

History

UDC 94(47)"1920/1939":32.019.5:77

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18136483>

**Visualizing Totalitarian Ideology:
Source Criticism of Soviet Photo Propaganda (1920s–1930s)**

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Accepted: 23.11.2025 | Published: 30.11.2025

Abstract: *The objective of the study is to analyze Soviet photography of the 1920s and 1930s, which was adjusted to achieve a propaganda effect. The research methodology is based on the historical-critical approach to the study of photographs and is built on a traditional two-stage analysis of sources: external (formal) and internal (using additional sources of information) criticism. The study also extensively uses methods of special historical disciplines, primarily iconology, which allows searching for hidden meanings and possible interpretations of images.*

Analysis of photographs of the studied period showed that the active use of various types of photo correction in the 1920s and 1930s was associated with the authorities' desire to exert cognitive influence on the public and censor visual data in the mass media. An important aspect of the examination of Soviet photo propaganda was the identification of methods of visual manipulation with symbolic constructivist-style images of new buildings intended to exert a hidden influence on the viewer. An analysis of Soviet photographs of the 1920s and 1930s shows that the photographs contain connotative information hidden through staged scenes, retouching, photomontage, and "palming". The main areas of adjustment to the content of photographic documents were: staged shots of successes in "big constructions", designed to demonstrate the scientific and technical achievements of the USSR and its ability to implement large-scale projects; retouching, which was often used to create a flawless image of party figures and "production leaders"; photo montage to increase the number of participants in significant political events; and "palming" to remove the undesirable people and objects from photos.

Keywords: *cognitive war, monumentality, architecture, building, constructivism, history of science and technology, digital technologies, computing technologies, retouching, photomontage.*

Візуалізація тоталітарної ідеології:

джерелознавча критика радянської фотопропаганди (1920-ті–1930-ті рр.)

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Анотація: Метою дослідження є аналіз радянської фотографії 1920-х–1930-х років, яка зазнала корегування для досягнення пропагандистського ефекту. Методологія дослідження базується на історико-критичному підході до вивчення фотографій та побудована на традиційному двоетапному аналізі джерел: зовнішній (формальний) та внутрішній (з використанням додаткових джерел) критиці. У дослідженні також широко використовуються методи спеціальних історичних дисциплін, насамперед іконології, що дозволяє шукати приховані сенси та можливі інтерпретації зображень. Аналіз фотографій показав, що активне використання різних видів фотокорекції у 1920-х–1930-х роках було пов'язане з бажанням влади здійснювати когнітивний вплив на громадськість та цензурувати візуальні дані у засобах масової інформації. Важливим аспектом дослідження радянської фотопропаганди було виявлення методів візуальної маніпуляції із символічними зображеннями новобудов у конструктивістському стилі, спрямованими на здійснення прихованого впливу на глядача. Аналіз радянських фотографій 1920-х–1930-х років показує, що фотографії містять конотативну інформацію, приховану за допомогою постановочних сцен, ретуші, фотомонтажу та «пальмінгу». Основними напрямками коригування змісту фотодокументів були: постановочні знімки успіхів «великих будівництв», покликані продемонструвати науково-технічні досягнення СРСР та його здатність реалізовувати масштабні проекти; ретуш, яка часто використовувалася для створення бездоганного образу партійних діячів

та «передовиків виробництва»; фотомонтаж для збільшення кількості учасників значущих політичних подій; та «пальмінг» для видалення небажаних людей і предметів з фотографій.

Ключові слова: когнітивна війна, монументальність, архітектура, будівництво, конструктивізм, історія науки і техніки, цифрові технології, обчислювальні технології, ретуш, фотомонтаж.

Statement of the problem. The rapid growth of the use of the Internet and the widespread implementation of digital technologies in the field of public communications as a result of the 4th and 5th information revolutions provoked exaggerated expectations among the public regarding the objectivity of available information. However, practice has shown that modern digital technologies make it possible to effectively hide certain data from the public (“information noise”, “copywriting effect”, etc.) and control information flows (“filter bubbles”, trolling, etc.). It turned out that modern network technologies are capable of transmitting propaganda and misleading a significantly larger number of people and more effectively than traditional media.

In the circumstances of the War for Ukraine's Independence (2014–2025), it is especially important to strengthen the social stability of Ukrainian society by developing an effective strategy of countering cognitive destructive influence (“cognitive war”) in the media, aimed at forming subconscious disbelief among Ukrainians in their own strength and irrational recognition of the invincibility of the enemy. An important role in organizing informational-psychological resistance should play the consideration of global processes that humanity is witnessing in the field of public communications. At the beginning of the 21st century, society is experiencing an intensified “visual shift”—a transition from text-centric to visually-centric perception of information. The readiness to counter harmful visual influences should include not only technical measures of neutralizing hostile fakes and

manipulations in media, but also the study of historical experience in the use of visual political technologies by anti-democratic regimes for invasive cognitive influence on the public.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The study of the visual political culture of Soviet totalitarianism is largely represented by works on urban studies and art history. Among them, an important place belongs to researches of modernism and constructivism as methods of creating a new social environment. For example, S. Shklyar's work analyses the typology, stylistics, functional and spatial solutions of constructivist buildings in the Ukrainian SSR in the 1920s and 1930s, which helps to form an idea of Soviet constructivism as a coherent artistic movement [1]. I. Prokopchuk and I. Pakhalok consider Soviet constructivism in architecture and photography primarily as a unique stylistic movement that was supposed to reflect the ideals of industrial communist society [2]. The study of compositional methods typical for constructivism in the Ukrainian SSR leads A. Budnyk to the conclusion that Ukrainian constructivism had its own stylistic features [3].

The political and ideological influence on the artistic environment in a totalitarian society attracts considerable interest of scientists, as evidenced by the collective monograph “The Culture of Memory in Contemporary Ukrainian Society” [4]. The informational-psychological influence of Soviet visual art has been studied by O. Rogotchenko [5]. Conceptually, in his monograph, O. Rogotchenko reveals the sociocultural connection between the process of the formation of the totalitarian society and the development of its distinctive visual arts [6]. The author's thesis about the resistance of Ukraine's artistic community to government interference found some resonance in the scientific community, as evidenced by the work of V. Karpov [7]. The peculiarities of the process of politicization of the artistic community were summarized in articles of O. Khoroshilov [8] and Ye. Lanyuk [9].

So, researchers are mostly focused on the relationships between the art and the government. At the same time, there's a lack of works that can show the connection between the technical aspects of the formation and development of Soviet visual propaganda and its cognitive impact on the public. The work of I. Petrova and O. Khromova analyses how Soviet monumental art influenced the collective consciousness of society [10]. Specific technical means of enhancing the visual impact of Soviet propaganda are highlighted in the research of M. Kostiv and T. Sopronyuk [11].

Thus, it requires careful consideration to study the technical aspects of Soviet visual propaganda. Conceptual and methodological issues in researching visual history and culture, as well as methods of adjusting politically significant images during the formation of Stalinist totalitarianism, remain insufficiently studied.

Identification of previously unresolved parts of the general problem.

Therefore, in this paper, the main focus will be on the technical aspect of creating images of visual political culture as an integral part of photographic reality in the conditions of the formation of the Soviet totalitarian political regime in the 1920s and 1930s.

Formulation of the objectives of the article (task statement). The objective of this study is to critically examine Soviet photography of the 1920s and 1930s that has been staged, photomontaged or retouched, and to reveal the hidden manipulative goals of such corrections. The research methodology is based on a historical-critical approach to working with photographic documents as sources and is built on a traditional two-stage source analysis of photographs: external (formal) and internal (involving additional sources of information) criticism. In the process of criticizing photo documents, methods from special historical disciplines, primarily iconology, were also widely used. A comprehensive iconological approach to the analysis of Soviet photographic documents from the 1920s and 1930s involved the use of E. Panofsky's three-level method of interpreting graphic images, A. Warburg's

“pathosformel” and semiotic iconological analysis. This made it possible to carry out a source-critical interpretation of Soviet photo-propaganda works, to study their symbolic content and hidden intentions.

Summary of the main research material. Between the World War I and World War II, European visual arts reached new heights in the creation of propaganda art – works that combined artistic elements with political messages. The totalitarian political regimes that came to power in Italy, Germany, and the USSR created conditions for the rapid growth of propaganda visual art. The need to maintain constant, comprehensive state control over the mass consciousness of the population led to the transformation of propaganda art into an industry intended to form a specific political culture of reflexive emotional loyalty to the ruling regime. The cognitive influence of cinema, radio, photographs in the mass media, sculpture and architecture permanently convinced the broad masses in the priority of the state's interests and the need to be constantly ready to fight the internal and external enemies of their country. Having gained power in 1917–1922 through populist slogans, the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) found itself faced with the need to maintain ideological control over the broad masses in the conditions of post-war total economic crisis. A saving political technique for the Bolshevik regime became the concept of deferred reward – promises of prosperity in an uncertain future, in order to justify the current miscalculations of the authorities and the need to organize the people's super-efforts for the survival of the country. The formula of “deferred happiness” served as an ideological tool that fostered the psychological loyalty of the population to the authorities by forming an ideal image of the future USSR in the mass consciousness (today it could be called “virtual political reality”). To encourage belief in an utopian future, the communist regime offered the population a visualization of it that combined monumentalism, the heroization of the “Soviet citizen” and the hyperbolization of technical achievements.

It was a specific way of cultivating among the citizens of the USSR collectivism and maintain their interactive involvement into the creation of monumental visual markers of communist ideology through the so-called “great constructions of socialism” and constructivist experiments with urban development – the construction of the House of State Industry, House of Projects, the International Hotel, the Main Post Office building, the Gigant student dormitory complex in Kharkiv, the Central Railway Station and the House of the Doctor in Kyiv. New buildings in the Soviet constructivist style were intended to serve as models of architecture for the new socialist society, whose task was considered to be the creation of space for collective living. Thus, houses-communes and factories-kitchens were to serve as instruments of social engineering and, at the same time, demonstrate the Soviet society's desire to build a “city of the future” where collective welfare and progressive technologies would dominate (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. The Dzerzhinsky square. Kharkiv in the 1930s.

Source: [1, P. 156]

Soviet photo propaganda actively used architectural images of constructivism, combining documentary style with socio-utopian aesthetics. Soviet photographic art transformed real buildings into visual metaphors of a future in which there was no place for individualism. The cultural features of constructivism were its mass character, functionality, and the cult of technological power. Among Soviet photographers, the A. Rodchenko's method of so-called dynamic composition

became widely used. It employed the diagonal lines in the composition of the frame, which gave the image a sense of movement, and used the counter-angle shots, where the shooter photographed buildings from a low angle to emphasize their monumentality. At the same time, a unique aesthetic of photographing builders was formed: the always smiling faces of the workers were supposed to demonstrate their enthusiasm.

Under the conditions of the establishment of a totalitarian political regime, the average citizen inevitably became the target of a powerful visual cognitive attack aimed at distorting his perception of the surrounding reality. During the 1920s and 1930s, there was an increase in the number of periodical illustrated publications in the USSR. In 1930, the All-Union State Illustrative Photographic and Publishing Trust "Soyuzfoto" was created with the aim of improving Communist Party and government propaganda. The magazine "Proletarian Photo" explained its readers in an article entitled "Photography Helps Build Socialism" that "photography, like the press, has the task of being not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator, but also a collective organizer" [11, p. 134].

At that time, visual manipulation of photographic images became very common in the Soviet media, and aimed at forming a positive image of industrialization and collectivization policies in the minds of the population. Soviet photo propaganda extensively used staged photography, photomontage, and retouching. For example, Soviet photographers were particularly fond of staging photographs of agricultural machinery lined up in fields, as if they were military vehicles on parade. Rows of tractors and combine harvesters, supposed to symbolize the technical superiority of collective farms over traditional peasant farming (Fig.2).



Fig. 2. Staged photo: Tractor column in Krasnokutsk canton of the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

Source: [12, p.3]

Typical features of staged photography were the participants' acting in front of the camera (the characters' faces always radiated either positive emotions or unwavering determination) and the use of studio photography or scenery (especially when it was necessary to show the prosperity of collective farmers and workers).

Not less popular in Soviet propaganda was photomontage – the process of creating an image from different fragments of several photographs. Soviet artists used mechanical and projection montage. Mechanical photomontage involved cutting and gluing different photographic images. Projection photomontage involved the sequential exposure of negatives onto the same sheet. The signs of photomontage were different angles of shooting individual objects and different directions of their lighting. A characteristic result of photomontage was the visual effect of people “hanging in the air”, which was the result of deliberately removing the original background of the shot and replacing it with an artificial one (Fig.3).

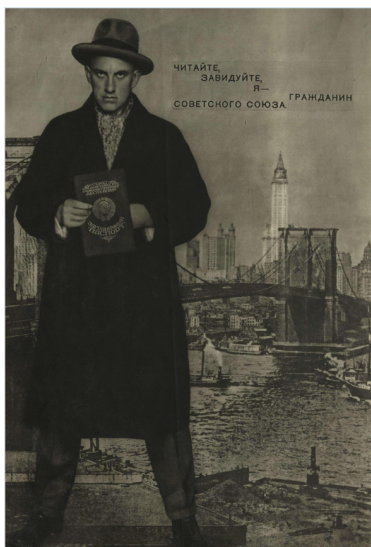


Fig. 3. The Effect of “hanging in the air”: photomontage dedicated to V. Mayakovsky's trip to the USA in 1925.

Source: [13, p.8]

A common plot of photomontage in Soviet political art was the creation of artistic compositions in which objects that performed the USSR state symbols acquired hypertrophied dimensions. They were supposed to show the scientific and technical achievements of the USSR and the grandeur of Soviet construction. For example, a photomontage with the sculpture “Worker and Collective Farmer” on a globe and a photomontage dedicated to the construction of the Moscow-Volga Canal with a monument to V. Stalin were supposed to convince the viewer of the USSR's ability to implement large-scale geopolitical projects.



Fig. 4. The Use of Exaggerated Soviet Propaganda in Photomontage.

Source: [14, p.1; 15, p.7]

Another popular photomontage technique was the artificial increase in the number of participants in pro-government demonstrations and rallies in photographs. These corrected photographs were intended to illustrate the mass support of the population for the domestic and foreign policies of the ruling regime. For example, in the photograph of V. Lenin's speech at the opening of the Second Congress of the Comintern in Petrograd in 1920 and the same photograph published in 1924, it is clear that photomontage visually increased the number of listeners (Fig.5).



Fig. 5. V. Lenin's Speech at the Opening of the Second Congress of the Comintern in Petrograd. Photo from 1920 (left). Photomontage from 1924 (right).

Source: [16, PP. 90–91]

Retouching, as a method of processing photographic materials, involved removing, adding, replacing or covering certain elements of a photographic document. Technical retouching was used to eliminate accidental defects in photographs, structural retouching involved cutting and pasting the necessary parts from negatives, and artistic retouching involved coloring photographs. Retouching was often used to create a flawless image of party leaders and “production leaders”. For example, a photograph of J. Stalin from 1924 after retouching in 1939 shows an ageless leader, emphasizing the inviolability of the ruling political regime (Fig. 6).

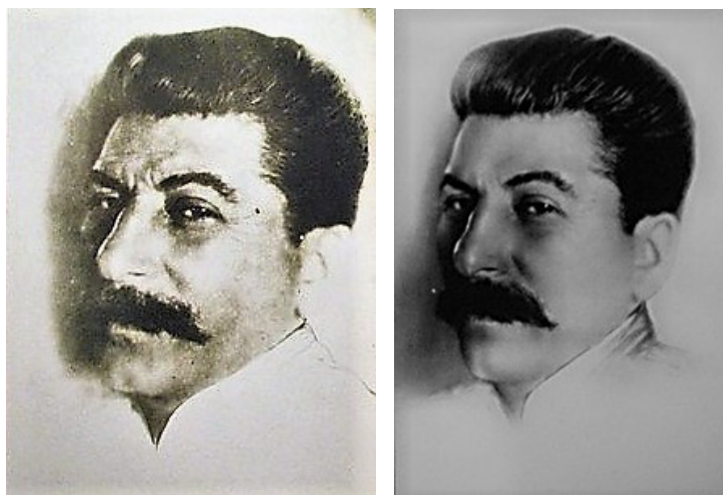


Fig. 6. J. Stalin: photo from 1924 (left). Retouch of the photo in 1939 (right).

Source: [16, PP. 110–111]

A special application of the retouching method was the creation of the “palming” effect – darkening a certain area of a photograph in order to hide (remove) a certain object. For example, the removal of images of repressed persons from group portraits using retouching techniques was intended to reconcile contemporaries with the ruling party's practice of concealing its political crimes (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Photo of K. Voroshilov, V. Molotov, J. Stalin, and M. Yezhov on the Moscow-Volga Canal, from which M. Yezhov was erased by the “palming” method.
Source: [16, P. 176]

It should be noted that it is often impossible to detect signs of the removal of a particular object from an image without special technical equipment. The fact of such manipulation of visual information can only be detected if the original negative or print, which differs from other copies of the photograph, is found.

Conclusions. Thus, source criticism of Soviet photo propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates its significant role as a tool for visualizing totalitarian ideology. The ruling regime turned photographic images used in the mass media into an effective means of political communication with the public. The visualization of the achievements of Soviet constructivist architectural art, combined with the methods of staged photography, photomontage, retouching and palming, made it possible to create an artificial alternative photographic reality. It was a conditionally ideal world without social problems, political and economic crises. The communist regime used photographic art as a means of public upbringing, widely employing such methods of visual influence as: the rational laconicism of the constructivist outlines of new buildings well known in the USSR, images of the impressive mass participation of the population in pro-government political actions, and the idealization of photographic portraits of party leaders and their closest associates.

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