

Kurdistan may encounter a little challenge because of the lack of evidence about the sociological literature and intellectual debates in the book.

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Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin’s Russia: Defacing the Enemy, by Denis Skopin, Routledge, 2022, 168 pp., \$170 (hardback), ISBN 9781032027050, \$47.65 (ebook), ISBN 9781003184744.

Many visual editing programs today allow users to radically alter an image in three clicks—five at most. Select an unwanted detail, a person, or a part of the background. Cut it. Save an “improved” version. If you are adventurous enough, you can copy and paste a new visual content into the emptied area.

It would be strange to associate this routinized technical managing of visual materials with any moral dilemmas or existential angst. Different iterations of the image’s original content and structure are nothing more than attempts to operationalize visual data. An image is never final. Nor finalizable. Editing is hardly a “violation” of its integrity; it is a way to “enhance” and “augment” it. Refreshingly, *Photography and Political Repressions in Stalin’s Russia* by Denis Skopin reminds us about predigital times when alterations of images were a much more complex affair with serious political, psychological, and social consequences.

Skopin is noticeably inspired by David King’s pioneering effort in documenting a sustained Soviet visual practice of obfuscating portraits of “enemies of the people.” His collection powerfully exposed the subjection of photographic or artistic pictorial records to diverse acts of mechanical defacing—be it airbrushing, blackening, whitening out, or physical excising (see David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia*, Metropolitan Books, 1997). Far from being accidental or random, such retroactive editorial interventions from the Revolution of 1917 onward engendered an eerie subgenre of the Stalinist visual culture: partially destroyed artifacts with gaping holes instead of the individuals, whose graphic (and physical) presence was deemed to be politically and socially inappropriate anymore. *Photography and Political Repressions* is motivated precisely by this dual historical quality of such visual documents—that is, by their constant oscillation between a particular historical moment, which was recorded by the original photo, and physical traces of the active reshaping of the initially recorded information later. It is the acquired fluidity of these photographs’ temporal identity and evidentiary performativity that constitutes the book’s core material.

As Skopin rightly observes, King’s volume—despite its enormous influence—had no conceptual or interpretative ambitions; mostly, it was concerned with displaying ominous manifestations of Stalinist cancel culture. The book under review makes a few important steps further by exploring reasons, emotions, assumptions, and consequences that such defacing interventions could have had. If King was preoccupied with demonstrating the life of the image *before* and *after* its editorial “cleanup,” then, Skopin focuses on the dynamics that took place *during* the process of their visual “decluttering.” By studying “mutilated photographs,” Skopin asserts, the book provides “an insight into the psychology of Stalin’s terror and the process of subjectivation of Soviet citizens during this

period” (3). Manipulated photos are used in the book as access points to “the defacer’s motives” (1) and to “internal psychological effects” that the terror produced (3).

Certainly, the book is a bold and creative undertaking. The validity and even plausibility of psychological insights discerned by Skopin from images could be easily questioned. Yet the book’s major contribution is not in its speculative conclusions but in the successful relocation to a new theoretical context of an important part of the visual archive of Stalinism. The book brings together scholars, ideas, and materials that normally stay apart. Familiar totalitarian assumptions about Stalinist socialism (picked from Hannah Arendt, Robert Conquest, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Jörg Baberowski) are somewhat mitigated by methods borrowed from the revisionist school (Sheila Fitzpatrick and Wendy Goldman) as well as by the research on Soviet subjectivity (Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin) and observations of cultural historians of Stalin’s cult (for example, Jan Plamper).

As if this were not enough, Skopin filtered this ecumenical blend of methodological approaches to Stalinism through the conceptual sieve of continental philosophy (Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, Gilbert Simondon, etc.), the history of European painting, and (to a lesser degree) studies of photography. The result is a vibrant and novel reconstruction of historical milieus, mental states, and affective conditions, which were reflected, refracted, and recorded in the process of people’s editorial intrusion into the bodies of photographic documents.

Such an intense conceptual embeddedness could have easily produced an indigestible cacophony of names and methods. To avoid this trap, Skopin organizes his overall narrative in a nontrivial and effective way: parts with historical excursions and theoretical contemplations are alternated with parts that deal with photos. As a result, history and theory do not quite blend with discussions of images in the book, preserving a possibility for the dialogical autonomy of discursive and visual forms of analysis. Thus, the first chapter, “*Stalin’s Repressions: Historical Overview and Theoretical Examinations*,” reframes Stalinist terror as a part of a larger condition of “Western Modernity.” Skopin significantly adapts the modernist dimension to the Soviet context, though, seeing it as a history of a continuous modern war, which makes the figure of the enemy structurally and existentially indispensable: “Since the war is modern, the front line can be between a group of friends or a family. The enemy in the modern war—and Soviet society throughout its history was involved in a war—is equivalent to an ‘enemy within’” (13).

Chapter 2, “*Portrait’ Criminal Cases*,” translates these somewhat abstract statements into a language of practical policies and actions. Assaults on portraits of Soviet leaders were used for identifying (and neutralizing) the “enemies” who would be unnoticeable otherwise. The chapter assembles an impressive collection of the so called “domestic crimes” against the pictorial incarnations of political functionaries of various ranks—from threatening Stalin’s portrait with an axe or shooting it with a slingshot to making “indecent” inscriptions, drawing caricatures, or misprinting and (unintentionally) distorting representations of local leaders during the publishing process. Richly illustrated, the chapter also presents a useful discussion of the vocabulary of defacement, showing vernacular technologies for obfuscating and removing the undesirable or compromising visual material.

The book returns to theoretical/historical generalizations in Chapter 3, “*The Group Portrait: Ontological and Political Backgrounds of the Genre*,” where it unfolds philosophical, social and psychological dimensions of the group portraiture and, consequently, of the process of removal of some members of the group from the image. Here, the photograph completely loses its objectal status of a mere material document that duplicates a historical moment with optical means. Instead, Skopin endows group portraits with a formative power to forge, maintain, and amplify the sense of community. Consequently, the group photo reemerges as an object “through which an emotional connection between people is established and maintained” (55). Again, these general and normative observations are given some practical dimension in Chapter 4, “*Collapse of Interpersonal and Family Relationships during the Terror (Editing Photographs of Friends and Families)*.” Starting from his basic assumption that a collective photo is nothing less than an explicit recognition of some common quality shared among the photographed people, Skopin claims here that “by coappearing

in photographs, people ... sign, by their own free will, a pact of friendship and equality" (74). This is, no doubt, a dramatic exaggeration and simplification of the nature of the snapshot, but it does its interpretative work, helping Skopin to bridge otherwise completely disconnected realms. Because the group portrait is a sign of an emotionally bonded union, then any fragmentation of this union—any defacement of its members, that is—would inevitably incur some emotional harm. Correspondingly, when done successfully, such “cleansing drained the individual of all political beliefs and emotional attachments and filled the person’s inner self with new content. The state with its ideology occupied the inside of the individual” (102). Not unlike today’s visual editors, the state seemed to perform some sort of photo-shopping by cutting and pasting ontologies inside of its subjects.

The last chapter, “*The Photographs of ‘Former People’ in the NKVD Card Indexes and Edited Photographs of Secret Police Officers,*” brings the narrative to a logical closure by showing how the Soviet police system (the NKVD), which was largely responsible for the emergence of the genre of the mutilated photo documents, turned onto itself and subjected its archive of secret police officers to the same operations of removal and obfuscation.

Drawing on archival materials, memoirs, and already existing scholarship, *Photography and Political Repressions* does a very important job of exploring epistemological dimensions of the visual archive of the Stalinist period. This is still a field that remains seriously underexplored, and Skopin’s contribution suggests several productive paths to follow, which is not to say that the book does not raise questions and doubts. Carried away by his militarist version of Soviet modernity, Skopin is clearly interested more in the political life of images than in images themselves. It is not by chance that Nikolai Yezhov (the head of the NKVD) is mentioned in his book 49 times while such theorists of early Soviet photography as Sergei Tretiakov, Osip Brik, or Leonid Volkov-Lannit (to name just a few) are not mentioned at all. Crucial debates about photographic practices in *LEF* and *Sovetskoe foto* are completely (and inexplicably) ignored. These (and other) lacunae have their effect. For instance, I find rather naïve the book’s emphatic treatment of group photographs as “a visual demonstration of a ‘mental coincidence’ of represented persons,” or as material manifestations of (if not as substitutes for) “an affective-emotional community” (118). The medium (photography), the message (collectivity), the referent (group), and the actual experience (affect) are unproblematically collapsed in this approach, being denied any specificity and distinction. In his search for an effective explanatory framework, Skopin sometimes abandons his analytical objects too hastily; the logic of the discourse tends at times to dominate the logic of the material. Important as they are, these drawbacks, however, do not diminish the significance and originality of Skopin’s creative reassessment of photography and political repression in early Soviet Russia. No doubt, his conceptual interventions would be of interests to scholars of Stalinism, and the visual material perceptively curated by the author could provide a fascinating resource for undergraduate students’ independent work.

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The Zelensky Effect, by Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale, Hurst Publishers, 2022, 424pp., \$24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781787388635.

For well more than a decade, scholarly work on Ukraine has pointed to a notable increase in attachment to a more civic form of national identity in the country. Implications of this trend include a growing sense of distance from Russia by many Ukrainian citizens, which increased