

‘They came, shot everyone, and that’s the end of it’: Local Memory, Amateur Photography, and the Legacy of State Violence in Novocherkassk

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What is the role of photography in creating, preserving and transforming memory of state violence? The events surrounding the ‘Novocherkassk massacre’, the brutal suppression of a workers’ demonstration in the Russian town of Novocherkassk in 1962, have been shrouded in secrecy until the fall of the USSR. Subsequent attempts by local activists to investigate the state’s crimes and commemorate the victims have been only partially successful. In the meantime, numerous snapshots preserved in family archives reference the events of 1962, and create frameworks for remembering that can be actualized during a conversation over the family album. The nature of the photographic ‘evidence’, however, is such that it enables not only remembering and identification, but also a partial reinvention of the past.

KEYWORDS photography, Russia, memory, museum, private archive, socialism, state violence, trauma

On 27 April 1991, the journalist Volkov published in *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* a series of photographs (Figure 1) about a public demonstration that took place in June 1962 in Novocherkassk, a town of about 200 000 people in Southern Russia.¹ These images were reportedly taken by KGB agents in civilian clothes who were dispersed among the demonstrators with hidden cameras. Subsequently, the photos were used as evidence at the show trial that followed this large-scale public protest, which was violently suppressed by the army and police.² With the help of the photographs, 150 people were arraigned, and a speedy show trial was conducted for the 14 identified as the ‘ringleaders’. Seven of the defendants were convicted of banditry under Article



FIGURE 1 The first full-feature article on the Novocherkassk massacre published in national press after perestroika. Komsomol'skaia Pravda, April 27, 1991. (Photos by Irina Mardar'. Published with permission).

77 and sentenced to death.³ The photographs became the ultimate proof of their guilt.

Together with other relevant documents, the photographs were kept in a closed file in the Military Prosecutor General's Office in Moscow for the rest of the Soviet

period, and would never have become public had they not been shown in 1990 to Irina Mardar', a journalist and founding member of the newly formed Novochoerkassk Committee for Investigating the Events of 1962. Mardar' could only make copies of a small selection of these documents (36 to be exact — the number of exposures she had in her analogue camera) and it is these 36 images that now comprise the visual archive of the event: as the spirit of *glasnost'* waned, the archives were closed and the files with the photographs mysteriously disappeared. Thirty years after the massacre and following the regime change, a museum to the Memory of the Novochoerkassk Tragedy opened in the building facing the square where the peaceful demonstrators were fired upon. The museum used the images obtained by Mardar' to narrate the story of oppression and political dissent, as well as to expose the crimes of the previous regime.

The basic outline of the Novochoerkassk protest and its aftermath can now be more or less reconstructed.⁴ On 1 June 1962, the Soviet government announced a 'temporary' 30% price increase for staple food items, which coincided with the local management's decision to reduce wages at the Novochoerkassk Electric Locomotive Plant (NEVZ) factory. The news led to a spontaneous strike followed by a protest demonstration on the town's main square, united over demands for 'Meat, butter, pay rise'. Afraid of the uncontrolled demonstrators, the authorities sent nearby army and Interior Ministry troops into the town. Although the commander of the army units sent to NEVZ, General Shaposhnikov, chose not to intervene when the demonstrators tore the plant's gates down and stopped a train on the nearby railway, the Interior Ministry troops guarding Party headquarters fired into the crowd on the town's main square.⁵ This resulted in a large number of casualties, now established as 24 dead and 69 wounded. The authorities decided to bury the dead in unmarked graves outside the city the following night. Their whereabouts and the number of casualties remained a state secret until the end of the regime. The shooting was followed by hasty show trials and the prosecution of those identified as leaders of the unrest. Seven people (Alexander Zaitsev, Andrei Korkach, Mikhail Kuznetsov, Boris Mokrousov, Sergei Sotnikov, Vladimir Cherepanov, and Vladimir Shuvaev) were identified as the 'ringleaders' and sentenced to death. 105 people were sentenced to 10 to 15 years in hard labour camps. During the investigation the official version of the events was formulated as 'hooliganism' and 'pogroms', while official Soviet media suppressed any information about the incident and attempted to block the circulation of reports about it to other parts of the Soviet Union.

Since the late 1980s, the events of 1962 have resurfaced in public discussion in Novochoerkassk. As the Communist Party lost its monopoly of power, the massacre of the demonstrating workers was one of the charges frequently levelled against it, 'a devastating item in the bill of particulars drawn up against the Soviet regime'.⁶ An official investigation initiated by the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR was first requested in June 1989. The same year several Novochoerkassk journalists and intellectuals established the Novochoerkassk Tragedy Foundation (*fond Novochoerkasskoi tragedii*) in order to investigate the events, pursue rehabilitation and compensation for the victims, and recover and transfer the remains of the anonymously buried victims.⁷

In the first English-language monograph on the Novochoerkassk events, Samuel Baron places the demonstration, massacre, and show trial within a single narrative,

and adds the belated rehabilitation as a closure that seals the legacy of the events as a transformative moment that ‘helped to destroy the legitimacy of the Soviet regime’.⁸ Throughout the 1990s, with the active involvement of survivors, some of whom participated in the establishment of The Novocherkassk Tragedy Foundation, the historical narrative of the events changed from one of ‘banditry’ and ‘hooliganism’ by marginal elements to one of resistance to the oppressive Soviet regime. In 1991, those convicted of banditry and mass disorder were rehabilitated. The very vocabulary used to address the events of 1962 was transformed, and the concepts of ‘massacre’ and ‘tragedy’ became the dominant explanatory frameworks. The Museum of the Memory of the 1962 Novocherkassk Tragedy (*Muzei pamiati Novocherkasskoi tragedii 1962 goda*) was created by the Foundation and opened in 2002 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the events. In 2009, the collection was transferred to the State Museum of the History of the Don Cossacks.⁹ The transfer to this museum, where it became a fragment of a larger historical narrative centering on the traditions of regional autonomy and glorifying the Cossacks’ services to the Russian empire, tones down the transformative momentum of the Novocherkassk events of 1962 in favour of establishing longer-term historical continuities.

The results of this politics of memory remain mixed: personal evaluations of the Novocherkassk events merge individual experiences and the official Soviet discourse on ‘hooliganism’ with the Foundation’s ‘counter-memory’ project. Discussions of the 1962 events on *Livejournal* and other online communities spurred by the forty-fifth anniversary of the massacre and continuing up to the present day demonstrate a variety of conflicting opinions.¹⁰ Although the chronological sequence of events is generally accepted, the interpretations of the motives and consequences of the events of those three days are highly divergent and point to the lack of an accepted interpretative framework for narrating them.

The radical incompatibility of the different narratives derived from the same photographs — first used as evidence of anti-Soviet activity and now employed as tangible reminders of Soviet crimes — demonstrates the malleability of photographic interpretations as well, paradoxically, as the powerful evidential appeal that images — and particularly photographs — continue to exert as undeniable ‘certificates of presence’.¹¹ By its very etymology, the word ‘evidence’ (from the Latin *videre*, to see) seems to point to the affinity between seeing and causal understanding. Our essay investigates a particular kind of looking and seeing — one associated with amateur photography — in order to understand the role images play today in the memory of 1962 in Novocherkassk in various contexts, from the museum display to constructions of family histories. This exploration draws from a larger ethnographic project on Soviet family photography and the generational memories of socialism in Russia that we conducted in between 2005 and 2008. In the course of this research, we consulted representatives of two or three generations in 54 Russian families in five different regions of the country, asking each separately to comment on the photographs from their domestic archives and on the events they represented. Our strategy was to delve not into the images themselves, but rather into what transpires between the viewer and the photographs when these images are looked at, commented on and interacted with. Our research, in its essence, can therefore be defined as an exploration of domestic photography as a technology of memory.

The case of Novochoerkassk offers an opportunity to look at the relationship between amateur photography, local memory and a traumatic past in a setting where private family memories are inextricably intertwined with the memories of state violence and public debates over the appropriate forms of commemoration of these events. Although our interviews did not focus specifically on memories of 1962, the abundance of unprompted references to the events of 1962 offers rich material for contemplating how amateur photography, this 'middle-brow art',¹² becomes important when dealing with the legacy of state violence. Can photographs bring about the retrieval of 'alternative' memories as compared with the established historical accounts? What kind of interpretative frameworks are set by the personal comments that accompany the viewing of photographs? What are the mechanisms of photographic-meaning creation and its transmission between generations?

A classification of the Novochoerkassk 'events' remains problematic. Can they be classified as 'traumatic', and, if so, for whom? The concept of trauma may be approached from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives and its definition remains contested. Originally understood as a psychological reaction to upsetting events, it is defined in psychoanalytic tradition as an event 'that was not fully experienced by the individual, who is then condemned constantly to relive it'.¹³ Projection of the individual phenomenon to the social level poses numerous questions, however, especially when considering the dynamic of historical memory in the *longue durée*. Indeed, the extension of the traumatic analogy to collective phenomena seems to assume the existence of a unitary perceiving collective subject of trauma and repression, an assumption that is deeply problematic when applied to heterogeneous collectivities in which only a small minority is usually directly involved in the events which are — usually *ex post facto* — labelled traumatic.¹⁴

In light of this, some social scientists advocate a move away from what they call the 'naturalistic fallacy',¹⁵ i.e. from the assumption that trauma is an inherent attribute of the event. Thus, Jeffrey Alexander suggests that trauma is not something naturally existing, but is rather a collectively mediated attribution viewed in the context of its active production and framing by various 'carrier groups'.¹⁶ For Alexander, trauma only exists as thematized by a 'speaker' to the 'audience', and its meanings are continuously reinterpreted.¹⁷ Whatever is not framed by the communication process is not seen as a trauma. Such a stance does not, however, allow us to account for the concept of latency, 'the period necessary for processing traumatic events', which is central to the definition of trauma.¹⁸ Testing the usefulness of the trauma concept for the social sciences, Jeffrey Olick — drawing on the works of Jan Assmann, Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin — justifies the transition from individual to collective trauma through the notions of habitus and genre. The former, following Bourdieu, is seen as a set of transposable dispositions ingrained in the body and shaping the behaviour of an individual, while genre is approached in Bakhtinian tradition as common ways of seeing between texts, dialogue being the central mechanism by which collective traumas are transmitted across generations while remaining latent.¹⁹ From this standpoint, the events of the Novochoerkassk massacre, publicized as a collective trauma only after the regime change, could be seen as having had far-reaching effects on the collective memory of the region in the late Soviet period through the micro-practices of the habitus, including casual conversations, urban legends and everyday material culture.

Photography occupies a special place in this broader array of micro-practices. There is no shortage of photographic images evoking strong emotional reactions that can be classified as both representation of traumatic events and traumatizing images. Going beyond the issues of representation, Jessica Lieberman turns to consider analogies in the structure of meaning in trauma and in photography, which proves a productive direction in bringing together photography and trauma.²⁰ Looking at photographic experience as being displaced from the referent allows her to draw interesting parallels in trauma studies and the studies of photography. The belatedness of the photographic experience allows Lieberman to argue that ‘the photograph is not, ultimately, the record of an event’.²¹ Drawing on Ulrich Baer and Rosalind Krauss, she separates experience from an ‘indexical deposit of the real’ in photographs and introduces a delay in an event’s reception as a key concept of traumatic latency.²² The gap between an image and experience — just as the gap between traumatizing experience and traumatic memory — is bridged only through interpretation.

As different models of narrating the Novochoerkassk events demonstrate, photographs serve as structural elements of the most different modalities of narrating the past. Public displays of the photographs exemplify what Alexander describes as ‘a new system of cultural classification’, in which images are framed to carry an easily accessible meaning.²³ The reconstructed narratives of the Novochoerkassk demonstration and massacre of 1962 make active use of photographic material in various forms of public presentations, in publications and museum displays.²⁴ However, to use Alexander’s terminology, the ‘trauma process’ necessary to transform a disruptive event into a bona fide collective trauma has not been fully carried out, and from that constructivist standpoint, one might take issue with the trauma terminology altogether. However, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the partiality and contestation that characterize the place of the Novochoerkassk massacre in the public memory of the city, the events of these three days in 1962 refuse to go away, and continue to resurface in conversations on seemingly unrelated topics, as we will demonstrate below. This pattern of constant return indicates just the kind of inability both to forget and to remember that characterizes traumatic reactions, and suggests, in agreement with Olick, that the institutional dimension of the trauma process does not even begin to exhaust the range of mechanisms involved in the articulation of a traumatic experience. In this paper, we will look in detail at a thin sliver of such mechanisms: those that relate specifically to photography.

The range of the photographs on public display in the Museum of the Novochoerkassk Tragedy is diverse (family photographs, official portraits, secret police snapshots) yet their context and provenance — apart from the KGB photographs — is rarely thematized. The Novochoerkassk museum indiscriminately exhibits very diverse images of the demonstrators on the main square: poor quality images made with hidden cameras by the secret police in civilian clothes in the crowd, period studio portraits of the main activists, photos of children of the political prisoners sent to the orphanage after their parents’ imprisonment, mug-shots of the defendants in prison, news photographs of official delegations visiting the Foundation and the Museum, and contemporary snapshots of the memorial that was erected after the regime change. They are accompanied by brief captions, identifying the main protagonists. The function of this ‘visual reportage’ is to illustrate the chronology of

the events, to expose some of the regime's mechanisms of social control, as well as to present the Novocherkassk uprising and its aftermath as just one incident within the Soviet Gulag archipelago. The latter message is embodied by a large Soviet wall map whose black colour contrasts with the red marks of labour camps, each personified with photographs of individuals. The black lines of barbed wire which criss-cross the map and the caption 'Map of the country — Map of the Gulag' put both a visual and a verbal equal sign between the two notions.²⁵ The photographs in family albums that we will now focus on elicit narratives of a different nature.

Unlike the photographs used in the public narratives of the events, domestic snapshots of the Novocherkassk inhabitants bear no witness to the physical event of demonstrations, militia, or casualties — yet they prove to be powerful visual prompts for narrating the events of June 1962. The domestic photographic collections are filled with what Elizabeth Edwards introduced as 'the banal traces of difficult history'.²⁶ Our focus here is on the performative qualities of the photographs and the ways in which they function as markers of experience. Although many studies of trauma, photography, and agency limit the analysis by close reading of images, we combine image reading with discursive analysis of the commentaries by the image owners, following Martha Langford's proposition that images engender not texts, but conversations and thus photographic collections should be approached as an oral-photographic performance.²⁷ Which aspects of the inherently private domestic snapshots reference state violence, if any at all? We argue that there is no easily defined iconography of traumatic events. Such a position opens up broader questions about the role of the Soviet legacies in the post-Soviet context as embodied and structured by amateur photography. Family photography, as was long argued by Bourdieu, carries the function of 'solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life',²⁸ and at first seems unfit for discussing memories of events of straightforwardly violent nature beyond the scope of family activities. The family album, according to Bourdieu, is a museum of the idealized past, which only contains the things one wants to remember. Because of their indexical relation with the referent, images authenticate the past's existence and provide tangible evidence of the factual reality of their subject (this is Barthes' 'having-been-there' element). But at the same time, they allow for projection and approximation, and their fragmentariness and two-dimensionality makes them, as Marianne Hirsch points out, 'especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery and to symbolization'.²⁹

Although constituting largely 'after-the-event' representations, photographic records repeatedly function as prompts for (re)formatting family history, along with or against existing popular historical narratives. A photograph, in the words of Allan Sekula, 'presents merely the *possibility* of meaning' — a possibility that is actualized in the act of interpretation.³⁰ Vernacular photographs often activate a nostalgic modality of relating to the past and, at the very same time, contain a universe of details that do not necessarily fit with this modality, and sometimes run counter to it. The nostalgic modality is projective at its core: the object of nostalgic longing is most typically not a specific age or place, but rather the state of longing itself.³¹ Nostalgia itself, then, can be best understood as 'longing for longing', which makes it a sort of double-projection, and nostalgic mourning laments the impossibility of re-living past desires in the present. But the trajectory of this mourning is complicated by the unpredictability of the memories awoken by the various elements of the



FIGURE 2 Still from a video-interview with photograph from a private archive, Novochoerkassk. 1960s. Published with permission.

image. Although some of these elements authenticate the nostalgic response, others inspire much more ambivalent feelings about the period. ‘Solemnizing’ and ‘immortalizing’ the family, domestic photographs provide ample occasions for inserting family histories into broader historical frames.

Absent from the public discourse for long decades in the late Soviet period, the Novochoerkassk massacre is similarly absent from the photographs themselves. The commentary, however, highlights the latent presence of the memories which are actualized only in the dialogical situation. The outdoor image in Figure 2, featuring people with spades working in the garden, belongs to a Novochoerkassk resident Alexei Stepanovich.³² The photograph appears accidental and out of place in an album filled mainly with posed portraits of relatives and family get-togethers.

Immediately upon its discovery, Alexei Stepanovich did not seem intent on providing extensive commentary; he continued to leaf through the album. At the same time, the changed tone with which he referenced the picture did suggest that it has a special place both in his collection and in his memory. When the interviewer showed signs

of interest in the story, he closed the album and made a number of adjustments to his posture, signalling what Goffman would refer to as a 'change in footing',³³ assuming the role of a story-teller. The mode of his interaction with the interviewer changed as well. If during his commentary on the photographs, Alexei Stepanovich looked and interacted mainly with the images of his family, now, with the album closed, he established eye contact with the interviewer and addressed her directly. The conversation went as follows:

AS: [and this is . . .] the improvement and beautification [*blagoustroistvo*] of the territory after the *sabantui*³⁴ . . . a park in the making.

Interviewer: Well, can you elaborate a little? *Sabantui*, this was the word for what?

AS: Well, the 1962 massacre, what else?

I: And this is a photo of some event after the massacre . . .?

AS: This is already afterwards, when they started to make a park on the site.

I: And what is your connection to this event?

AS: Well, I was working at NEVZ, I was smack in the middle [*v gusche*] of all this.

What followed was an extremely detailed narrative of Alexei Stepanovich's experience of the worker's strike, which he witnessed as a young specialist working at NEVZ. In his recollections, he presented himself as both an insider and an outsider. While sympathetic to the workers' discontents, he was apprehensive of the potential radicalization of the situation, and devoted considerable energy to helping the managers of the plant avoid a confrontation by leaving the site of the conflict. He was on his way to the city square when the shooting of the demonstrators took place, learning about the events from a passer-by, an elderly woman with greying hair who left a life-long impression on him: tearing out patches of her grey hair, she 'begged [them] not to go any further because people were being slaughtered [at the square]'. Disregarding her pleas, he and his colleagues went on, only to find a post-destruction scene described in the interview through a series of snapshot details:

Red rivers of blood . . . machine gunners . . . children's slippers on the ground, abandoned shopping bags, the ones on wheels that old women use, kids' sun hats, someone's padlock keys . . . and a teacher from School no. 1, this heavy-set man, I think he taught history and people knew him in the city . . . he was stumbling around wondering, 'What are we to do now, what to say? How are we to educate kids, if things like this are happening . . .? He was not afraid . . . Well, maybe he was, but he was still saying it. Just openly like that. They told us right there about the hairdresser that was shot at her workplace — a stray bullet. And from the balcony [of the city Party committee that the demonstrators came to address] someone was waving the sausage that they looted in their canteen,³⁵ I saw it. People were looking for sausage and vodka, some were behaving like criminals. But there was no violence between people, everyone was just pouring their souls out over what happened, there was such indignation [after the massacre].

This commentary on the image powerfully exemplifies the photographic ability of invoking 'what is not shown'.³⁶ This image is a paradigmatic belated photograph, in which not only 'the bodies have gone',³⁷ but the space itself is undergoing transformation, no longer corresponding to the past it evoked in the narrative. It thus instantly becomes a reference to and a commentary on the events which preceded the taking

of the photo, enabling a post-traumatic account of history.³⁸ The record of spatial erasure of references to the traumatic past (the making of a park in the place of the square on which the massacre took place) stubbornly creates its own framework for remembering: an act of erasure becomes an embodiment of time.³⁹

Notable in Alexei Stepanovich's reference to the photo is the description of the shooting as *sabantui*, a traditional Tatar, Bashkir, and Chuvash agrarian feast. In contemporary Russian slang *sabantui* is used rather colloquially to refer to a 'wild' happening marked by a carnivalesque reversal of power hierarchies and an orientaling flavour (implying a 'wild' world of the 'undercivilized'). The use of argot hints that the trauma process is far from complete: while the emotional power of the event is palpable in Alexei Stepanovich's account, his dependence on the ironically estranged term allows him, while claiming eyewitness status, to estrange the event and locate himself outside of it. Such positioning accounts for a palimpsest of different narrative constructs in the interview, which combines the official Soviet version of raging 'criminals' and later re-narration of the demonstration as a united spontaneous communal protest against the impossible living conditions under the Soviet regime. The narrator originally places himself as an outsider somewhere 'above' and 'beyond' the events, while the belatedness of the photograph provides both a plotline and a closure to the narrative evolving from disorder to order, from chaos to stability.

Alexei Stepanovich's treatment of this photograph provides a tangible illustration to John Berger's observation that 'an instance photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future'.⁴⁰ But the indexical nature of the photograph does not mean that one can ever predict how a particular image will be read or, in other words, what sorts of past and future will be lent to it by a particular observer and what sort of 'evidence' it will become.

The evidential appeal of the photograph is not constant. In the course of time any photograph can suddenly acquire new evidential qualities, absent at the moment of its creation. Furthermore, it can substitute for the eyewitness experience. Consider, for example, the standard post-WWII class photograph shown in Figure 3.

This group photo was shown to us by another resident of Novochoerkassk, 68-year old Vera Leontievna, who used it as evidence of her own proximity to the Novochoerkassk tragedy. Vera Leontievna, who was living in a village outside Novochoerkassk at the time, did not witness the events herself, but experienced their reverberations through the stories of her brother and friends. Nevertheless, in commenting on her photo collection, she presented the tangible evidence of her personal connection to the tragedy. She stumbled upon this image in the course of her narrative of her school years, and commented on it in the following way:

VL: This is me in 5th grade, in 1952. I can tell you an interesting episode about a classmate. This is Sergei Sotnikov, I used to sit at the same desk with him in school . . . Would you happen to know anything about him?

Interviewer: Tell be about him, how did his life pan out?

VL: I don't know how it panned out because I left the school and moved away. But back then, he was the class monitor (*starosta*), he was really strong-willed. For starters, he was among the oldest, I think he was born in 1936, and so, yes, he was a good student, I guess you can say he ordered us around a bit, but he was respected, and all the three years I was there he was the class monitor. [this is followed by a story about how she



FIGURE 3 Class photo with Sergei Sotnikov. Private archive, Novocherkassk. Early 1950s. Sotnikov is in the second row from the top, fourth person from the left. Published with permission.

smacked Sotnikov on the head for pushing her during a class, and how both of them got into trouble with the teacher for it; then goes off on a 5-minute tangential story before returning to the subject]

And then he [VL's brother, who worked as a long-distance truck driver] came to our village in 1962 and told us: there are such things going on in Novocherkassk — something like a war or uprising . . . There were killings there, people went out to the tracks, stopped the trains, blocked the roads and he was also blocked, there was no way to drive through Novocherkassk, no way to find an exit. [...]. And who told me about Sotnikov? . . . I don't even remember who that was . . . Maybe Olga? . . . I don't know . . . He headed it all, he worked at NEVZ and he was going out there to the railroad tracks, he was already married, had two daughters. They took him away and nothing was known about him, but rumors have it that he was shot . . . And then — either I heard it on TV or read in a newspaper . . . that many bodies were later discovered, but his [she repeatedly touches the small figure of the boy on the image] and two others were never found. The [bodies of the] main ring-leaders [*samykh glavarei*] . . . I was of course surprised then — with whom I was studying for three years . . .

A picture of a child who went on to become a missing adult, since the body of Sergei Sotnikov was never found, profoundly and irreversibly changed its meaning after the tragedy. The terms in which Vera Leontievna frames her memories are unsettling. She refers to Sotnikov, who she knew as an outgoing boy with pronounced leadership abilities, and who became one of the seven demonstrators executed after a quick

show-trial in November 1962 and rehabilitated 30 years later, as a ring-leader (*glavar*), employing the highly loaded term used by the prosecutor demanding the death penalty for the defendants. In other words, while Sergei's image in the class photograph produces an instantaneous connection and a sense of tangible and retrospectively tragic presence (which is underscored by her caressing of the image itself), the interpretation of the events bears lasting traces of the Soviet authorities' explanatory framework.

The question of the photographic evidence has another, more sinister side. We referred earlier to the ominous presence of KGB agents with cameras dispersed throughout the crowd. The function of the show trials was not only to punish those taking part in the protests, but to terrorize and intimidate the local population — many of whom could have been similarly accused based on KGB-produced 'proof of guilt'. Every chance photograph could all of a sudden become a compromising piece of 'evidence'. For obvious reasons, this use of images was most typical of the secret police, but had repercussions for family albums as well. For example, Alexei Stepanovich's wife Lilia Danilovna destroyed all photographs of her ex-boyfriend (Figure 4) after a surprise visit by secret police armed with their own photographic evidence of his presence in the demonstrating crowd.

Even decades after the event she remained cautious about it; in fact, during our interview she revoked her original reference to fear as the main reason for destroying part of the photograph and substituted another explanation — her concerns about the possible jealousy of her husband.



FIGURE 4 Photograph from a private archive, Novocherkassk. Early 1960s. Published with permission.

The frameworks of erasure are frequently defined by broader political and medial contexts. In the case of Novocherkassk, a systematic policy of erasure of the event from official media has left lasting traces in present-day private memories and judgments. Yet individual, private choices and decisions have a gravity and consequence of their own, making their own contribution to the process of transformation of the traumatic past in cultural memory. In this case, Lilia Danilovna's reluctance to acknowledge the personal repercussions of the Novocherkassk massacre left traces on the way that period was envisaged by her children. It is perhaps no coincidence that Lilia Danilovna's 49-year old daughter Nelly recalls the early 1960s (when she was about 3–4 years of age) as the time of idyllic communal unity. Selecting photographs which characterize best the image of 'her 20th century', she first picked a photograph of her mother taken in 1962 at a popular photo studio a few blocks away from where the demonstrators were shot down (Figure 5). She commented that her mother looks in the picture 'just like Sophia Loren'. Her brief commentary to this studio portrait unveils a covert theatrical lineage of the photographic medium, visualizes an idea of timeless beauty, and escapes the 'burden of chance' which so disturbed Roland Barthes.⁴¹

Seeing her mother through the beauty code of movie stars, Nelly forgoes the orientation of photography towards factography and historicity, turns the material image into fetish, and transforms conventional linear temporality into a timeless presence. Yet the year 1962, marked on the photo's back, does not stop working as



FIGURE 5 Photograph from a private archive, Novocherkassk. 1962. Published with permission.

a ‘historical’ marker. But instead of carrying connotations of the massacre, the image is incorporated within the ‘now’ and ‘then’ dichotomy, in which ‘then’ functions as a golden age in contrast to the drab present. Nelly’s selection also includes two snapshots from a very different kind of demonstration to that of 1962 — the annual parades which were organized in every city and town of the USSR. Nelly, who, unlike her parents, never referenced the 1962 shooting of demonstrators, remembers these demonstrations as instances of joyful collective leisure and occasions for reuniting with friends and family.

Using her family photo archive to illustrate her point, Nelly did not differentiate between amateur and professional photographs in her private collection. The colour image of a demonstration in Figure 6 is of the latter type, standing out not only because of the intensive colour palette (virtually nonexistent in the amateur photography of the time), but by the extensive presence of banners (absent or relegated to the oblique background in amateur photos), the frontal arrangement of a large group of people (amateur photos tend to present smaller groups of relatives, colleagues or close friends), as well as uniformly displayed ideological markers in the form of red fabric badges clearly visible on everybody’s coat.

The ‘official’ lineage of the photograph, however, does not prevent it from authenticating private discourses. On the contrary, the co-existing public and private frameworks for making sense of the Soviet past open up new possibilities for new generations. Having no first-hand memories of the times captured in his family



FIGURE 6 Photograph from a demonstration dedicated to the anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution. Private archive, Novocherkassk. Early 1980s. Published with permission.

photographs, yet possessing the 'visible evidence' of its actuality, Nelly's 16-year old son Alex creates a 'phantom memory' of the recent past on the basis of the same photograph the following way:

Alex: In the 20th century I think people were closer to power, I mean, they loved the authorities more I guess than now.

Interviewer: Than people now? Common people you mean?

A: Yeah, then people respected and appreciated the authorities.

I: Why so? Do you see it in the photo somehow?

A: Well, now there aren't people everywhere with banners, at least around here I did not see them marching this way.

I: They marched for love of the authorities?

A: There are many other [parties] now, they got split . . . [...] Democracy started.

I: You believe that people liked the way they lived back then?

A: Of course not everyone liked it. If anything could have been changed many would have changed it.

I: But they could not?

A: What could they have done? Hardly anything could have been changed back then.

They came, shot everyone, and that's the end of it.

The ominous 'they' that Alex referred to are, of course, the Soviet troops who, by firing at the demonstrators in 1962, started the Novochoerkassk massacre. This was the only reference to these events that Alex's interview contained, and it appears difficult to reconcile this comment, uttered in passing reference to an image of another, entirely uncontroversial demonstration, with the rest of his discussion of the Soviet political culture. Indeed, Alex's narrative of the past combines a normative-nostalgic evaluation of the past in a familiar genre — 'it was better back then' — with a reference to a traumatic event that directly subverts such benign framing. Paradoxically, the snapshot of the demonstration anchors both interpretations at once: the nostalgic one through the public displays of enthusiasm and splashes of colour; the traumatic one by demarcating the narrow limits of possible expression allowed to the people in the photo, and silently invoking the sanctions associated with transgressing these limits. Judging by the ease with which Alex moves from one evaluation to the other we could suppose that neither of them is positioned as the dominant one; rather, they are configured as combinations of diverse yet widely popular discourses that demarcate the 'memorable' events and thus define what events and meanings deserve further circulation.⁴²

Yet, as we have seen, although a given photograph may lose the ability to witness, it does not necessarily lose its unspoken traumatic resonance and its appeal in terms of the viewer's imaginary sense of connection with the image. Although a 'silent' family photo gives no specifics to the young viewers, it offers grounds to project and fantasize. The effect of this photograph, therefore, is marked by the tension between projection and authentication, making the two mutually constitutive. The photographs' unmatched ability to conjure up a tangible presence of past moments and people and foster a sense of connection with them is thus not an alternative to the images' denotational, narrative potential. Rather, it is a building block that enables

viewers to construct their own meanings, authenticating today's interpretations with the tangible indexical 'evidence'.

What then does this case study tell us about memory, photography and the traumatic past? Strong regional discourses specific to the Novochoerkassk and Rostov areas, and absent in other regions included in our research, point to the need to specify discussions on collective memory by going beyond the private/public dichotomy to introduce the concept of regional, or 'middle-range' memories, which not only draw on a set of local events, but are nourished by local agents and social networks. These 'middle-range memories' are close enough for everyone to feel personally affected, yet large enough to be resilient. Such 'territorialized' or site-specific memories and memory politics develop complex relationships with the state-initiated memory projects, having the potential to enhance, modify, accommodate and subvert the activities of the 'centre'.

Domestic photography proves to be a pivotal frame for preserving such site-specific memories and anchoring them in the familiar landscape, inevitably shaping viewers' relationship with their immediate environment. Amateur albums not only allow us to 'visually stage experiences that would otherwise remain forgotten because they were never fully lived',⁴³ but also quite literally bring home historical traumas and translate them into terms of everyday experience of the family (for example, school memories, episodes of work biographies, familiar corners of urban space). It is precisely this ability of family photos to connect with the viewer's current experience that made John Berger so optimistic about the potential of private photographs to promote ethical engagement with history.⁴⁴ In this sense, it is prescient of the Museum of the Novochoerkassk Tragedy to include family snapshots of the massacre's victims and their children in their displays. Though lacking in instructional value, these images draw a viewer in precisely because they look so similar to their own family photos, implicitly suggesting a shared fate, as if saying: 'This could be you'.

Thus, although the photographs that are formative for shaping local memories and individual narratives may not contain visible markers of a relationship to a traumatic event, this does not diminish their power. It is perhaps precisely the disconnect between the images that populate family albums and those one is likely to see circulating in the media that gives amateur images such resonance, because they are more likely to take viewers by surprise. The concept of trauma provides a helpful framework for addressing such latent memories and related images. At the same time, the latency stage does not exclude transformation, during which the ripples of the traumatic past, in the absence of a 'trauma process', become increasingly disjointed and unstable, coexisting with seemingly incompatible ideological propositions. Still, by revealing the richness of possibilities of a long-gone moment, the idiosyncrasies of gestures and expressions, the minute details of encounters, photographs complicate, but also immeasurably expand, the significance of the events to which they refer. Since 'every photograph is radically exposed to a future unknown to their subjects',⁴⁵ images always carry with them the ghosts of alternative possibilities and futures. At times when such futures are cut radically short, as was the case for Sergei Sotnikov and other victims of the Novochoerkassk tragedy, they make the unintentional and indirect consequences of state violence not only more visible, but also more poignant.

Notes

- ¹ O. Volkov, 'Novocherkassk. 2 iunia 1962' *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 27 April 1991, p. 3.
- ² Samuel H. Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union: Novocherkassk 1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. ix.
- ³ Erik Kulavig, *Dissent in the Years of Khrushchev. Nine Stories about Disobedient Russians* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 146.
- ⁴ Irina Mardar', *Khronika neob'iavlennogo ubiistva* (Novocherkassk, 1992). For a comprehensive English-language analysis, see Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union*. On the political consequences of the 1962 events, see Yoram Gornitzki, 'Policing Post-Stalin Society. The Militia and Public Order under Khrushchev', *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 44, 2/3 (2003), 465–480.
- ⁵ Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union*, pp. 51, 59–62.
- ⁶ Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union*, p. 149.
- ⁷ Yurii Bepalov, 'Novocherkassk. Posledniaia taina?', *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 18 January 1991, p. 4. G. Poltaev, Yurii Bepalov, 'Streliat' mozhno?' *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 8 June 1991, p. 1. Christopher Marcisz, 'Digging up the Past', *Russian Life*, July/August 2008, pp. 40–47.
- ⁸ Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union*, p. 181.
- ⁹ Irina Mardar', 'Dva kryl'tsa Atamanskogo dvortsa' *Indeks*, 29 (2009) <<http://www.index.org.ru/journal/29/18-mardar-dva.html>> [accessed 25 May 2011].
- ¹⁰ <<http://novocherkassk.net/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=8401>> [accessed 25 May 2011]. <<http://vaziani.livejournal.com/26664.html>> [25 May 2011]. <<http://www.ciota.ru/forum/view.php?subj=72711>> [accessed 25 May 2011]. <<http://galgai.com/forum/showthread.php?t=2673&page=1>> [accessed May 29, 2011].
- ¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Flamingo, 1981), p. 87.
- ¹² Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).
- ¹³ Jessica Catherine Lieberman, 'Traumatic Images', *Photographies* 1, 1 (March 2008), 87–102 (p. 88).
- ¹⁴ W. Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor', *Rethinking History* 8, 2 (2004), pp. 193–221.
- ¹⁵ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life: a Cultural Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 91.
- ¹⁶ Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life*, p. 86.
- ¹⁷ Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life*, p. 91, 103.
- ¹⁸ Jeffrey K. Olick, 'From Usable Pasts to the Return of the Repressed', *The Hedgehog Review* 9, 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 19–31 (p. 21).
- ¹⁹ Olick, 'From Usable Pasts to the Return of the Repressed', pp. 27–30.
- ²⁰ Lieberman, 'Traumatic Images', p. 89.
- ²¹ Lieberman, 'Traumatic Images', p. 87.
- ²² Lieberman, 'Traumatic Images', p. 91.
- ²³ Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life*, pp. 92–93.
- ²⁴ On the use of photographs in the construction of 'counter-official' memory see A. Golubenko, 'Pamiati zhertv novocherkasskogo rasstrela' <<http://rostov-region.ru/news/item/foo/so2/nooooo274/index.shtml>> [accessed 20 May 2011]. The same photographs are also republished in Baron, with attribution to anonymous KGB photographers.
- ²⁵ The description of the exhibition as seen in the summer of 2007.
- ²⁶ Elizabeth Edwards, 'Excavating Experience: Photographs and Difficult Histories' presentation at East European Memory Studies Research Group at Cambridge University in February 2011 <<http://www.memoryatwar.org/resources-video-pg007>> [accessed 10 May 2011].
- ²⁷ Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: the Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 20.
- ²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 19.
- ²⁹ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29, 1 (2008), 103–125 (p. 117).
- ³⁰ Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982) (pp. 84–109), p. 91 [emphasis in the original].
- ³¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
- ³² All names have been changed.
- ³³ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
- ³⁴ *Sabantui* is the name of traditional Tatar, Bashkir, and Chuvash agrarian feast celebrating the beginning (by now — the end) of the spring field work traditional aimed at pacifying the spirit of harvest (*dukh plodorodiia*). The feast included egg painting, present-giving, sport competitions, mass gatherings, and dancing into the night. Today, the feast takes place on a Saturday in June, around the same time as the Novocherkassk strike, demonstrations, and massacre (June 1–3, 1962). Obviously, the nickname '*sabantui*', widely used in Novocherkassk in reference to the event, carries a markedly different semantic load than a reference to the 'Novocherkassk tragedy'.
- ³⁵ It is worth remembering that meat was one of the three main demands of the protestors, whose demonstration was accompanied by rhythmic chanting of the demand for 'Meat, Butter, Pay

increase'. In this sense, it is plausible that the expropriated sausage, usually unavailable to regular workers, might have become an apt symbol of their deprivation.

- ³⁶ John Berger, 'Understanding a Photograph', in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), p. 293.
- ³⁷ John Roberts, 'Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic', *Oxford Art Journal* 32, 2 (2009), 281–98, p. 290.
- ³⁸ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002).
- ³⁹ Michael Roth, 'Photographic Ambivalence and Historical Consciousness', *History and Theory* 48 (2009), 82–94 (pp. 83–86).
- ⁴⁰ John Berger, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 89.
- ⁴¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 12.
- ⁴² Nikolai Vukov, 'The "unmemorable" and the "unforgettable": "Museumizing" the socialist past in post-1989 Bulgaria', in *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, ed. Oksana Sarkisova, Peter Apor (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), pp. 307–334.
- ⁴³ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, p. 2.
- ⁴⁴ John Berger, 'Uses of photography', in his *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1991). See also Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- ⁴⁵ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, p. 7.

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