting almost entirely of alternating black and white lines ("Steps").

Rodchenko began his career as a painter but switched to photography in 1924. Widely considered the most influential photographer of the Soviet era, Rodchenko was

counted among the leading lights of Europe and America who led the integration of photography into the fine arts. Initially known for his engaging portraits, he went on to pioneer the development of techniques such as arresting motion and capturing scenes of daily life from unusual angles of view. *Rodchenko is uniquely credited with introducing these purely photographic techniques as art rather than adapt impressionistic features of painting to photography*, which had become vogue abroad. Although his innovations may not have appeared to square well with the rigid ideology of the times, it is my sense that Rodchenko managed to survive by suggesting rather tenuous links between his creative photography and the orthodoxy of the era. For example, he was quoted as stating that abstract photography helps mankind to see reality in new ways.

For the *Shutterbug* of August 2002, a high-school student enrolled in an accelerated arts program was interviewed and asked which photographer has most inspired him. His answer: Alexander Rodchenko. The reasons: Rodchenko's innovative techniques in creating dynamic art of photography, together with his expertise in managing black and white tones in highly contrasting images.

* * *

YEVGENY KHALDEI AND THE REICHSTAG PHOTOGRAPH

Among the most widely published photographs of the Soviet era, within the country and abroad, was a newsbreaking picture in 1945 of a soldier waving a Soviet flag from the roof of the Reichstag building against a backdrop of the ruins of Berlin. The photographer, Yevgeny Khaldei, was among the most well-known portrait photographers of the Soviet Union. In his recently released video memoir, "Photographer Under Stalin," Khaldei relates the story behind the image.

The photograph was not a capture of a spontaneous event, but was carefully engineered by Khaldei himself. The idea came to him the previous day, but since no Soviet flags were readily available, he managed to have one sewn together from army blankets. Khaldei then gathered some soldiers to ascend the roof of the Reichstag building with the flag, where a number of poses were taken. The negatives were flown to Moscow the next day.

Enlargement of the most compelling photograph prior to publication revealed a serious flaw. The soldier holding the Soviet flag was wearing a wristwatch on each hand, indicating he had likely been looting or blackmarketeering. One of the offending watches was scratched out of the picture, which was then widely published, making the cover of *Life* magazine in America.

* * *

INTERESTING SOVIET CAMERAS

The Soviet *Leica*: Alexander Rodchenko benefited from using the first mass-produced 35mm camera of high quality, the Leica rangefinder introduced in Germany in 1925. The model offered precision, high-resolution photography in a robust design.

Manufacture of a premium camera was accorded priority in the Soviet Union. In 1934 a model of the high quality and features of the Leica 35mm rangefinder was introduced in quantity production. In fact the new camera was nearly an exact copy of the Leica II(D) with coupled rangefinder and f3.5/50mm lens. In a rare display of transparency, the new camera was publicized as produced in a “labor commune” of the NKVD. Through 1941 the serial plates on the camera were so inscribed. The Soviet Leica was named the FED—the initials of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet security service. Technically the quality of FED cameras was reported to be excellent.

Ionkor (“Young Correspondent”): Perhaps the closest a Soviet camera came to cult status, the Ionkor was an abbreviation colloquially translated as “Cub Reporter.” Produced in the early 1960s, the camera was a simple medium-format 6x6cm rangefinder built of rugged bakelite. Colored jet black or deep red with a catchy art-deco logo fronting the lens, the camera ultimately became a collectible.

Other notable Soviet cameras include the *Zenith*, a quality SLR 35mm camera introduced in 1952, with autoexposure added in 1967. The *Narciss*, a vanity 16mm camera, was produced in the late 1960s; as was the *Photon*, designed to shoot instant (Polaroid-type) film, but which was not mass-produced because of difficulties in manufacturing the film. The camera used by Soviet cosmonauts in flight was the medium-format *Salyut* that has been produced in Kiev since 1957.

©Bill Katzenstein