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## Refusing to Fade: Soviet Domestic Photography Archives as Memory Strongholds

Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko, *In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2023).

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Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko's *In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos*, the result of a long-lasting intellectual endeavor that began around 2006 and was ultimately published in 2023, immediately captivates the reader with its commanding and elegant materiality. At first glance, the book recommends itself as a photographic album, due to the excellent quality of its glossy paper and its rich iconographic material. Nearly all of the reproduced photographs return the viewer's gaze in the most literal sense, prompting an immediate affective engagement with the content. This prevents the casual graze over the surface that many beautiful "books as objects" elicit and instills a sense of responsibility towards the researchers' ethical as well as theoretical tenets. Beyond the appearance of the book, this ethical dimension is what instantly grabs attention, insofar as the preface starts by thematizing the sinuous paths post-Soviet domestic photography archives relentlessly take. It illustrates its argument with a snapshot of a military unit stationed in Kyiv — taken in 1947, found by the two authors in 2007 in a photo album during an interview with its Russian possessor, and commented upon in 2022, in the light of the war of aggression led by Putin's regime against Ukraine. Similarly, the book closes with Sarkisova and Shevchenko's reflections on the weight, but also the honor, of having been granted intellectual, if not material, guardianship of the photographs they have encountered during their investigation of Southern and Central Russian families' care practices for private visual media. Thus, the dense, polyvalent, and engaging research carried out by the authors, which follows several transversal conceptual axes, is firmly grounded in a heightened awareness of the sensitivity of the material being dealt with. They remain mindful of its historical situatedness as well as of its temporal dispersion, recognizing the many shreds of unresolved past(s) that perforate the layers of both national and familial heritage laid upon the photographs under scrutiny.

Besides the objectual and ethical gravitas of the book, what becomes quickly apparent is the extent to which Sarkisova and Shevchenko's effort fills the lacunas left by the growing body of articles and theses on the functions and configurations of amateur photography in the Soviet space. Each of these earlier studies created small islands of specialized knowledge that struggled to coalesce into a comprehensive map of the whole phenomenon. The fact that the previous explorations of themes that also surface,

under various guises, in Sarkisova and Shevchenko's book — such as the construction of feminine identity through home photography,<sup>1)</sup> the role of specific press outlets in the formation of a Soviet amateur photographer's ethos,<sup>2)</sup> or the intertwining of image and writing in photographs meant to circulate within kinship networks<sup>3)</sup> — often adopted a narrow research focus is indicative of the complexity of these topics. This reflects the challenge posed by the multifaceted character of both the medium of photography, especially when various cultural, ideological, and technological forces pull it in different directions, and the notions of amateurism and/or privacy in Socialist contexts.

The two authors resolve at least part of the difficulties inherent in ambitions to strictly define and compartmentalize the swarming field of Soviet private visual photographic practices by choosing not to pre-select specific theoretical aspects of their topic on which to focus. Rather, they let themselves be guided by the organizing methods — looser or stricter, depending on the custodian of each domestic archive — of the different corpuses they examine. Thus, the photo album, the picture book, but also the framed photo-collage or even the careless depositing of pictures in boxes and bags become the structural models of the book. Sarkisova and Shevchenko take it upon themselves to dissect their spontaneous logics of display, apposition, and connection, or, conversely, of invisibilization. From these idiosyncratic and pre-theoretical arrangements, Sarkisova and Shevchenko are able to draw rich reflections and sophisticated digressions, all while staying attuned to the micro-narratives embedded in the pictures and the operations of care that surround them.

The place occupied by the issue of materiality in both the problematization of post-Soviet private archiving practices and in shaping the reader's encounter with Sarkisova and Shevchenko's findings should not overshadow the researchers' deep engagement with the human element. Following in Annette Kuhn's footsteps, Sarkisova and Shevchenko adopt the method of "interactive performative viewing" (xviii), anchoring their interviewing techniques in the specific communicative and affective environment created by presenting one's private image archive to an audience. Proceeding from this framework, the two authors orient their questions — addressed to themselves as well as to their subjects — along three axes. First, they explore the historically situated uses of photography as a preservation medium of discrete slices of life. Second, they focus on the tensions and intersections between post-Soviet official discourses — on topics such as heroism, collective trauma, or nationhood — and the narratives of selfhood and descendancy vehiculated in the private sphere. Lastly, they examine the generational exchanges that may happen during the excavation of a family's photographic archive, foregrounding their oscillation between continuity and differentiation.

If these axes often converge along the pages of the monograph, three sections nonetheless emerge, following a movement from macro to micro, only to take a few steps back again in the final part of the book.

The first section is the most ambitious (and the most successful) in weaving together numerous theoretical threads that arise from and connect the various corpuses of photographs studied by Sarkisova and Shevchenko. An impressive array of sources, materials, and concepts is masterfully brought

1) Maria Gourieva, "Constructing the Feminine in Late Soviet Private Photography," *Photography and Culture* 13, no. 3–4 (2020), 369–383.

2) Emily Joyce Evans, "De la photographie amateur au mouvement des photocorrespondants. Sovetskoe foto et la transformation de la pratique photographique en URSS," *Transbordeur: Photographie histoire société*, no. 4 (2020), 60–69.

3) Tatyana Alexandrovna Mishchenko, "Family, Friendship and Memorabilia in Inscribed Amateur Family Photographs," *Revista Turismo: Estudos & Práticas* (Caderno Suplementar), no. 1 (2021), 1–12.

together to address the problematics related to private media and memory practices — many of them developed mainly by Western or Western-based thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, Marianne Hirsch, Aleida and Jan Assmann, or Geoffrey Batchen — and realities pertaining to the former Soviet space. Despite potential tensions between these two spheres, the authors succeed in extracting the pertinent aspects of the Western theories and applying them to distinctly Soviet and post-Soviet issues. This approach exemplifies the type of work many academics from non-Western cultures must undertake in order to reconcile their own specific cultural contexts and heritages with the dominant discourses flowing from the Global North. This is not to say that Sarkisova and Shevchenko do not also ground the personal testimonies gathered from interviews with possessors of photographic archives in a wealth of local primary or secondary textual sources, produced during and after the Soviet era. This integration of local sources draws attention to a vast intellectual landscape that would have remained inaccessible to non-Russian speakers without the authors' contribution.

Therefore, the first section of the book effectively displays the overarching aims of the research: to historicize and spatialize domestic photographic archival gestures in contemporary Russia without pigeonholing them to the field of post-Soviet Studies or even to the broader disciplines of media studies or memory studies; and, conversely, yet equivalently, to interrogate the grand generalizing tendencies of many Western theories on media configurations — especially domestic ones, as the private sphere was of defining importance in modern occidental ideologies. By doing so, the authors nuance and enrich these theories, demonstrating both their utility and their limitations when applied to places and periods outside the context in which they were originally developed.

The opening chapter of the first section introduces the reader to the methodology of the entire volume, starting with an encounter with one of the interviewees and thus indicating that all theoretical expansions are going to be deeply rooted in lived experiences and in the patterns their remembrance generates. At the same time, as the first interviewee's accidental remark — linking the two authors with the ultranationalist organization *Pamiat'* which attempted, in the 1990s, to disseminate an ideologically tailored version of Russia's past — serves to prove, talking about memory practices in the post-Soviet space can never be strictly factual or depoliticized. Sarkisova and Shevchenko embrace this fact and transform it into the discreetly beating militant heart of their research. The authors review a series of movements and projects originating in Soviet memory policies, such as *The Name of Russia* contest to elect "the main hero of the fatherland" or *The Immortal Regiment* marches, which started as grassroots initiatives and were quickly reappropriated by the state power. In this charged context, domestic photography has become a battleground, especially in virtue of its constitutive duality between representative finitude and symbolic surplus — a battleground from which the two researchers are not willing to stay away.

In the second chapter, Sarkisova and Shevchenko offer a historical overview of the constellation of practices surrounding popular photography in the Soviet Union. They investigate the interconnectedness between what we traditionally understand as domestic photography and the snapshots taken during professional duties or for official purposes, which often end up in the same albums, thereby contesting established (Western) distinctions between public and private spheres. Once again, this narrative echoes the fate of many documents in other Socialist spaces beyond the Soviet Union, which, as long as they did not belong to state services, were supposed to incarnate the visibility of the private sphere in a period when it was being reshaped into the collective sphere. This porosity of the individual's statuses outside and inside the home is also relevant in light of the drastic privatization — economic but also behavioral and moral — which occurred in post-Socialist societies. Chapter two fur-

ther introduces the recurrent theme of the interpretative shift that operates when the same photograph travels through the hands of members of distinct generations.

The third installment delves into the materiality of domestic photo archives, occasioning a review of different types of interaction with images-as-objects. These include: modes of presentation –organization within frames, folders, and albums; modes of circulation — from one place to another and one lifestyle to another (an issue especially relevant considering the major socio-geographical changes hurled at the population by the Soviet regime); and modes of transmission, in virtue of their power as evidence of these displacements and oftentimes happening during similar periods of transition.

Lastly, the final chapter of the section (and personally, the one I found the most inciting) zooms in on one particular subgenre of amateur image production, namely travel photography. The case study conducted by the authors on touristic snapshots and their afterlife masterfully illustrates all the main methods employed in *In Visible Presence* — from the detailed study of the photographic contents, coupled with the detection of recurrent patterns that unite various domestic archives, to the thorough historicization of their conditions of production and the illuminating analyses of the affective and discursive manifestations of their reappropriation by succeeding generations. The issues of the political valency of spatiality, the construction of a new supranational collective scenario, and the markers employed to give a population the impression of “possessing” a highly fragmentary territory all converge and find expression in this otherwise quite disregarded subgenre, marred by touristic clichés and overly descriptive intents.

The second part of the book anchors itself even more deeply in specific family archives, while concentrating on the different discursive formations (or their brevity or total lack) that take shape around them. The authors treat photographs as fragments of lost wholes that the succeeding possessors continuously try to recompose, always subjectively, always (self)creatively, when traumatic silence has obscured the context in which the images were made. The fifth and opening chapter of this second part approaches the physical traces of the elimination of certain individuals or events from the photographs themselves, as well as their symbolic radiation from the memory landscape of a family. As silence is cultivated as a survival tactic in highly volatile political contexts, so is the exclusion of problematic evidence of kinship in the form of tearing, cutting, or throwing away certain images. Beyond these extreme material operations, many photographs are just cut off from their wider contexts by refusing to clearly pass on their surplus meaning from one generation to the next. Sarkisova and Shevchenko do not emit any moral judgment on these voluntary omissions and embellishments, limiting themselves to trace the narrative developments of these half-truths and half-lies and their impact on the arrangement of the photographs and the operations of display and care that surround them.

In the sixth chapter, these reflections are anchored in a concrete case, the 1962 Novocherkassk tragedy — a protest initiated by the workers of the local Electric Locomotive Plant and suppressed in blood by the armed forces — whose traces resurface in different configurations that again bridge the private-public dichotomy.

In chapter 7, the author then venture into the myriad ways photographs can be used to generate diverse and atomized (self)portraits, in accordance with processes of revealing and obscuring, framing and deframing, emphasizing and withholding: in one word, what Hayden White described as processes of “emplotment.”<sup>4)</sup> In the ideologically-charged context of post-Soviet Russia, these strategies prove

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4) Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

to be far from innocuous or entirely private; self-narration becomes inseparable from the power plays that unravel behind present attempts to write Russian official history. The fact that almost all the participants in the research have been anonymized through name changes serves, in addition to protecting privacy, as a statement that these personal framings of one's photographic archive are indeed symptoms of a broader need to reclaim the nation's fraught visual heritage through rewriting and personalization.

In the eighth chapter, Sarkisova and Shevchenko frontally address the issue that has been underlying the book from the beginning: the photo album as a performative object. It reflects the intentions of its successive owners, who arrange, relocate, and add or remove photographs in line with their desired origin story yet also materially resists the total erasure of its previous architectures. Similarly, the photo album can fulfill different functions according to the identity of the person who is flipping through its pages. For instance, it can display visual evidence of an exemplary career and a fulfilling personal trajectory, while also holding traces of the sacrifices that were made to uphold such a social image — sacrifices which only the “curator” of the album knows about.

The book reaches its third and final part with an ample discussion on the gestures of care that surround domestic photographic archives. These gestures are expressions of deeply rooted affects as well as manifestations of the need for emotional and historical closure, thus inscribing the debate within a less technologically inflected interpretation of maintenance and repair studies. Photographs' micro-movements — from one material framing to another, from one generation to another — as well as their macro-movements — from the private sphere to the public, from one type of overarching narrative to another — are revelatory of their intrinsic fluidity of meaning. This demonstrates the necessity of regularly engaging in intellectual endeavors like those of Sarkisova and Shevchenko, which do not attempt to establish a rigid interpretive system for reading domestic visual archives but instead provide a glimpse into their embeddedness within current post-Soviet dynamics, intersecting at individual, regional, and national levels.

The issue of commemoration is first addressed, in the ninth chapter, through the lens of the need to concretize emotional bonds by engaging in a special type of labor devoted to arranging, displaying, and transmitting photographs. Caring for the visual traces of progenitors sometimes amounts to enacting a reconciliation that was impossible to achieve during their lifetimes, because of a tumultuous and divisive historical context. At this point, we arrive at the emotional apex of Sarkisova and Shevchenko's study, which does not shy away from exploring and conveying affects, insofar as these are fundamental to our interactions with both our own and others' domestic archives.

Finally, the tenth and closing installment rises to the expectations set by the first chapter, where the two authors boldly examined contemporary strategies for absorbing domestic photographic archives into various ideologically laden collective ventures. Building on the idea of the movement of photographs, discussed in the previous chapter on a smaller scale, here Sarkisova and Shevchenko follow the incorporation of these images into mass movements. The authors explore the birth and expansion of the Immortal Regiment marches, which began as a grassroots initiative in the Siberian city of Tomsk in 2012 and were quickly overtaken by the state propaganda apparatus. They also investigate the visceral reactions that the exhibition and parading of family portraits elicited in ordinary citizens — reactions that extended beyond the political channeling of the spectacle that the regime clearly intended.

As mentioned in the beginning, the book closes as it had opened, with a vibrant recognition of the necessity to critically engage with the past in the light of the emergencies of the present. It emphasizes the importance of considering the longer passage of time and its corollary shifts in reading grids and

interpretative approaches, which will inevitably demand further research on this still enigmatic, still profoundly significant corpus of photographs.

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