

The Marking of Absence: What is Contained in the Archive of Iryna Pap



Označavanje odsutnosti: što je sadržano u arhivi Irine Pap

PRETHODNO PRIOPĆENJE
Primljen: 30. lipnja, 2022.
Prihvaćen: 30. prosinca, 2022.
DOI: 10.31664/zu.2022.111.11

PRELIMINARY PAPER
Received: June 30, 2022
Accepted: December 30, 2022
DOI: 10.31664/zu.2022.111.11

SAŽETAK

Irina Pap, ukrajinska fotografkinja čiji je opus nedavno ponovno otkriven, snažno se ističe u svom trenutku, a važnost njezine ostavštine nastavlja rasti. Kao žena, pridošlica u svijetu sovjetske fotografije kojim su dominirali muškarci te kao takva gotovo jedinstvena u svojoj struci, Pap je radila za novine *Izvestia*, jedne od najpoznatijih publikacija u SSSR-u između 1958. i 1971. godine. Poslije je pokrenula prvu profesionalnu novinarsku školu School of Journalistic Excellence pri savezu Journalists' Union of Ukraine, u kojoj se formirala sljedeća generacija ukrajinskih fotografa od kojih su neki i danas aktivni. Fotografije Irine Pap raspršene su po različitim arhivima u Rusiji i Ukrajini, iako je od 1991. veliki dio njih spašen i sad se čuva u arhivu Fotohof Archiv u Salzburgu. Ovaj rad daje kratak pregled biografije Irine Pap, raspon njezina rada i pitanja koje postavlja njezina arhiva te predlaže neke metodološke pristupe koji bi mogli pomoći u rješavanju njezine ostavštine.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

sovjetsko fotoreporterstvo, ideologija, socijalistički realizam, fotografija, arhiv, ukrajinska fotografija, dekomunizacija

ABSTRACT

Iryna Pap, a Ukrainian photographer whose oeuvre was recently rediscovered, stands out starkly in her moment, and the significance of her legacy continues to grow. As a female newcomer to the male-dominated world of Soviet photography, and as such almost unique in her profession, Pap worked for *Izvestia*, one of the USSR's newspapers of record from 1958 to 1971. Later on, she launched the first professional School of Journalistic Excellence at the Journalists' Union of Ukraine, thus shaping the next generation of Ukrainian photographers, some of whom are still active in the field. Pap's photographs are scattered around different archives in Russia and Ukraine, although, as of 1991, a big portion of them have been rescued and are now preserved at the Fotohof Archiv in Salzburg. This paper provides a brief overview of Pap's biography, the scope of her work and the problems posed by her archive, and suggests some methodological approaches that may help to address her legacy.

KEYWORDS

Soviet photojournalism, ideology, socialist realism, photography, archive, Ukrainian photography, decommunization.

Kateryna Filyuk

AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Ukrainian photography of the last two decades, with a dozen internationally known names (take, for example, Alexander Chekmenev in photojournalism and Synchrondogs in fashion photography), has finally started to receive long-awaited and well-deserved attention. In 2018, the Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography and the eponymous publishing house were established (the museum building is currently under construction). From the beginning of the 2000s, Ukraine saw the rise of a number of private photo schools, including Viktor Marushchenko School of Photography (est. in 2004, Kyiv), Bird in Flight School (est. in 2016, Kyiv), MYPH (est. in 2018, Mykolaiv); festivals and fairs including *Odesa Photo Days Festival* (est. in 2015, Odesa), *PHOTO KYIV* (est. in 2017, Kyiv); magazines including *5.6 Magazine* (est. in 2010, Kyiv), *Saliut* (est. 2021, Kyiv); and online platforms such as *Bird in Flight* (est. in 2014), *Untitled* (est. in 2020); etc. However, photography is still not entirely welcomed in academic circles and, for instance, is still not taught at the National Academy of Visual Arts and Architecture in Kyiv.

Admittedly, what preceded this revival, namely more than seventy years of Ukrainian photography unified by the Soviet aesthetic canon, remains largely forgotten and little investigated. This is partially due to a lack of written sources and fundamental research on the entire domain of culture in this period and partially due to the period's controversial nature (i.e., its undeniably ideological charge). The first issue has been dealt with by undertakings such as the *PinchukArt-Centre Research Platform* and some recent publications, among them *The Kharkiv School of Photography: Game Against Apparatus*¹ by Nadiia Bernard-Kovalchuk (2020), which closely examines late Soviet unofficial photography. The second has been aggravated by the set of decommunization laws passed by the Ukrainian government in 2015 and then immediately addressed critically by various artists, including the initiative DE NE DE.

Unluckily, Iryna Pap's photographic practice falls under both categories — her archive, and thereby her practice was brought within reach of the public only in the second half of the 2000s. The fact that she was one of the key figures of the official Soviet photojournalism in the 1960s and 1970s has rendered her unheralded and her entire oeuvre questionable in terms of its relevance in the light of decommunization.

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF IRYNA PAP

Iryna Pap, a Ukrainian photographer and educator, was born in 1917, the same year as the first publication of one of the USSR's newspapers of record, *Izvestia*, where she would later work. She was born into a family of Lithuanian Jews in the printing business in Odesa, although soon



Sl. / Fig. 1 Portret Irine Pap / Portrait of Iryna Pap. FOTO / PHOTO: Borys Gradov ©Borys Gradov Archive

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after her birth, they moved to Kyiv, where she grew up. The girl's birth name was Freida (Frayda), although, at the time, mass Russification and the substitution of birth names in order to conceal ethnic background were widely practiced in the USSR. Thus, Freida was gradually transformed into the more conventional Iryna. She changed her birth year as well, from 1917 to 1921, in part to look younger and in part to conceal her origins even more. Upon her graduation from the then newly-formed Ukrainian Institute of Cinematography in 1941 with a specialization as a "film industry electrical engineer" (her thesis was entitled *Acoustics of the concert hall named after P. I. Tchaikovsky in Moscow*) Florina² Pap relocated to Kuybyshev (Samara, Russia), where she started working as a sound engineer at the Kuybyshev Studio of Chronicle Films. She came back to Kyiv in 1944 and continued her work at the Ukrainian Studio of Chronicle-Documentary Films (Ukrkinochronika) in the capacity of a studio administrator. From 1946 to 1951, Pap lived in Uzhgorod, where her second husband, Borys Gradov, had moved to work as a photo reporter for *Sovetskoe Zakarpattia* [Soviet Transcarpathia]. Presumably, it was here, and under his direct influence, that she took up photography. (Fig. 1)

According to her record of service, she first worked as what is listed as a literary worker, and in 1950, she began her official career as a photojournalist for *Sovetskoe Zakarpattia*. Upon their return to Kyiv, she took on various different jobs related both to her degree specialization and her new profession. In 1958, she finally ended up at *Izvestia*, where she would work for the next fifteen years. Her time at *Izvestia* coincided with Khrushchev's Thaw — an era of major infrastructural construction, economic growth, space exploration, and the weakening of ideological tension. Being a photojournalist for the Ukrainian correspondent office at *Izvestia*, Pap and her husband Borys Gradov, who had by that time become the leading photojournalist of the *Ukraine* magazine, belonged to the creative intelligentsia of the higher rank, which granted them access to foreign travel (mostly to the Eastern Bloc but also Northern Europe) and social benefits unimaginable for the majority of the Soviet citizens. Professionally, Pap was the first photographer to be granted permission to take aerial photography of Kyiv's reconstructed streets after WWII. She also took photos of the construction of the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant and the city around it and documented numerous official visits of foreign delegations, including Fidel Castro's 1963 visit to the USSR. (Fig. 2)

Throughout the years, Pap occasionally collaborated with other news outlets, and in the 1970s, when her permanent contract with *Izvestia* terminated, she quite often carried out tasks for the *Sputnik* magazine, a monthly illustrated digest printed in seven foreign languages and distributed abroad. Unlike the black and white, often cropped photographs on the pages of *Izvestia*, these assignments usually provided an opportunity for a picture essay: a couple of magazine spreads, color photographs, and much more freedom in treatment.

1

So far, the Kharkiv School of Photography is the most researched and well-documented movement of Ukrainian photography, not least because of the efforts of its members and researchers who were close to it, like T. Pavlova.

2

Her name transformation can be retraced in her official documents of that time, such as her Komsomol membership card or record of service.



Sl. / Fig. 2 Izgradnja nuklearne elektrane u Chernobylu / Construction of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, 1971.
FOTO/PHOTO: Iryna Pap © Iryna Pap Estate ↑

Despite her long and successful career as a photojournalist, for many, Iryna Pap is much more well-known as a gifted educator who, in the early 1970s, launched the first professional School of Journalistic Excellence at the Journalists Union of Ukraine. For a long time, her institute provided the only professional training for photo reporters available in the Soviet Union. Previous to the program's inception, photographers were obliged to receive a basic education in vocational training schools. She succeeded in cultivating high professional standards, introducing the idea of peer-to-peer and portfolio reviews and, as a result, raised a new generation of Ukrainian photographers who continue to work in the country and abroad, among them Rita Ostrovska, Volodymyr Falin, Valery Orlov, Viktor Marushchenko and Vasyl Artyushenko.

THE ARCHIVE (S)

At a time when probably the biggest photography archive — the Magnum Photo Agency's press prints collection — was acquired by Michael Dell of Dell computers in 2010, affirming its monetary and symbolic value, little or no interest was and still is expressed on the national level for photographers' archives in Ukraine. In the absence of photography museums and the blatant nonexistence of contemporary art museums in the country, there is hardly any institution that can take care of a photo archive on both material and conceptual levels. However, some of the existing institutions, as well as independent art professionals, are seeking to bridge this gap in a series of exhibitions,³ publications⁴ and films.⁵ Simultaneously, the last decade can be characterized by a genuine interest of Ukrainian visual artists in archival practices, to the point that Asia Bazdyrieva, a researcher of visual culture, has indicated that this "archival impulse" is among one of the most important tendencies of Ukrainian art.⁶ The importance of these critical inquiries of the archives cannot be understated because they question and problematize existing historical narratives, at the same time proposing alternative takes on the manipulated and disrupted past.

In its turn, Iryna Pap was meticulous about her archive, although this did not save it from indifference. Her *Izvestia* production is accumulated in 140 envelopes, each numbered and dated. The overall number of negatives is approximately 1200. The majority of envelopes contain reporter's notes, contact sheets, press prints, negatives and positives. However, after her death in 1985, this archive remained forgotten at the *Izvestia* correspondence office in Kyiv, where it was discovered and rescued from oblivion in 1991 by photographer Valeriy Miloserdov. In the following decade, he carefully studied and digitized Iryna's archive, making it accessible primarily to researchers. Recently, the archive was handed over to Fotohof Archiv (Salzburg, Austria) for further research, popularization and publication of Iryna Pap's work. This decision was dictated by the



Sl. / Fig. 3 Kopenhagen, Danska / Copenhagen, Denmark, 1969.
FOTO / PHOTO: Iryna Pap © Iryna Pap Estate

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Cf. the exhibitions *Playing the Past*, IZOLYATSIA, 2017; *Overcoming Gravity*, Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit, Mystetskyi Arsenal, 2019.

4

For instance, Sakharuk, Valery. *Mykola Trokh. Enfant Terrible of Ukrainian photography*. Kyiv: Stedley Art Foundation, 2020.

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Cf. *Fragile Memory* project. <https://burlakafilms.com/fragilememory?fbclid=IwAR2rn1bbpD1GbZELdL4bPZa7D-4gdee07FzNjLjQyTHENclSSWdpX9e20w> (date of access June 28, 2022)

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Bazdyrieva, "Tendencies: Ukrainian art in 2019", 205.

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Cf. *Visualrian* [RIA novosti mediabank], <http://visualrian.ru/search/?query=Пан&area=author> (date of access June 28, 2022) and *Sputnik images*, <http://sputnikimages.com/search/?query=Pap&area=author> (date of access June 28, 2022).

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Badior, "Why we need a post-colonial lens to look at Ukraine and Russia", 9.

forementioned lack of will and expertise on the part of Ukrainian art institutions, although this decision also legitimates taking one of the important press archives documenting a quarter century of Ukrainian history outside the country.

Further research on the *Izvestia* issues puts forward an assumption that the photographs in Pap's archive are those which, for some reason or another, were passed over by the editor's office in Moscow and thus never made it to the pages of the daily newspaper.

In the meantime, Iryna's personal archive, which contains photos from her foreign trips to Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, has been recently retrieved by her family members. It is much smaller as compared to the *Izvestia* archive, containing around 450 negatives. Without a doubt, this personal archive is of great interest because these photos may be the only evidence of Pap's photographic practice stripped from the ideological and political restrictions under which she worked at *Izvestia*. Her official body of work features exemplary factory and *kolkhoz* [collective farm] workers around the country, construction sites of new neighborhoods in Kyiv, party congresses and portraits of prominent figures of the time. Her private archive, on the other hand, contains far more nuances, picturing an unbiased vision of life outside of the USSR, which she managed to glimpse while enjoying the privilege of travel. (Fig. 3)

The traces of Iryna Pap's work for local media outlets, as well as other bits of the *Izvestia* production, may also be found in two Ukrainian archives — TASS (Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union) in Kyiv and the Pshenychnyi Central State Film, Photo and Sound Archive of Ukraine in Kyiv. The current war in Ukraine has made these archives temporarily out of reach amid hopes that the research can be resumed shortly. A good selection of her photographs published during her days at *Izvestia* and *Sputnik* are currently available for viewing and purchase on the two specialized websites of the international media group *Rossiya Segodnya* [Russia Today].⁷ The websites do not provide any authors' biographies, although even the fact that her work is showcased there exposes coloniality described by cultural journalist Daria Badior in her recent piece on the nature of Russian-Ukrainian relationships: "Soviet accomplishments were and are seen as Russian only — after 1991, Russia became the heiress of the most important physical or symbolic Soviet heritage. In the media mainstream, few can discern whether an artwork was created in the Ukrainian, Georgian, Estonian, or the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic — it just seems, to the general public, like Soviet art and therefore Russian."⁸

The aforementioned archives remain the primary and unique source for the study of her oeuvre due to the relative lack of firsthand information, whether in the form of biographical records, memories, or archival traces that might shed specific light upon the written discourses that shaped

its creation and recorded its reception. Therefore, the vast quantity of what we cannot reconstruct poses the question of how to address the archive. In addition, proceeding in this way — mostly limited to pictorial archives — risks suppressing the important absences that the archives necessarily contain. Describing Iryna Pap’s approach, Valery Miloserdov emphasizes: “it’s honest Soviet reportage photography without any artistic antics like, say, superimposing details from another photo. These photos are to be trusted, they capture daily Soviet life, its front side. Although, in fact, the other side of that life — Holodomor, the war, Gulag — was not documented by anybody”.⁹ This comment is compliant with Leah Dickerman’s assumption about the nature of the entire Soviet representational enterprise, namely “the simultaneity of opposed views about the photograph”.¹⁰ On the one hand, various manipulations and explicit violence of the image were normalized and rarely hidden to remind the viewer of the pervasive power of the omnipresent system. On the other hand, the wide exertion of the medium speaks in favor of “the perceived need to offer a visual proof of a particular (but false) historical narrative with the strength of photography’s power of authentication”.¹¹ Thus, manipulation and avoidance of certain topics in Pap’s practice have yet to be researched and interpreted.

DISCURSIVE SPACE
OF PAP’S
PHOTOGRAPHS

When we talk about the archives of Iryna Pap that are within reach, we are generally talking about a vast collection of envelopes with reporter’s notes, contact sheets, press prints, negatives and positives compiled by the photographer, rediscovered after some 50 years, and made publicly accessible almost 45 years after their creation. But how did they operate in their own time?

Evidently, Pap’s photographs primarily circulated and were encountered by the audience on the pages of *Izvestia*, meaning they were usually seen in small sizes and cropped to fit the layout of the newspaper. Underlining the hegemony of the center within the Soviet paradigm, news from the Ukrainian Soviet Republic was rarely important enough to make the headlines. For instance, in issue #266 of *Izvestia* from 1960, one finds Pap’s photo of the newly opened metro in Kyiv. Even without access to the missing original negative, it is clear that the photo was skillfully fitted up the page. The text reads: “In Kyiv, subway trains went underground. Five stations — each more beautiful than the next. The Kyiv metro is a worthy rival of the Moscow and Leningrad underground roads. Take a look at the picture by Iryna Pap. This is the Universytetska station. Is it any worse than the underground palace in Moscow with the same name!?”¹² There is no lack of condescending tone, promotion of emulative spirit and colonial auspices in this short and seemingly unexceptional passage. The layout of the page reserves a disturbingly small space for the photo from Kyiv. (Fig. 4)

9 Prokopenko, “A journey through the archives of Iryna Pap together with the photographer Valery Miloserdov”.
10 Dickerman, “Camera Obscura: Socialist realism in the shadow of photography”, 141.
11 *Ibid.*, 18.
12 *Izvestia*. November 7, 1960, 3.



Sl. / Fig. 4 *Izvestia*, № 226, 1960. Photography by Iryna Pap © Izvestia

Apart from those published in *Izvestia*, Pap's photographs participated in various exhibitions, such as the All-Union Art Photo Exhibition *The Seven-Year Plan in Action 1961*, where her *Wedding* was awarded a diploma of the 3rd degree and mentioned in the article "The Features of Our Life" as a great example of genre work dedicated to children. According to the *Sovetskoe Foto* [Soviet Photo], there were 970 photos on display from 390 photographers, and the exhibition in Moscow was attended by two hundred thousand visitors.¹³ (Fig. 5)

Taking advantage of the favorable location of the main office of *Izvestia* in Moscow on Pushkinskaya square, there was a constantly changing exhibition of photographs in the shop windows of the building. No doubt Iryna's works appeared there many times, although no records of that have been found so far. The editorial office usually hosted simple solo exhibitions of the newspaper's photojournalists for two weeks. Each exhibition was arranged by an artistic director and featured about 20–25 photographs 30×40 cm in size, selected and printed by an author. Quite often, they were the photos that did not make it to the pages of the newspaper but were considered by their authors worthy of being shown. However, partaking in the shop window exhibitions was not so financially rewarding—the fee was about 100 rubles, whereas one photo in the newspaper paid from 45 to 120 rubles. The appeal of this display was rather to update passersby on the recent news in an extended format that featured many more images than a newspaper page could accommodate. At the same time, according to eyewitnesses, the display was always well-curated, and in addition to its communicative or educational significance traditionally brought to the forefront of Soviet photography, it also provided a rich visual experience.

These exhibitions in the shop windows conceivably became possible at the dawn of the 1960s due to the period's relative liberalization and the end of the decades of Stalinist terror and censorship. Marking this liberalization in photography in 1961, the president of the USSR Union of Journalists and chief editor of *Pravda*, Pavel Satiukov, in his introductory article for *Sovetskoe Foto* [Soviet Photo], declared that photography was now being regarded "as a political document truthfully reflecting the life of our people constructing Communism and at the same time as works of art".¹⁴

This twofold approach to photography, in contrast to the Stalinist dominance of the solid socialist realist canon focusing on authenticity, finally allowed for and even encouraged experimentations, which were previously labeled formalistic and bourgeois, and as such forbidden. In her article entitled "Photography in the Thaw", Susan E. Reid talks about the reinvigoration of the Soviet press and the heyday of photography in the 1960s due to a number of reasons, among them the sudden changes to the requirements placed on photojournalists, who now were supposed to emphasize "authorial engagement and artist's individual, expressive and persuasive use of the medium."¹⁵



Sl. / Fig. 5 Vjenčanje / Wedding, №11, 1961.
FOTO / PHOTO: Iryna Pap © Soviet Photo

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In light of these new requirements, and since Pap's photographs indeed appeared both on the pages of the news outlets and at the exhibitions, resorting to Rosalind Krauss' term "photography's discursive space" may come in handy. Apparently, Pap's works already at that time belonged to a mass media and an aesthetic discursive space, which meant that they "assumed different expectations in the user of the image, they convey two distinct kinds of knowledge".¹⁶ Operating in the mass media context, her photographs had to convey the truth about ordinary people's lives, propagandize the success of Soviet science and industry, speak to the least sophisticated audience due to the medium's universality and comprehensibility, and educate. Instead, as part of art discourse, the poetic and expressive purpose of the photos was prioritized; staging and shooting from eye level gave way to experimentation with composition, angle, lighting and focus. It is interesting to note that, in the article praising her *Wedding* in *Sovetskoe Foto* [Soviet Photo], among other things, the author reminds the readers and the photographer that: "This persistent desire to look for a new solution to the plot, these attempts to shoot differently than others have already shot, this creative restlessness, all can serve as an excuse for those failures that, of course, happen in the shooting practice of the photojournalist".¹⁷ He goes on, saying that some of the portraits shot by Pap are too static and thus lack expression and ingenuousness, which is unjustifiable and thus requires more creativity from the photographer's side in the future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even though photography in the Thaw enjoyed this special in-between status and was considered one of the most important modern technology mediums, helping mobilize and engage the masses, it actually never made it to the Soviet art establishment and academia. Photo exhibitions were hardly ever reviewed in the art press, and up to this day, it is not taught in art schools in post-Soviet Ukraine. Rigid hierarchy, with classical oil painting on canvas getting an absolute priority, for decades pushed photography to the margins, questioning its origins, relevance and artistic quality. As many researchers have confirmed, among them André Rouillé in *La Photographie, entre document et art contemporain*,¹⁸ photography for a long time had an uncertain status and was finally recognized as a full-fledged cultural and artistic phenomenon only around the 1970s. However, the Soviet and even the current post-Soviet situation has kept this marginal status and denied photography admission to the art world. As a practice as much as in its forms of distribution and display, photography in contemporary Ukraine largely adheres to practical uses like photojournalism or as an accidental medium used in artistic production. This situation is reinforced and perpetuated by the fact that there are currently no academic programs in photography and scarcely any art criticism focusing on it.

¹³ "We congratulate the participants of the photo exhibition *The Seven-Year Plan in Action 1961*", 3.

¹⁴ Satiukov, "Soviet photojournalist — truthful chronicler of a great era, scout of the future", 2.

¹⁵ Reid, "Photography in the Thaw", 34.

¹⁶ Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces", 311.

¹⁷ Filimonov, "Iryna Pap — Kyiv photojournalist", 10.

¹⁸ Rouillé, *La Photographie, entre document et art contemporain*, 7.

Despite that, and to a certain extent thanks to the yet unrecognized attempts of Iryna Pap to elevate photography to a more professional level, the contemporary Ukrainian photographic scene is very versatile and undoubtedly has its place within the visual arts ecosystem. One of her former students, Rita Ostrovska, remembers that the School of Journalistic Excellence not only raised her professional level but created an inspiring and thought-provoking environment that encouraged learning and experimentation. And the fact that it was led by a woman had a particular significance to her as, at the time, almost all professional photographers were men.¹⁹ Recognizing the importance of that kind of peer-to-peer knowledge production in the 2000s, another former student of Pap, Viktor Marushchenko, established his school of photography, which, in turn, has trained the youngest generation of Ukrainian photographers. As such, Pap's legacy, more than ever, requires a reflective and accurate study, stripped from binary perception and ideological prejudice. This study can turn into an unlearning exercise shedding light on Soviet photography and Ukraine's place in it. Interpretation of her works can build on the discursive spaces they belonged to, visual studies of mass media and decolonial approaches, which can grant them another perception and acceptance in the current moment.

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From the unpublished memoir of Rita Ostrovska, December 8, 2020.

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