THE AESTHETICS OF CENSORSHIP AND THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE:
Abstraction Beyond Art

Volume One

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Preface

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of any other University or similar institution except as specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University of similar institution except as declared in the Preface specified in the text.

The dissertation is 78, 682 words in length, including footnotes and list of images, but excluding image captions and bibliography.

Cover image: Varvara Stepanova, *Risunek dlia tekstil'* (1924)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reconsiders the art of the Russian avant-garde by exploring its engagement with, influence from and contribution towards an unconventional area of culture: censorship.

Although extensive research has already considered the way artists such as Malevich, Rodchenko and Stepanova blurred the binaries between art and vandalism, construction and deconstruction in their work, this analysis has not yet extended to consider their engagement with institutions of censorship to its full extent. This disinclination is informed by a long-standing and resilient assumption that censorship and creativity are antithetical, mutually oppositional forces. My thesis uses extensive new archival findings to problematise this position. By questioning these binary distinctions, and searching for commonalties between art and expurgation, this project offers a new understanding of how at different points in their careers, across different media, artists borrowed, adapted or referenced the censor's strike in complex ways.

Whilst extensive research has been devoted to the ideology and institutional mechanisms of Russian censorship, its aesthetic dimensions have been largely disregarded. As a corrective to this, this project will consider case studies of visibly altered and amended works in three different media: typography, photography and painting. Case studies range from redacted texts, censored manuscripts, excised details in print journals and defaced photographs. In each case, it will be argued that the very surface and texture of censorship itself warrants a formal reading, as placeholders of enforced negations which contain a rich semantic complexity.

This project adds to a growing field of research which reconsiders the interactions between avant-garde artist and institutional apparatus. Covering a chronological period from the First to the Second World War, it charts the artists' transition from anti-establishment cultural agitators to employees of the Soviet state's expanding art administration network. It explores the tense entente that ensued as their art was adapted and appropriated to accommodate these changing institutional allegiances. Ultimately, it illuminates a new facet of the relationship between art and its destruction during this period, and provides a new understanding of the role of the artist as a willing or willed iconoclast.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TRANSLITERATION

Abbreviations

BL	-	British Library, London
MAM	-	Multimedia Arts Museum, Moscow
MoMA	-	Museum of Modern Art, New York
MSA	-	Memorial Society Archive, Moscow
RNB	-	National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg
GMIIP	-	Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
RSA	-	Rodchenko Stepanova Archive, Moscow
RGB	-	Russian State Library, Moscow
RGASPI	-	Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow
RGALI	-	Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts, Moscow
GPIBR	-	State Public Historical Library of Russia
GRM	-	State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
GTG	-	State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.
TGA	-	Tate Gallery Archives
UFSBSP	-	Archive of the Office of the Federal Security Service for St. Petersburg and Leningrad Regions

Note on Transliteration

The dissertation follows the Library of Congress transliteration system, with the modification that I transliterate soft signs with straight apostrophes (') to distinguish them from quotation marks. When a Russian name has an established spelling in English I follow convention (for example El Lissitzky and Trotsky). Patronymics of Russian names are not used, and soft signs are not transliterated into first names nor surnames. When quoting Russian text in footnotes, I use modern orthography, even if the source is pre-1917. Translations of quotations are my own unless stated otherwise in the footnotes.

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INTRODUCTION

In March 1980 the conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid published their thoughts on Kazimir Malevich in an *Artforum* article.[1] Writing with a lack of restraint which today would plainly not make it past peer-review, their article dismisses Malevich as an 'illiterate' who painted with 'bad form'.[2] His collected writings are deemed to consist of 'asinine scribblings' and the etymology of his movement, Suprematism, is attributed not to the imperious Latin *Supremus,* but the faintly ridiculous Russian 'Super-Mother'.[3]

This is not, however, just a hatchet job. Alongside these pejorative comments are percipient insights, both facilitated by the fact that the article pre-dates Malevich's ascension to global renown and hence exempts the writers from the reverence which habitually frames his work today. For example, Komar and Melamid observe that Malevich was not just an artist, but 'also an active Commissar, one of the first of the Soviet bureaucrats', and therefore his artistic influence extends to his 'bureaucratic heirs', to the officials who have consciously 'left his content untouched'.[4] The accuracy of this claim is vividly conveyed by the Suprematist rubber-stamp design which Malevich's student Nikolai Suetin created in 1920 (fig. 1). The modernist masterpiece of the *Black Square* is here reinterpreted as an administrative aid showing that, whilst part of Malevich's legacy leads to the minimalist art in the MoMA collection, another part leads to office-writing; to the aesthetics of officialdom, the signs and symbols of Soviet paperwork. It is in the latter that Komar and Melamid claim the 'full and horrifying powers of the avant-garde' are 'unexpectedly revealed'.[5]

The grounds for this grandiose statement are playfully illustrated in a visual pun which concludes the article. As the reader turns to the final page, they find a large illustration of Malevich's most famous work, *Black Square,* taking up over a third of the print space (fig. 2). In assessing the artist's legacy, the writers concluded that 'Malevich's squares [...] turned out to be empty in all respects'.[6] We assume this refers to the square's studied semantic vacancy. Suprematism, after all, sought to strip art of all representation, leaving the void of the image which turns in on itself, erasing

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[1] Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, 'The Barren Flowers of Evil', *Artforum*, 18:7 (March, 1980), 46-52.
[2] Ibid., 52.
[3] 'Suprematism - think about the name a bit: super + mat (mother in Russian).' Ibid., 52.
[4] Ibid., 52.
[5] Ibid., 52.
[6] Ibid., 52.

its own content. Yet, as it turns out, the writers are referring to something else entirely. The punchline is revealed in the small-print caption underlying the image, which reads: 'Black square covering a painting by a Russian artist. At the last minute the artist requested that we not reproduce his painting or mention his name for political reasons. (K/M)' (fig. 2).[7]

Komar and Melamid end their essay in this way to play a trick and prove a point; that we ourselves can't spot the difference between the censorship of art, and art itself. The reader's misidentification of Malevich's modernist masterpiece bolsters the argument which has been made all along; we cannot distinguish avant-garde experiment from artistic oppression because they are indistinguishable, because *this* is its legacy, this is art emptied of its content. For Komar and Melamid, the powers of the avant-garde are 'horrifying' because the relationship between the artist and institutions of power are not reactionary, but mutually influential:

> Officials [...] fulfil the role of censors. Everything produced in the Soviet Union [...] passes through bureaucratic hands. Thus, if an artist has created a work of art and wants to exhibit it, he must approach the proper department and explain to the official, in officialese, what the work of art means. [...] Malevich [...] was one of the first Soviet bureaucrats. His bureaucratic heirs, having exchanged Malevich's bad form for their own good uniforms, left his content untouched, and currently reign supreme in Russia. Recognising this, Russian artists discovered that Lenin's avant-garde and Stalin's academism are essentially only two different sides of the same socialist utopia.[8]

The double-meaning illustrated by *Black Square* may be sardonic, but it reflects a genuine characteristic of Soviet magazines. It is indeed true that those that are heavily censored can be indistinguishable in design terms from those that pay homage to Malevich, as Aleksei Gan's *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura* (*Contemporary Archiecture)* and Solomon Telingater's *SSSR na Stroike* (*USSR in Construction*) prove (figs. 3-4). Mikhail Karasik, an artistic contemporary and colleague of Komar and Melamid, makes the same observation with regards to Malevich's visual overlap with Soviet photographic censorship. Looking at the 'blacked-out portraits' of purge victims from photo albums of the late 1930s, Karasik is struck by how 'the black ovals instead of faces' resemble not mindless vandalism but fine art.[9] Specifically, he claims they 'refer the viewer to earlier examples of a similar visual device: the heads of peasants in the form of coloured ellipses in plantings by Kazimir

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[7] Ibid., 52.

[8] Ibid., 52. Here the writers prefigure the famous argument which would be published by Boris Groys twelve years later, debunking the myth of the innocence of the early revolutionary avant-garde and calling attention to its shared features with Socialist Realism: Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. by Charles Rougle (Princeton, 1992). These parallels are not coincidental, Groys was a colleague of the artists' and is cited several times throughout the article.

[9] Mikhail Karasik, *The Soviet Photobook* (Göttingen, 2015), 272.

Malevich'.[10]

The peculiarities of these parallels form the starting point for this thesis. Komar and Melamid may be exaggerating when they claim that there is something inherently censorial about the *Black Square*, but the suggestion is not entirely without grounds. The Russian avant-garde began in and belonged to a culture of pervasive censorship whose proprieties were at times evaded and enforced, mimicked and maintained. Far from exhibiting the autonomy of its creators, the work of avant-garde artists shows and retains multifaceted signs of collaboration with a regime of political censorship in explicit and implicit ways. This thesis explores the overlaps between art and officialdom, building on the analogies suggested by Karasik, Komar and Melamid. With a wider consideration of the shared symbolic language between the artists of the avant-garde and the institutions of censorship, it reconsiders the extent to which this unlikely source may have informed modernism's fascination with images of absence, rupture and negation.

Thesis Structure

This thesis analyses the interactions between avant-garde artists and institutions of censorship in Russia in the period between the First and Second World Wars. It is organised into three sections, each concerning a different medium - typography, photography and painting - and taking as its case studies damaged and visibly censored examples of avant-garde books, journals, manuscripts and photographs from archives and libraries in London, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Prague. Many of these are unpublished, marginal versions of canonical texts, which have been subject to surface alteration by political redaction or self-censorship. By comparing this corpus of defaced and deconstructed editions with their inviolate counterparts, I seek to complicate the distinction between 'creative' and 'coercive' acts of redaction, to reconsider the relationship between art and its destruction during this period, and to reassess the role of the artist as a willing or willed iconoclast.

Section one consists of two chapters which assess the impact of literary censorship on avant-garde book design in Imperial and Soviet Russia. Whilst extensive research has been devoted to the ideology and institutional mechanisms underlying this practice, its aesthetic dimensions have been largely disregarded. Critics generally try to look beneath and beyond the censor's 'strike', trying to work around them in order to excavate the 'authentic' text underneath. Yet black bars, strike-outs and missing words are, in and of themselves, also literary devices, and these chapters explore how they shaped the look of Russian texts. Chapter one provides a roster of various styles of censorship in the late Imperial era, including hand-drawn excisions and over-writing, and mechanical interventions

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[10] Ibid., 272.

made with a printing press (elliptical dots and lithographic stamps). The significance of these marks is contextualised via a close reading of the official statutes and charters directing Imperial censorship, demonstrating that they are not arbitrary excisions but a coherent set of signs that transmit an informative message. These stylistic features are then compared to Russian avant-garde book design, specifically typographic trends in Futurist poetry by Kruchenykh and Suprematist manifestos by Malevich, which also deconstructed texts and cultivated a print space which retained deleted portions and symbols of reversal and removal.

Chapter two applies the same approach to a study of the Soviet censorship body, Glavlit. Two case studies are used to explore how censors visibly imposed or embedded their presence on the texts that passed through their offices, both pre-publication and post-publication. The former category is considered in relation to Constructivist books designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko in the early post-revolutionary period, the 1920s, and the second with regards to political redaction in a magazine for which he worked as a designer a decade later in the 1930s, *SSSR na stroike.* As the artist navigated his place within the expanding Soviet arts bureaucracy, shifting from the upheaval and radical reorganisation of the immediately post-revolutionary period to the cultural consolidation of Stalinism, the chapter charts the extent to which his Constructivist design theory was influential on, or consciously integrated with, the aesthetics of censorship throughout these changing political contexts. The section as a whole thus compares two periods during which artists had altered allegiances to censorship institutions. In the first case, they were anti-establishment cultural agitators, vehemently opposed to any State control of literature. In the second, they were part of the Soviet state apparatus itself, employed in its cultural ministries and programmes. Within this streamlined and unified cultural mechanisms, they were (in principle, if not practice) colleagues and collaborators with the censors employed alongside them, and striving towards a single goal.

Section two deals with a conceptually distinct branch of censorship: photographic defacement. It is structured around archival findings of heavily defaced photobooks designed by Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova. Chapter three considers the case study of the 1937 military publication *Pervaia konnaia,* and chapter four looks at the 1934 Eurasian album *10 let Uzbekistana.*[11] Both albums were recalled and re-issued by the publishers in the year following their initial release, in response to the political upheavals of the purge period. Many images of politicians denounced for counter-revolutionary activity were thus excised from the artists' personal copies of the original albums. The two chapters focus on these acts of self-censorship, compiling a new catalogue raisonné of instances of photographic defacement in Rodchenko and Stepanova's oeuvre. This is then used to correct

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[11] Even though it is chronologically the later album, *Pervaia konnaia* is considered first as it has produced more substantial archival findings.

certain historiographic inaccuracies and authorial attributions which have prevailed about the albums, as well as to contextualise defacement as a historical practice and address its complexity as a social ritual.

While sections one and two focus on explicit manifestations of censorship, section three considers its implicit dimensions and returns to a medium more classically associated with art history: painting. Its three chapters each correspond to a particular artist: Rodchenko, Stepanova and Malevich. The artists' later careers were each characterised by a return to figurative work, with a shared interest in the idiom of the faceless figure. Scholars have struggled to accommodate this return to representational painting in their work, repeatedly dismissing it as evidence of artistic compromise or concession. These three chapters, however, suggest new ways in which these can be understood, by assessing the works against the newly established inventory of defaced photographs, which, I argue, also constituted a painterly practice. The motif of facelessness, whether rendered on canvas or censored photographs, in each case shares certain formal, textual and chromatic qualities, unified in part by explorations of negation and absence. Thus, rather than being read as acquiescence with a return to traditional figure painting, this can be seen as a reference to the new political status of subjects under Stalin. Collectively these chapters demonstrate that at different points in their careers, across different media, artists borrowed, adapted or referenced the censor's strike in complex ways.

The censorship and defacement of artwork was most common during the period commonly known as the 'Great Terror'. Even though these few years have been the subject of more research than any other period of Stalinist history, they remain highly contested, with historians disputing the motives of the state violence and mechanisms of its application. Perhaps the only aspect of the 'terror' upon which historians are broadly in agreement is its chronological confines, generally understood to start with the assassination of Sergei Kirov, in December 1934 and to draw to a close following the removal of Nikolai Ehzov as head of the NKVD (*Narodnyi kommissariat vnutrennykh del*) in November 1938. Nonetheless, the question of how we should label and refer to this period remains contentious, and some explanation of my chosen terminology is necessary.

The phrase 'Great Terror' is widely used in everyday parlance, but is contested in academia for its associative meaning. Coined by Robert Conquest in his 1968 book of the same name, the term 'terror' is disputed amongst historians who disagree with his characterisation of the period, and who seek to distinguish between violence as 'terror' and violence as a 'purge' of the body politic.[12] The latter term

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[12] Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (New York, 1968). For a discussion on the applicability of this term, see David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, 2011), 239.

is also used to identify these few years, which are frequently referred to as 'the purges'. As Wendy Goldman explains:

> The term 'purge' or *chistka* refers to a process within the Communist party in which members were reviewed at periodic intervals and sometimes expelled for corruption, passivity, moral laxity, political opposition or other reasons. In the late 1930s, these purges turned deadly, and expulsion was often, although not always, the prelude to arrest, imprisonment or execution.[13]

In what follows, I use the terms 'terror' and 'purge period' interchangeably to refer to the heightened political violence and wide phenomena of arrest, imprisonment, exile and execution between December 1934 and November 1938. My approach to analysing artefacts from this period is aligned with historians of the 'cultural turn.' This is a substantial and growing body of research which probes the complexities of everyday responses to terror and the explores the dynamic between central orders and social responses.[14]

Methodology

Iconoclasm has existed as long as images have been made, and censorship as long as books have been written, and yet rigorous study of either was for a long time deterred by the implicit assumptions and explicit reprisals they both incite. A case in point is Jonathon Green's 1990 *Encyclopaedia of Censorship*, which opens with the words:

> The dates may differ, the ideologies may quite confound each other, but the world's censors form an international congregation, worshipping in unison at the same altar and taking as their eternal text Jehovah's 'Thou shalt not'. Censorship takes the least flattering view of humanity. Underpinning its rules and regulations is the assumption that people are stupid, gullible, weak and corrupt.[15]

Green sets up a binary between 'communication and its symbiotic rival, censorship', and in pitting the two terms against each other constrains the subject he aspired to expand.[16] Studies which have focused specifically on Russian censorship have, if anything, been even more condemnatory in their characterisations. The two most prolific writers on Russian censorship, T. M. Goriaeva and Arlen Blium, describe censorship as a 'monster' and 'a poison' respectively.[17] It is 'one of the most awful of

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[13] Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge, 2007), 2, footnote 4.
[14] See, for instance: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999); Hirokai Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian–Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (Cambridge, 1998); and Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, 1997).
[15] Jonathon Green, *Encyclopaedia of Censorship* (London, 1990), 3.
[16] Ibid., 3.
[17] 'Аппарат и штат Главлита […] превращаясь в некоего монстра'. T. M. Goriaeva, 'Sovetskaia politicheskaia tsenzura: (istoriia, deiatel'nost', struktura)', in *Iskliuchit' vsiakie upominaniia: ocherki istorii sovetskoi tsenzury,* ed. by T. M. Goriaeva (Moscow, 1995), 13-64, 23; Arlen Blium, *A Self-Administered Poison: The System and Functions of Soviet Censorship*, trans. by I. P. Foote (Oxford, 2003).

humanity's inventions; it is, in my opinion, an absolute evil',[18] concludes Blium, his choice of words exemplifying what Robert Darnton pinpoints as the field's ingrained obstacle:

> The trouble with the history of censorship is that it looks so simple: it pits the children of light against the children of darkness; it suffers from Manichaeism – and understandably so because who can take a sympathetic view of someone who defaces a text with a blue pencil or a film with scissors? But we need to understand censorship, not merely to deplore it, and to understand it we need to put it in perspective.[19]

Putting Soviet censorship in detached, analytical 'perspective' runs the risk of trivialising the trauma and human tragedy to which was inexorably bound. This perhaps explains why even works published as recently as 2000 persist in presenting dichotomies of total freedom versus total oppression, when the field of cultural studies has long been committed to dismantling such absolute binaries.[20] Nonetheless, the past two decades have produced a wealth of alternative approaches to the topic, amounting to an entire sub-field. The 'new censorship' (a movement whose methodologies are heavily influenced by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu) challenged the Orwellian characterisation of censorship as a simplistic, top-down application of repressive power.[21] It recognised instead that censorship is just one of the myriad fluctuating cultural forces that interact with artists and authors, influencing them in both explicit and implicit, conscious and subconscious ways.[22]

This approach has been particularly productive in exploring how the formal devices of modernism were shaped by both by reaction against and compliance with censors.[23] Lev Loseff was the first scholar to acknowledge that Russian censorship was in certain ways a culturally productive force which could enhance the quality of literature.[24] Rather than merely clipping their wings, Loseff argues that the restrictions imposed by censorship were creatively stimulating to Russian writers. In order to evade the censor's eye, Russian writers cultivated their use of Aesopian language, extending double-entendres whereby writers could embed hidden meaning into seemingly unobjectionable content. This, he argues, is a hallmark of Russian nineteenth-century literature, a sophisticated

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[18] 'Цензура […] одно из самых страшных изобретений человечества, есть, по моему мнению, абсолютное зло'. Arlen Blium, *Kak eto delalos' v Leningrade: tsenzura v gody ottepeli, zastoia i perestroiki 1953-1991* (St. Petersburg, 2005), 253.

[19] Robert Darnton, 'Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789-East Germany, 1989', *Representations,* 49 (Winter, 1995), 40–60, 40.

[20] See: Green, *Encyclopedia,* and Katherine Bliss Eaton (ed.), *Enemies of the People: The Destruction of Soviet Literary, Theatre and Film Arts in the 1930s* (Evanston, 2002). Eaton characterises censorship as 'devices of intimidation and terror' in her introduction, xi.

[21] See, for example, Beate Müller (ed.), *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age* (Amsterdam, 2004) and Robert C. Post (ed.), *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles, 1998).

[22] For a study of this nature in a specifically Soviet context, see Jan Plamper, 'Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s', *The Russian Review,* 60: 4 (October 2001), 526-544.

[23] See, for example: Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge, 2006); William Olmsted, *The Censorship Effect: Baudelaire, Flaubert and the Formation of French Modernism* (Oxford, 2016); and Rachel Potter, *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment, 1900-1940* (Oxford, 2013).

[24] Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature,* trans. by Jane Bobko (Munich, 1984).

innovation arising as a result of, not in spite of, censorship. His approach has recently been adopted to explore a similar phenomenon in the visual arts of the Russian avant-garde by Margaret Bridget Betz, who adopts Loseff's methodology to painting to argue that censors also acted as 'spurs to abstract art' by incentivising artists to create works full of hidden meaning.[25] This, however, is a rare exception in what is otherwise an overwhelmingly logocentric field. This thesis seeks to build on Betz's approach, while expanding it to explore not just how artists evaded censors, but how they occasionally directly mimicked them.

Implicit throughout the wealth of research devoted to the institutions of Russian censorship is an emphasis on censorship's invisible manifestations: hidden meanings, mistranslations, withheld distribution, editorial policies, psychologies of self-censorship, institutional processes and administrative systems.[26] Censorship, as interpreted by extant historiography, can in fact mean almost anything other than the physical marks of excision themselves. The notion of attaching any cultural significance to the actual traces of erasure – the blacking out or whiting in, the scratched emulsion and scalpel cuts – is invariably dismissed, as the marks are considered little more than irrelevant administrative gestures devoid of valuable semantic content. This is a missed opportunity. As Mikhail Iampolski notes, the overt *visibility* of Soviet censorship was its defining tendency; 'normally, what we call "censorship" does not exhibit itself before society so much as hide in its shadowy depths, producing its effects without attracting general attention'.[27]

In this thesis I seek to take a new approach to censorship studies and address this logocentric imbalance by arguing that the surface and texture of censorship itself, the spills of ink and scarred emulsions are coded signifiers which warrant a formal reading. This approach is informed by a distinct but overlapping field: iconoclasm studies. Historically interpreted as a branch of vandalism (and therefore drawing on the polarity of barbarity versus civilisation), iconoclasm has recently become a fashionable topic for scholars who problematise its complexities in a Foucauldian fashion. Dario Gamboni's book *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* was the first substantial exploration of the complex relationship between the evolution of modern art and the history of iconoclasm.[28] Since then a number of collective projects have probed the

[25] Margaret Bridget Betz, 'Irony, Derision, and Magical Wit: Censors as a Spur to Russian Abstract Art' in *Political Censorship of the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Arresting Images*, ed. by Robert Goldstein and Andrew Nedd (London, 2015), 9-60.
[26] This approach true of all the previously cited works by Blium and Goriaeva. It has also characterised Western scholarship, including: Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917-1991* (Lanham, 1997); Marianna Tax Choldin and Maurice Friedberg (eds.), *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR* (Boston, 1989); and Martin Dewhirst and Robert Farrell (eds.), *The Soviet Censorship* (Metuchen, 1973).
[27] Mikhail Iampolski, 'Censorship as the Triumph of Life' in *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, ed. by Thomas Lahusen and Evegenii Dobrenko (Durham, 1997), 165-77.
[28] Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (London, 1997). A notable forerunner was David Freedberg's *Iconoclasts and their Motives* (Maarssen, 1985).

meanings, significance, and paradoxically productive dimensions of destructive actions.[29] Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay have been forerunners in this reassessment, the latter, in his study of iconoclasm in revolutionary France, elucidating a particularly useful reevaluation:

> Incidents of iconoclasm can be understood as being complex responses to a world full of signs whose meanings and values were contested. Iconoclasts, like their contemporaries, were by necessity competent semiotic coders and decoders [...] they altered visual signs physically while seeking to establish consensus over meanings and spatial control in the wider world.[30]

Rather than violence and destruction, iconoclasm can therefore be understood as 'a type of material sign transformation' in which a preexisting sign is adapted and given new meaning.[31] I adapt this methodology to my case studies of deconstructed texts and defaced photographs which, following Clay, do not act as a demolition, but a transformation. Rather than an end, they can reasonably be considered a new stage in the changing ritual of signs.

Key to this approach are the specific semantic ranges of iconoclasm, defacement and censorship. 'Iconoclasm' is seemingly easy to clarify as the definition is embedded in the etymology of the word, from the Greek *eikon* image and *klastes* to break. Nonetheless, as Boldrick notes, far from a single category, iconoclasm can be understood as a continuum ranging from complete obliteration of the object to its partial destruction, to contextual modes of removing images, such as relocating or hiding them.[32] This wide range of actions is united only by the fact that they all somehow constitute 'a breach of the physical integrity of an art object'.[33] I define 'defacement' as a specific sub-category within the iconoclastic spectrum; an attack on the facial features of a human image, with the intention to disgrace. Defacement always results in the object's partial deletion, as opposed to total obliteration. 'Censorship', for its part entails a broader range of actions. It constitutes 'the suppression or prohibition of any parts of any media that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security'.[34] Unlike iconoclasm, which is usually (but not always) the result of individual attack, censorship, in the above definition, is always directed by institutions, usually the state or church. Therefore, it is a source of contention whether one can apply this term to photographic defacement. Denis Skopin, for instance, has argued that it is incorrect to do so, as this type of action varies so substantially in process, function and purpose that it is

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[29] See three recently-published edited volumes: Anne McClanan and Jeffrey Johnson (eds.), *Negating the image: Case Studies in Iconoclasm* (Aldershott, 2005); Stacy Boldrick (ed.), *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms* (Farnham, 2007); and Stacy Boldrick, Leslie Brubaker and Richard Clay (eds.), *Striking Images, Iconoclasms Past and Present* (Burlington, 2013).

[30] Richard Clay, *Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Paris: The Transformation of Signs* (Oxford, 2012), 3-4.

[31] Ibid., 3.

[32] Boldrick, *Striking Images.*

[33] Ibid. Also relevant for this thesis will be the adjectival form of the term, iconoclastic, which has become synonymous with a certain cultural non-conformism in colloquial usage.

[34] *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford, 2010), 281.

misleading to be considered part of the phenomena of censorship.[35] Whilst I agree with Skopin in acknowledging the conceptual difference between the two practices (and I agree that different methodological approaches must be used to frame them), his nomenclature runs the risk of imposing artificial limitations upon an extremely common word. In colloquial usage, 'censorship' is often applied to *any* means of restraint on freedom of speech or thought, implicit or explicit, from publication bans to an individual holding their tongue. The wide semantic range is, in my view, integral to correct usage of the term, and hence is reflected in my thesis.

The methodological complexities of researching this topic are matched, however, by another scholarly roadblock: the lack of historical records on Glavlit. There are three main reasons for the paucity of archival holdings on this institution. Firstly, in many cases there was no paper trail left of Glavlit protocol; it was common practice to communicate decisions by telephone, with no written record (Ermolaev refers to this practice as *telefonnoe pravo*), which explains why so little archival information remains easily accessible.[36] Secondly, given the inherently sensitive nature of Glavlit's work, many documents were destroyed. An interview with Glavlit's ex-head, Vladimir Solodin, carried out in the 1990s, alludes to the destruction of censorial documents by Glavlit agents.[37] Thirdly, restrictive archival access means that, for example, of nine preserved inventories of current archival holdings of Glavlit in the State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow (GARF) only three are currently available to researchers.[38] The majority of these are operation records, financial accounts, staff lists, and end of year reports from regional and city branches. These, moreover, are not particularly pertinent to this project as they concern the 1950s, by which time the political landscape, as well as communication and mass-media, had considerably evolved.[39] This scarcity of archival records of course need not deter study on Soviet censorship, although it does demand new and imaginative methodological approaches. Visual analysis is especially important in this regard, as images and symbols can often function in a less prescriptive mode than words, retaining more flexibility to preserve a multiplicity of meanings. In this thesis, I have sought to analyse the embedded meanings - both intended and unintended - within the surface design of censorship in order to illuminate some aspects of the practice which have long remained hidden in plain sight.

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[35] Denis Skopin, *La photographie de groupe et la politique de la disparition dans la Russie de Staline* (Paris, 2015).

[36] Ermolaev, *Censorship,* 145.

[37] See Steven Richmond and Vladimir Solodin, '"The Eye of the State": An Interview with Soviet Chief Censor Vladimir Solodin', *Russian Review*, 56 (1997), 581- 590.

[38] GARF (f. 9425, op. 1-3).

[39] Several excellent document collections have been published in recent years which provide insightful sources for the study of this institution, see: 'The Censorship' in *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents*, 1917-1953, ed. by Katerina Clark et al, trans. by Marian Schwartz (New Haven, 2007), 261-275; T. M. Goriaeva (ed.), *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury: dokumenty i kommentarii* (Moscow, 1997); D. L. Babichenko (ed.), *'Schast'e literatury': gosudarstvo i pisateli, 1925–1938* (Moscow, 1997); and Arlem Blium (ed.), *Tsenzura v sovetskom soiuze, 1917–1991* (Moscow, 2005).

Historiography: Aleksandr Rodchenko

Mythology and martyrdom have framed the story of the Russian avant-garde ever since its artists appeared on the dust jacket of Alfred Barr's 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* (fig. 4).[40] In this famed exhibition catalogue, Suprematism and Constructivism were presented as examples of talent cut short, made by painters who 'have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power.'[41] This narrative of a victimised artistic community, trampled on from above, would prove to be resilient for much of the rest of the century. It is particularly evident in the way in which Western scholars described Rodchenko's career as a photographer; Barr states that the turn towards the camera was his only choice after he 'gave up on painting' having 'left art'.[42] The oppressed artist, in other words, had to sacrifice his painterly skills for the cause of creating state propaganda. This view was reinforced by the first English-language publications which furthered Barr's research. Camilla Gray's hugely influential *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (1962)*,* presents Rodchenko as a 'painter of circles' and makes no mention of his photography.[43] Christina Lodder's equally seminal *Russian Constructivism* presents photography as 'at once a symptom and a cause of the decline of Constructivism and of its increasing compromise'.[44] For her, photography was born of artistic frustration, once 'Constructivism had failed in its primary objective'.[45]

The Cold War biases framing these narratives are obvious, and thrown into even sharper relief when compared to contemporaneous publications further East. The artistic dismissal of Rodchenko's photographic oeuvre was only ever a trait of English-language publishing. By contrast, researchers working in the geographical region broadly classified as the Eastern Bloc were, from the outset, able to recognise the artistic innovation and formal experimentalism underlying Rodchenko's photography. Lubomir Linhart's *Alexandr Rodčenko* (Prague, 1964) presented the artist primarily as a photographer, whilst the title of Leonid Volkov-Lannie's 1968 *Aleksandr Rodchenko risuet, fotografiruet, sporit* clearly places his camera work on equal footing with his graphic work.[46] The first extensive monograph on Rodchenko was published in Hungary in 1975, with its author, German Karginov, acknowledging that 'Rodchenko's work in the field of photography' was so innovative that it 'deserves a book to itself.'[47] As if rising to this challenge, two books, an exhibition and catalogue

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[40] Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art: Painting, Sculpture, Constructions, Photography, Architecture, Industrial Art, Theatre, Films, Posters, Typography* (New York, 1936).

[41] Barr, *Cubism*, 18.

[42] Barr, *Cubism*, 17-18.

[43] Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (London, 1962), 195.

[44] Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, 1983), 181.

[45] Ibid., 181.

[46] Lubomir Linhart, *Alexandr Rodčenko* (Prague, 1964); Leonid Volkov-Lannit, *Aleksandr Rodchenko risuet, fotografiruet, sporit* (Moscow, 1968).

[47] Citations are taken from the English translation which appeared four years later: German Karginov, *Rodchenko*, trans. by Elisabeth Hoch (London, 1979), 225.

would appear devoted precisely to this topic in Germany within the next seven years.[48] Amongst these was Hubertus Gassner's authoritative survey *Rodchenko Fotografien* (1982).[49] Aleksandr Lavrentev, the artist's grandson and biographer, would subsequently publish two books devoted to his work as a photographer, and Russian art historian Selim O. Khan-Magomedov released a second monograph on the artist in 1986, which included a chapter on photography.[50]

This is not to claim that this research was not available to Anglophone readers. Both of the monographs were translated into English, as were several other significant publications. These included the articles which French-Bulgarian art historian Andréi Nakov published about Rodchenko's photography in American journals during the seventies.[51] David Elliot organised an exhibition and accompanying catalogue in 1979 which included Rodchenko's photography, and John Bowlt included many theoretical articles on photography in his anthologies of Russian avant-garde writing.[52] Yet, this research remained confined mainly to the spheres of academia. Photography had no representation, for instance, in either of two major, agenda-setting exhibitions which introduced the Russian avant-garde to Western audiences: the Pompidou Centre's *Paris- Moscow* of 1979 and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910-1930* in 1980. Both of these shows presented Rodchenko as a painter alone.[53]

Nonetheless, following the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991, a sea change in scholarship began, enabled by the increased accessibility of archival documents. A radical historiographical reconsideration in the following decade resulted in several works which made significant progress in reconceptualising the value of Rodchenko's photography. Margaret Tupitsyn, for instance, challenged the 'compromise' view of photography by looking beyond the images themselves, in order to chart and analyse the voluminous theoretical discourse against which they were conceived and critiqued.[54] By meticulously mapping the photographic discussions and debates from the mid-twenties to the mid-thirties, she demonstrated that Rodchenko's camerawork was a calculated, and continually refined, endeavour to support and sustain the social exigencies of Soviet ideology.

In Slavonic studies more broadly, the understanding of Soviet modernity was reevaluated by

[48] Evelyn Weiss (ed.), *Alexander Rodtschenko Fotografien 1920-1938* (Cologne, 1978); and *Alexander Rodtschenko: Möglichkeiten der Photographie* (Cologne, 1982).

[49] Hubertus Gassner, *Rodchenko Fotografien* (Munich, 1982).

[50] Aleksandr Lavrentev, *Aleksandr Rodchenko: fotografii* (Moscow, 1987); Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *La Opere di Aleksandr Rodčenko 1891-1956* (Milan, 1986), published in English as *Rodchenko: The Complete Works,* trans. by Silvana De Vidovich (London, 1987).

[51] Andréi Nakov, 'Alexander Rodchenko: Beyond the Problem of Pictorialism', *Arts Magazine* (April, 1975), 33-36; 'Back to the Material. Rodchenko's Photographic ideology', *Artforum*, 27 (October 1977).

[52] David Elliot, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (Oxford, 1979); John Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (London, 1988).

[53] *Paris-Moscow, 1900-1930*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, 1979); Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman (eds.), *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles, 1980).

[54] Margaret Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-37* (New Haven, 1996).

academic shifts towards cultural history. The research produced by historians and cultural theorists who explore how Soviet politics were manifest in social dynamics, relations and everyday culture offers a radically new assessment of the period during which Rodchenko was professionally active. A large focus of this work concerned the reshaping of individual identity, and practices of what Steven Kotkin described as 'Bolshevik self-fashioning'.[55] This rich field of research was influential in reframing approaches towards art history, with aspects of its methodology utilised effectively in two notable doctoral theses on Rodchenko by Leah Dickerman (1997) and Erika Wolf (1999). Dickerman's thesis argued that Rodchenko's photography was instrumental in consolidating and communicating new models of subjectivity under Stalin.[56] Through an analysis of his photojournalism, Wolf corrected certain chronological misconceptions by challenging the notion that his later career consisted of a sheer capitulation to political propaganda.[57] Her in-depth study of Rodchenko's White Sea Canal commission proved that his avant-garde aesthetic was not extinguished by the demands of the Socialist Realist period, but continued to evolve alongside it.

These approaches to the artist's work gained prominence following their incorporation into the curatorial narrative of several influential exhibitions. Dickerman co-curated a 1998 MoMA exhibition on Rodchenko, which included research focused on his photography in its accompanying catalogue.[58] In 2008, the exhibition *Alexandr Rodchenko: revolutsiia v fotografii*, opened in Moscow and later travelled to the Hayward Gallery, London.[59] In response to this increased public prominence, an extensive range of primary sources relating to the artist were published in a number of anthologies, many edited by Lavrentev including diaries and correspondence, several of which have been translated into English.[60] The availability of these sources has facilitated further efforts to reconsider how Rodchenko's photography can refocus our engagement with Socialist modernity.[61] Contemporary research has continued to explore the dynamic dialectic between state policies and social responses, challenging the view of the avant-garde and the Soviet State as antagonistic entities, struggling against and resisting one another. Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, for instance, has

[55] See Steven Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley, 1997). For a survey of this voluminous literature, see Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone, 'Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective', *Slavic Review,* 67: 4 (Winter, 2008), 967-986.

[56] Leah Dickerman, 'Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness', unpublished PhD thesis (Columbia University, 1997).

[57] Erika Wolf, 'USSR in Construction: From Avant-Garde to Socialist Realist Practice', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Michigan, 1999).

[58] Peter Galassi, 'Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution' in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. by Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman and Peter Galassi (New York, 1998), 100-137.

[59] Aleksandr Lavrentev (ed.), *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography* (London, 2014).

[60] Aleksandr Lavrentev (ed.)*, V gostiakh u Rodchenko i Stepanovoi* (Moscow, 2014); *Aleksandr Rodchenko: V Parizhe, iz pisem domoi* (Moscow, 2014); Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Opyty dlia budushchego*, ed. by O. Mel'nikov and V. Shchenikov (Moscow, 1996), 92. See also Elena Sidorina, *Russkoe iskusstvo: XX Vek: issledovania i publikatsii* (Moscow, 2007) and Igor Vorobiev, *Russkii avangard: manifesty, deklaratsii, programmnye stati (1908-1917): k 100-letiyu Russkogo avangarda* (Moscow, 2008).

[61] Hugely important, albeit less pertinent to this historiography as they are not specifically focused on photography, were Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Los Angeles, 2005) and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Massachusetts, 2008).

explored the complex interactions between state initiatives and Rodchenko's artistic output by reconsidering how his photomontage engaged with and reflected the prevailing political climate.[62] Katherine Hill Reischl incorporates aspects of Rodchenko's photojournalism into her wider study on the interactions between discourses of photography and literature, seeking to 'expose tensions underlying the creation and self-creation of the Soviet author and subject'.[63] Aglaya Glebova, meanwhile, continues to reassess the intersections between Socialist Realism and photojournalism by focusing on the residual romanticism of landscape imagery in Rodchenko's White-Sea Canal project.[64] Alongside these methodological reassessments, other scholars have embraced the 'material turn' to reassess Rodchenko's photographic practice by analysing the physical substance of his prints. Lee Ann Daffner uses laboratory equipment and high magnification lenses to examine his photographs at a molecular level, overturning the prevalent assumption that he prioritised 'straight' photography, and demonstrating the high levels of editing, retouching and surface finish at stake in his work.[65]

 With its focus on censorship and defacement, this thesis seeks to contribute to these continuing reevaluations and reassessments. The relationship between photography and censorious practices is ripe for reappraisal, given the considerable quantity of works by Rodchenko which were defaced by his own hand; the artist's earlier self-identification as an iconoclast; and the growing interest in the nature of censorship as a culturally productive force. Whilst some scholarship exists on the topic of photographic retouching, the specific practice of defacement has been under-explored.[66] Rodchenko's defaced photographs were published in David King's *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (1997), which was the first book to demonstrate not just the full scale of photographic defacement under Stalin, but also the variety, flexibility and unexpected creativity of its practice.[67] Nonetheless, King's book was intended for a non-academic audience, and so far, his revelatory case studies have impacted scholarly discourse only as supplementary material. Dickerman draws on King's sources in her 2000 article 'Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography', which demonstrated how the incoherencies of the 'false historic document' can animate debates on photography's role as a simultaneously factual and

[62] Ekaterina A. Bobrinskaia, *Russkii avangard: granitsy iskusstva* (Moscow, 2006).

[63] Katherine H. Reischl, *Photographic Literacy: Cameras in the Hands of Russian Authors* (Ithaca, 2018), 11.

[64] Aglaya Glebova, 'Elements of Photography: Avant-garde Aesthetics and the Reforging of Nature', *Representations*, 142 (Spring 2018), 56-90.

[65] Lee Ann Daffner 'Dive: A Materialist History of the Photographic Industry in Germany and the Soviet Union between the Wars' in *Object: Photo, Modern Photographs The Thomas Walther Collection 1909-1949*, ed. by Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, Maria Morris Hambourg (New York, 2014), 50-69.

[66] See: Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop* (New York, 2012); Lee Ann Daffner, 'Retouching Revealed: Finishing Practices Observed in the Thomas Walther Collection' in *Object: Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art* ed. by Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York, 2014), http://www. moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Daffner.pdf.

[67] David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (London, 1997).

fictional enterprise.[68] Nevertheless, she only uses the falsified photograph as a primer to lead into a discussion on the discursive construct of historical narrative, and ultimately it remains secondary to her main argument. Reischl similarly acknowledges the significance of subjectivity on photographic destruction, but subsequent scholarship has not pursued these lines of enquiry. The first academic research to consider defaced photographs as empirical data useful for understanding historical experience under Stalin was Denis Skopin's 2015 *La photographie de groupe et la politique de la disparition dans la Russie de Staline.*[69] This book prompted new insights into the nature and political significance of photography under Stalin. However, as it was adapted from a philosophy doctoral thesis, it did not seek to situate its findings within the specificities of Russian aesthetics and art history. This dissertation will fulfil an overlooked need to further these findings and contextualise them specifically within the debates over photography's social function.

Varvara Stepanova

Barr's exhibition has affected the way we think about Stepanova just as much as it has her husband, Rodchenko. Her art is notable by its omission from his pioneering *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition, and whilst she is mentioned in the accompanying catalogue, this is only in relation to her husband, implying almost that she was some sort of spousal studio assistant.[70] Stepanova has continued to be overshadowed in subsequent literature, reflecting broader male biases in art history. Gray quotes Stepanova at length, but neglects to reprint any of her works other than her textile and stage designs.[71] During the resurgence of interest in the Russian avant-garde, it was common to present Stepanova as one half of an artistic couple rather than an autonomous individual. The best known surveys of her oeuvre were the 1984 Italian exhibition, *Rodćenko e Stepanova, Alle origini del Costruttivismo* and Peter Noever's 1991 book *Rodchenko, Stepanova: The Future is Our Only Goal.*[72] Nonetheless, as the titles of both demonstrate, the rediscovery and exhibition of Stepanova's work was dependent on her presentation as part of a pair, with the implication, perhaps, that her role in the canon of modernism is contingent on her relation to her husband.

Lavrentev has produced several correctives to this view, including a monograph devoted solely to Stepanova.[73] Nevertheless, a retrospective authored by a family member can have questionable status as an objective and robust validation of one's place in the canon. Furthermore, whilst Lavrentev's edited anthology of her diaries provides a valuable primary source on Stepanova's life and work, its

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[68] Leah Dickerman 'Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography', *October,* 93 (Summer, 2000), 139–53.
[69] Skopin, *Photographie.*
[70] Barr, *Cubism,* 18.
[71] Gray, *Great Experiment.*
[72] *Rodćenko e Stepanova, Alle origini del Costruttivismo,* exhibition catalogue (Milan, 1984); Peter Noever (ed.), *Rodchenko, Stepanova: The Future is Our Only Goal* (Munich, 1991).
[73] Aleksandr Lavrentev, *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work* (Massachusetts, 1988).

editorial biases are evident, focusing on republishing entries within which she speaks about Rodchenko, giving the impression she is more of a commentator on, or manager of, her husband's career.[74] Several publications in the 1990s, by contrast, attempted to foreground female contributions to the Russian avant-garde, amongst them *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* and *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900-1935.*[75] By far the richest area of research devoted to Stepanova has focused on her clothing and textile design. This has included Christina Kiaer and Natalia Adaskina's studies of Constructivist dress designs, and Julia Tulovsky's illuminating explorations of Stepanova's work in textiles.[76] The choice of this focus, however, seems to replicate the gendered approach to her art by concentrating on media traditionally associated with feminine, domestic crafts. My archival findings will offer a valuable corrective by showing that some of her work on photobooks may have mistakenly been attributed to Rodchenko. In light of this, we can reintegrate Stepanova into a discussion from which she has, for too long, been excluded.

Kazimir Malevich

Malevich's revered place in the pantheon of modernism is partly circumstantial. His decision to leave a large number of his most important paintings in Berlin in 1927 contributed significantly to the artist's assimilation into the Western modernist canon.[77] As a result, more has been published on Malevich than perhaps any other Russian artist. Having an oeuvre split between collections on either side of the Iron Curtain, however, presented considerable logistical hindrances for researchers. It inevitably meant that, in virtually all Cold War scholarship, individual Malevich paintings were decontextualised from his wider works and writings. The deracination of large portions of the artist's output contributed to a tendency not to situate his work within a specifically-Russian visual tradition, but to incorporate it into 'part of a century-long European project to reach the absolute in art'.[78] This hardly demanded interpretative overextension. Indeed, the abstraction of his early paintings, along with the artist's mystical pronunciations and invocations towards the sublime, meant that much of his work adroitly accommodated formal analysis in a Greenbergian vein. The later phases of his career, when Malevich returned to figurative painting, fit into what was, in many ways, an equally mythologised view of twentieth-century modernism; that is, the capitulation of

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[74] Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda. Pisma. Poeticheskie opyty. Zapiski khudozhnitsy* (Moscow, 1994).

[75] Miuda N. Yablonskaya, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900-1935*, trans. by Anthony Parton (London, 1990); Aleksandr Lavrentev, 'Varvara Stepanova' in *Amazons of the Avant Garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova and Nadezhda Udaltsova* ed. by John Bowlt and Matthew Drutt (New York, 2000), 241- 270, 241.

[76] Kiaer, *Imagine* and 'The Russian Constructivist Flapper Dress', *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (Autumn, 2001), 185-243; Natalia Adaskina, 'Constructivist Fabrics and Dress Design', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts,* 5 (Summer, 1987), 144-159; Julia Tulovsky, *Tekstil' avangarda: risunki dlia tkani* (Ekaterinburg, 2016).

[77] See Joop M. Joosten, 'Berlin 1927' in *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (Amsterdam, 1988), 22-29. Important early monographs published in the West include Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art,* 1910-1930 (London, 1982); and Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds. Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, 1980).

[78] Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable: World War, Modern Art and The Politics of Public Culture in Russia 1914-1917* (Lincoln, 2008), 117.

Soviet artists to political pressure. The first English exhibition of Malevich's work (1959) opened with a statement by the then-director of the Whitechapel Gallery, Bryan Robertson, blaming the menacing Soviet state for the suppression of artistic creativity.[79] This interpretation proved resilient, and accordingly the dominant interpretive model for these works has been an act of the unwilling artistic concession, 'a visual symptom of an avant-garde slowly suffocating in an increasingly restrictive cultural climate.'[80]

The reunification of Malevich's divided oeuvre was only possible over half a century after the artist's death. The first time both Eastern and Western collections of his work were shown simultaneously was in 1988, when the Russian Museum in Leningrad and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam collaborated on a travelling exhibition.[81] This ultimately lead to the publication of a four-volume catalogue raisonné of the artist's work, compiled by Andréi Nakov in 2006-7.[82] As well as this accessibility and understanding of Malevich's output has been greatly aided by major exhibitions at famous museums worldwide, with their bountifully-illustrated and meticulously-documented catalogues. These include the display and publication of the huge collection of 101 works held in The Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and important exhibitions at the Tate Gallery in London, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.[83]

The increased accessibility of his paintings and drawings has been matched by the growing availability of Malevich's voluminous theoretical writings, which have been widely published and translated. A forerunner in this field was Troels Anderson, who published parts of the artist's personal correspondence and theoretical writings in the 1970s.[84] A major contribution was then made at the turn of the twentieth century, through Alexandra Shatskikh's publication of five volumes of Malevich's collected writings, complete with commentary.[85] This was followed by another substantial publication, edited by Irina Vakar and Tatiana Mikhienki, focusing on Malevich's correspondence and personal writing.[86] This step forward in Malevich scholarship has been furthered by two volumes of

[79] *Kasimir Malevich, 1878-1935: An Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings, and Studies*, exhibition catalogue (London, 1959).

[80] Adrian Barr, 'From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*: Theoretical Shifts, *Nova Generatsiia*, and the Late Paintings' in *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth,* ed. by Christina Lodder and Charlotte Douglas (London, 2007), 203-220, 203.

[81] *Malevich 1878-1935*. For an overview of Malevich's exhibition history see Lodder, 'Preface' in *Rethinking Malevich,* i -vii.

[82] Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: le peintre absolu.* vols. 1-5 (Paris, 2006-2007). This was preceded by a single volume, Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris, 2002).

[83] *Kazimir Malevich v russkom muzee,* exhibition catalogue (2000. St. Petersburg); Achim Borchardt-Hume, (ed.), *Kazimir Malevich,* (London, 2014); Matthew Drutt (ed.), *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York, 2003).

[84] Troels Andersen (ed.), *Malevich: Catalogue raisonné of the Berlin exhibition in 1927* (Amsterdam, 1970); and *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-25*, trans. by Xenia Glowacki-Prus (Copenhagen, 1976). Another notable early effort was Evgenii Kovtun, 'Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu', *Ezhegodnik otdela rukopisi pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god* (Leningrad, 1976), 177-95.

[85] Aleksandra Shatskikh (ed.), *Kazimir Malevich: sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh.* vol. 1 - 5 (Moscow, 1995 - 2004).

[86] Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko, *Malevich o sebe. Sovremenniki o Maleviche. Pis'ma. Dokumenty. Vospominaniia. Kritika.* vol. 1-2 (Moscow, 2004).

formerly unpublished manuscripts and other materials from the Khardzhiev collection.[87]

Recent scholarship has made the most of these newly available sources to reassess ways to conceptualise Malevich, and the increased publishing of primary sources relating to the artist has facilitated theoretical shifts. Scholars seeking to build a fuller picture of his life and work have now tended to contextualise his work against its precise temporal and geographic coordinates.[88] For instance, Ekaterina Kudriavtseva interprets the *Black Square* as a symbol pertinent to the political ideology of the Russian state, rather than a universal effort to embody the sublime.[89] Other scholars have demonstrated increased interest in Malevich's organisational activities. Shatshikh studies his pedagogical practice, whilst Pamela Kachurin explores his Soviet career as a bureaucrat.[90] These reconsiderations of Malevich have extended to his later, figurative works, providing a wealth of newly theoretical frameworks through which they can be seen as something other than defeat or concession. In particular, the increased access to his writing has allowed close analysis of the artist's own thought processes, demonstrating that he primarily conceived of his later works as a recalibration of Suprematism, rather than a renunciation of it.[91] This thesis builds on this work to further explore what continues to be the two most problematic aspects of Malevich's career: his relationship to figuration and bureaucracy.

Conclusion

The development of abstract art is perhaps the most lionised chapter in the story of twentieth-century art. The familiar narrative of the artist who renounces representation in their quest to embody the ineffable in art remains one of the most enduring of modernist myths. Within this history, Russia plays a significant role. Its avant-garde artists have long been recognised as pioneers of abstraction, with several artists absorbed into canons and curricula, celebrated precisely for their abandonment of the painterly subject, their embrace of the non-objective. But absorbing these works into a cross-cultural narrative runs the risk of eliding the very specificities which ground it and gave it meaning. *Bespredmetnost',* as both the Constructivist and Suprematist schools used to refer to their 'subjectless' canvases, was a concept celebrated precisely because it was unique to Russia, distinct from the West.[92] It has too often been aligned with a Eurocentric narrative arc, an upwards trajectory towards the sublime. This may be part of the story, but is not the whole

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[87] Aleksandr Parnis (ed.), *Arkhiv N.I. Khardzhieva. Russkii avangard: materials i dokumenty iz sobraniia RGALI* (Moscow, 2017).

[88] For a good overview of these approaches, see two conference proceeding publications: Lodder, *Rethinking Malevich* and Christina Lodder (ed.), *Celebrating Suprematism, New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden, 2018).

[89] Ekaterina Kudriavtseva, *Kazimir Malevich: metamorfozy 'chernogo kvadrata'* (Moscow, 2017).

[90] Aleksandr Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo supremus* (Moscow, 2009); Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet* (Chicago, 2013).

[91] See Barr, '*Vozbuzhdenie*'.

[92] The term was used in the title of an exhibition within which both groups participated in Moscow in 1919, '19-i gosudarstvennoi vystavka: "bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm"'.

story. Whilst part of Russian abstraction was pursued with quasi-religious mysticism, another part was embedded in something much more prosaic. This thesis reconsiders abstraction, not within the parameters of the spiritual ineffable, but as part of another visual tradition, placing its points of origin and application in an alternate trajectory of the everyday.

Acknowledging that the invention of abstraction occurred not solely within the walls of the Fine Art atelier, but was also inspired by the many visual coordinates of commonplace culture is not a new idea.[93] However, amongst the many types of proto-abstraction which have been integrated into this story, the impact of censorship has yet to be explored. The topic warrants further study not simply because there are visual parallels between the visual emblems of anarchy and authoritarianism – the black passages of politically excised texts and the deconstructed typography of Futurist poetry, paintings stripped of colour and photographs stripped of content – but also because, in Soviet Russia specifically, artists were so closely integrated with institutions of political power. Charting the changing ideological engagement from the period of opposition to Imperialism, to the chaotic years immediately following the Russian Revolution to the consolidation of Stalinism, this thesis documents the evolving relationship between artists and power brokers in Russian cultural institutions, as their positions within the expanding Soviet arts bureaucracy saw them shift from cultural agitators to associates. In doing so, it charts the mutating symbolic value of marks of erasure and omission, exploring how abstraction had alternate applications which both preceded and superseded its presence on canvas.

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[93] See Leah Dickerman (ed.) *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* (New York, 2012).

Typography

This section takes a, quite literally, superficial approach to the study of censorship. It is concerned with surface appearances, studying the censor's strike with a focus on its contours and colours, its tones and textures. An analysis of this nature has long been overlooked by studies which delve into censorship's substrata, expiring its underlying ideology and internal mechanisms. This new angle seeks to contribute to a bigger picture by illuminating a new facet of a complex topic.

The 'material turn' in humanities has long since proved that the surface/substance binary which traditionally guided approaches to historical artefacts is misleading in its assumed hierarchy. Meanings *are* embedded on surfaces, and censorship matters, in part, because it *is* matter. It had a material presence and a diverse range of designs, all embedded meanings to which its contemporaneous readership were responsive. The two chapters which make up this section provide a roster of several types of these marks, an incomplete catalogue which goes some way to illuminating the variety and (paradoxical though it may sound) care which went into the much-vilified practice of bowdlerising literature. Chapters one considers the aesthetics of late-Imperial censorship, focusing on case studies of Futurism and Suprematism - two schools which originated before the revolution and were vocally anti-establishment. Chapter two continues to study Constructivism, which began in 1921, by when its artists had been absorbed into the Soviet state's cultural apparatus. As institutional employees, they worked alongside, rather than against the censorship body, and hence had a different professional relationship with censors.

The purpose of this section is to consider how these artists and writers addressed, evaded, parodied or simulated the censor's 'cut'. All of these artists lived and created in a climate where printed matter was constantly under review and emerged abridged, mangled with missing words and paragraphs. Thus, whilst it is true that Russian artists and writers complained about censorship, and that it posed a severe impediment to creativity in many ways, it is also true that it established a symbolic repertoire of signs of omission, one which bore a strong formal echo to the distinctive typography of avant-garde books, offering new ways to assess how censorship was interiorised by those subjected to it.

Early Avant-Garde Book Design and Imperial Censorship

Mimicry and Misprint in Malevich's Books

In 1919, at the age of almost forty, Kazimir Malevich published his first treatise on Suprematism, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* (*On New Systems in Art*).[1] By avant-garde standards, the book was uncommonly overdue: Malevich had invented Suprematism five years earlier, and in the frantic tempo of vanguard advance, half a decade between movement and manifesto was almost guaranteed to render one artistically obsolete. Given its long gestation, one may be surprised to find that when the book finally rolled off the press, each of its one thousand editions were littered with errors. On the title page itself, the reader finds a seventy-four-word paragraph within which Malevich makes twelve mistakes (fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Kazimir Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve.*(Vitebsk, 1919). Lithographed book, 23 x 17.2 cm. Detail from page 1.

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[1] Kazimir Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. statika i skorost', ustanovlenie* (Vitebsk, 1919). Hereafter referred to as *Novykh sistemakh.* Malevich had printed two pamphlets on Suprematism prior to this: *Ot' kubizma k suprematizmu. Novii zhivopisii realizm* (St. Petersburg, 1915) and *Ot' kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novii zhivopisii realizm* (Moscow, 1916). Both were printed to accompany exhibitions he was participating in. *Novykh sistemakh,* however, signals a major development of his ideas, and his first extensive exegesis on the topic.

These are not inconspicuous errors. Indeed, the artist is intent on drawing attention to them; when Malevich makes a correction, he does not use a simple strikethrough, but blots out the entire word with a densely-inked oblong.[2] These brash, black amendments disrupt the fluidity of reading; rather than a coherent column of text, the paragraph is encountered as a splintered mix of script, abstract shapes and stray serifs. The quantity of typographic errors in *Novykh sistemakh* is at odds with the obvious time and care that went into its production. Barely a page of the book is printed without conspicuous misprints and corrections, giving the impression that it was a hastily assembled first draft, and a poorly proof-read one at that. The opposite was in fact true. Malevich wrote *Novykh sistemakh* in June and waited until December to have it published in a comparatively large circulation of one thousand.[3] Moreover, he invested considerable creative resources into its production, commissioning a collaborative artel of art students to lithograph it under the direction of El Lissitzky.

This poses the question: why would Malevich wait five years to publish his career-defining ideas, spend five months drafting them and outsource their production to a printmaking expert, only to have it reach the reader riddled with errors? The situation is all the stranger given that lithography is an easily editable technique. Corrections can be made by abrading the limestone surfaces before etching or making gum-arabic deletions prior to printing.[4] The ease with which these errors could have been eliminated indicates that they are more than mere technical blunders, that there was something deliberate in their transfer from proof to print. This is further demonstrated by the conspicuous way in which Malevich integrates his corrections into his book's graphic design. *Novykh Sistemakh* is a highly illustrated, visual artefact wherein every page features some graphic adornment. Miniature Suprematist symbols litter the margins and intervene in the text as inter-titles, headers and end-notes (fig. 6b-e). Each time Malevich makes a correction, he overlays the text with small black squares or circles, which are morphologically identical to the pictographs adorning each page. In fact, his mistakes blend so seamlessly into the book's design that it is often impossible to distinguish what is art and what is error.

Initially, Malevich's corrections may strike us as negligible details in a text which sought to appear spontaneous, improvisatory. Yet they take on a new significance when situated amongst his collected writings. Suprematism is recognised primarily as a painterly movement, but it had a typographic

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[2] Discrepancies exist between different editions of this book, as is always the case with lithographic prints. The following analysis refers to the edition held in the Russian State Library, Moscow.

[3] Print-runs for hand-made, self-published avant-garde books most commonly ranged from 400-500. For specific information on edition numbers, see *The Russian Avant-Garde Book 1910-1934*, ed. by Deborah Wye and Margit Rowell (New York, 2002).

[4] For more on the reversibility of lithography techniques see Marjorie Devon, *Tamarind Techniques for Fine Art Lithography* (New York, 2009).

dimension as well, one which was consistent with the movement's ethos and aesthetic. Many of Malevich's publications demonstrate a distinctly Suprematist style to their text, characterised by the inclusion of miniature Suprematist 'signs' (*znaki*) which structured the text, but also embedded themselves within it, overlaying and erasing parts of the writing.[5] We see this in examples such as his 1920 book, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* (*Suprematism 34 Drawings*)*,* which features a three-page introduction to his Suprematist philosophy within which Malevich makes fifteen corrections, each of which is conspicuously drawn over with a prominent black bar (figs. 7a-b).[6] As with *Novykh sistemakh,* this was a lithographed book whose layout would have been easily editable. Similarly, his 1919 manuscripts 'Supremus: kubizm i futurism' ('Supremus: Cubism and Futurism') and 'Stranitsa 27' ('Page 27') both feature a number of redactions and revisions, which cause a deeply disjointed, fragmented reading experience (figs. 8-9).[7]

A hallmark of Suprematist typography, then, is the technique of overlaying text with abstract forms, rendering a visibly redacted manuscript and a ruptured, interrupted reading experience. The primary aim of this chapter is to identify sources of influence on this distinctive typographic style. In doing so, it builds upon an already considerable amount of scholarship devoted to the graphic style of early avant-garde books.[8] It has already been proved that, despite the author's insistence of their autonomy from literary precedent, there are many identifiable 'source[s] to which books such as [these...] show clear reference'.[9] Their abstracted penmanship has been attributed to influences ranging from the coarse outlines of *lubki* prints, the slapdash brushwork of commercial shop signs, the scrawled draughtsmanship of children's drawings, and the skewed longhand of Orthodox manuscripts. Malevich was not alone in his calculated cacography; many Futurist books revelled in merging poetry with misprint. In *Mirskontsa* (*Worldbackwards,* 1912) for example, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov deliberately used typographic techniques which indiscernibly blended accident and intention.[10] *Mirskontsa* is an important reference for understanding Malevich's manuscripts, as he identified so many

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[5] Nina Kogan, one of Malevich's students, discussed the different ways by which the black and red squares can be perceived as 'signs' (*znaki*). Nina Kogan, '*Chernyi kvadrat kak znak ekonomii*' and '*Krasnyi kvadrat - znak-signal peremeny puti*'. 1920. RGALI (f. 3145, op. 2, ed. khr. 1346, l. 1-2).

[6] Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka* (Vitebsk, 1920).

[7] Kazimir Malevich, 'Supremus: kubizm i futurizm' (1917) RGALI (f. 3145, op. 2, ed. khr. 699). A transcript is available in Shatskikh, *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. 5*,* 40-53; 'Stranitsa 27' (1919), unpublished manuscript held in George Kostakis collection, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece. Partially reprinted in Shatskikh, *Sobranie sochinenii* vol. 5*,* 158-159*.*

[8] See, for instance, Susan Compton, *Russian Avant-Garde Books, 1917-34* (London, 1992); Gerald Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900-1930* (Princeton, 1984); and Nancy Perloff, *Explodity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art* (Victoria, 2016).

[9] Jared Ash 'Primitivism in Russian Futurist Book Design' in Rowell and Wye, *Russian Avant-Garde Book,* 33-40, 35.

[10] Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, *Mirskontsa* (Moscow, 1912).

parallels between his painting and Futurist poetry that he described the two as a united effort: 'our idea', 'our common task'.[11]

Futurist books were famed for eschewing typesetting machines in favour of handwritten text; Kruchenykh insisted that poems were more expressive when printed in longhand which, he claimed, would 'convey the mood' and 'inspiration' of the writer at a glance, 'independently of words'.[12] The typography of *Mirskontsa* takes this logic to an unprecedented extreme, exaggerating handwriting into a hybrid of scrawls and smudged stamps. The result is a book printed in varying levels of readability, with certain letters rendered entirely indecipherable. On pages three, five and twelve (fig. 10a-c) the Cyrillic letters Т, Х, В, Л, А and О are barely recognisable as alphabetic forms at all, reduced instead to black daubs. This is not so much negligence, as a conscious effort to appear amateurish. Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov used a childlike technique for these letters, rolling black ink onto hand-cut potato halves and stamping them over the page.[13] The results of these potato-stamped scripts - not a technique known for its precision - are deliberately untidy, with the imprint of individual letters smudged beyond their contours, causing orthographic symbols to dissolve into inkblots.

At stake here is a fundamental reconsideration of the role of the misprint. Rather than something which detracts from a text, diminishing or diluting the purity of its meaning, errors are embraced - indeed, deliberately exaggerated. Kruchenykh was vocal about the need for writers to preserve their errors, down to the last 'ink stain'.[14] Within his poetic praxis, errors and their visible revisions were essential to convey the doubt, deliberation and contradiction which make up the creative process; 'we consider an inseparable part of the work its corrections'.[15] As such, in *Mirskontsa,* marks and materials usually deemed detractive to the text – mistakes, fingerprints, smudges – are enriched with new creative license, activated and integrated into the reading process itself. Both Malevich and Kruchenykh were fascinated by this point of dissolution at which the letter transforms from a phonetic signifier into an abstract sign. The two corresponded at length, with Kruchenykh becoming something of a mentee of Malevich.[16] Their letters to one another recount their intense preoccupation with typography, especially

[11] 'нашей идеей.' Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushkin, 19 October 1915. Vakar, *Malevich,* vol. I, 70-71, 70. 'нашей общей задачей.' Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushkin, 23 June 1916. Ibid., 90-91, 90.

[12] 'Почерк, своеобразно измененный настроением, передает это настроение читателю, независимо от слов [...] которыми снабдил ее почерк в час [...] вдохновения'. Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Bukva kak takovaia*, originally written in 1913, first published in 1930 in Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie proizvedenii Velimira Khlebnikova. Stikhi, proza, stat'i, zapisnaiia knizhka, pis'ma, dnevniki,* vol. 5, ed. by Iu. Tynianova and N. Stepanova (Leningrad, 1930), 248.

[13] For more on the significance of stamping in Kruchenykh's books, seePerloff, *Explodity,* 94.

[14] Aleksei Kruchenykh, Kazimir Malevich and Velimir Khlebnikov, *Troe* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 13.

[15] David Burliuk et al, *Sadok sudei II* (St. Petersburg. 1913).

[16] For a transcript of this correspondence, see Vakar, *Malevich,* vol. 1, 77-78, 91-94, 103-104, 128-129.

at the moment it loses its legibility, and slips from a verbal sign into what they termed '*slovanaia massa*', verbal mass.[17] Marjorie Perloff notes that this illegibility is entirely in keeping with the embrace of illogicality that characterised *zaum,* the 'beyonsense' mode of language which the Futurists pioneered, wherein poems were encountered through subliminal phonetic responses to their sounds. Knowledge of dictionary definitions would impede this purely musical encounter, and hence studied scribal negligence was used to defamiliarise the reader:

> The poem is visualised even as the painting contains letters; the presence of black writing marks [...] transforms text into image. We see the poem as a visual configuration before we try to determine what it says. And since its meanings do not cohere in any sort of consistent framework, syntactic parallelism not being matched by semantic equivalence, its words are, so to speak, set free.[18]

The Rorschach effect of misprinted ink is therefore welcomed because it demands that the reader apprehend each letter through subconscious associations and instinctual responses rather than ascribed alphabetic values. Kruchenykh's essay 'Bukva kak takovaia' ('The Letter as Such') emphasised that when letters become indistinguishable from 'graphic signs, visual signs [...], or simply tactile signs' they offer a richer reader experience because they open themselves up to a whole range of alternate interpretations.[19] Illegibility, in other words, transforms text into abstraction. It was this very quality which compelled both Kruchenykh and Malevich to retain their misprints. Indeed, doing so became something of a stylistic signature of Malevich's.

This playful inversion of rationality is the established explanation behind the aesthetics of infantilism and amateurism in early avant-garde books. However, this does not, in itself, fully account for the aesthetic traits which I identify as specific to Suprematist typography: covering portions of text with black segments and abstract shapes. There are, however, other points of reference in Russian literary history to which we can attribute these idiosyncrasies. To identify these, we have to look beyond the conscious artistic engagement with primitivism and puerility towards the involuntary constraints of the institution of Russian publishing. Indeed, one does not have to look far in the history of Russian literature to find a prior instance of text deliquesced into an indecipherable mass of black; the censorship office had been doing this already for centuries.

A suitable example of this phenomenon might be Maksim Gorkii's 1902 play *Na dne* (*Lower Depths*)

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[17] '[О]словесных масс.' Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushkin, 23 June 1916. Vakar, *Malevich,* vol. 1, 87-90, 88.

[18] Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Movement: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago, 1989), 139-140.

[19] 'письменных, зримых или просто осязаемых [...] знаках.' Kruchenykh, *Bukva,* 248.

(fig. 11). This is a useful case study for comparison, not because it displays any particular uniqueness, but precisely because it offers a typical example of how manuscripts looked once they passed through the censor's office in early twentieth-century Russia. When, in 1901, Gorkii's draft was submitted for preliminary review, his references to the hypocrisy of the Orthodox church were deemed heretic. Two sentences from act five were excised from the copy before the play was printed.[20] The original manuscript bears witness to this deletion in the black bars of typographic ink. On a purely visual level, Gorky's bowdlerised draft bears a resemblance to Malevich's *Novykh sistemakh*. The manuscript redactions are similar in terms of their material (opaque typographic ink), application (superimposed over text), alignment (parallel with page lineation), placement (tailored to fit precisely over the problematic word) and draughtsmanship (hand-drawn with gestural brushwork). These could be just superficial similarities but, in what follows, I will argue that there are conceptual parities to be found, based on the mutual endeavours of censors and artists towards textual deconstruction.

This hypothesis is not informed merely by the Gorkii manuscript, but also by the widespread prevalence of censorship in early-twentieth-century Russia. Marianna Tax Choldin has compiled data on the quantity of censored manuscripts in circulation in the late nineteenth century, and calculates that a third of imports from her case study selection (foreign-language texts published between 1856 and 1896) were 'permitted by the Russian censorship only with the excision of certain passages, ranging in length from a single line to many pages.'[21] She identifies nearly two thousand publications where this was the case.[22] The sheer quantity of visibly bowdlerised manuscripts in circulation in late Imperial Russia attests that artists would have been familiar with their aesthetics, a fact which casts new significance on the fact that several examples from Choldin's collection recall the look of Malevich's manuscripts. Her sources show pages of text with black squares of ink covering paragraphs, abstract spills of ink obscuring individual words, and hand-printed expanses of dark ink painted over entire paragraphs, interrupting the diegetic flow of text (figs. 12-13). These often-disregarded equivalences lead us to a counter-intuitive question: were artists influenced by the aesthetics of expurgation?

The hypothesis may seem misguided - why, after all, anti-establishment cultural agitators like the Futurists chose to mimic or draw on an institution they so vocally despaired of? Vladimir Maiakovskii lamented the bowdlerisation of his texts and 'prohibition of [his] performances', whilst Malevich

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[20] The two excised sentences originally read: 'Ложь оправдывает ту тяжесть, которая раздавила руку рабочего […] и обвиняет умирающих с голода', ('the lie justifies the heaviness that crushed the worker's hand […] and accuses the dying of hunger'); 'Ложь — религия рабов и хозяев', (the religion of slaves and masters is a lie.). Maksim Gorkii, *Na dne* (St. Petersburg, 1903).
[21] Marianna Tax Choldin, *A Fence around the Empire: Russian Censorship of Western ideas under the Tsars* (Chicago, 1979), 137.
[22] Ibid., 137.

ridiculed the 'censorship of artistic innovators' by outdated academicians.[23] And yet, these public condemnations of censorship as a practice do not obviate the possibility that it was simultaneously encountered as a productive and stimulating force for creativity.

As outlined in the introduction, methodological models for considering the culturally productive dimensions of censorship already exist. The most prominent example regarding Russian literature is Lev Loseff's study of the stylistic adaptations (and improvements) writers adopted in response to censorial restrictions.[24] He concluded that the censor's office was a catalyst for literary creativity as it entailed the cultivation of 'Aesopian language'; double-meanings dextrously embedded into texts. Loseff's model, however, does not apply to Futurist or Suprematist books, which were produced and printed in small batches by the artists themselves, thus circumventing censorial preview.[25] Rather than Loseff's stylistic adaption, therefore, it is perhaps more viable to conceptualise these parallels according to a model of stylistic mimicry. In positing this, I draw on a similar phenomenon that has been discussed by Sergeui Oushakine in his study of Cold War *samizdat* publications.[26] Oushakine was struck by the tendency of publications produced by political dissidents during the mid-1960s-70s to rely on language and arguments which 'did not differ substantially from [...] the discourse of the communist authorities themselves'.[27] Intuitively, one would expect 'official' and 'nonofficial' publications to contrast in both form and content, he notes, however, that the opposite was true. Oushakine attributes this oversight to a 'deeply rooted tradition of seeing the dissident movement as an example of the more-than-two-centuries-old, ongoing battle between the Russian intelligentsia and the institutions of power'.[28] His work is important here because it proves that, just because dissident ideology is incompatible with official policy does not necessarily mean its communication strategies contrast with official channels. Even oppositional discourses overlap. Indeed, Oushakine argues that they would not exist if they did not:

> I conceive of the dominant and subordinate as belonging to the same discursive field [...] Whilst being differently positioned, the dominant and dominated draw on the same vocabulary of symbolic means and rhetorical devices. And neither the dominant nor the dominated could situate themselves 'outside' this vocabulary.[29]

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[23] 'запрещением выступлений.' Osip Brik and Vladimir Maiakovskii, 'Za chto boretsia Lef?', *Lef*, 1 (1923), 1-7, 1; 'цензуре с новаторами искусства.' Kazimir Malevich, 'K voprosu izobraziteľnogo iskusstva', Shatskikh, *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. 1, 208-222, 219.

[24] Loseff, *Beneficence*, 1984.

[25] As Nina Gurianova notes, the artists 'did not have publishers in the strict sense of the word; most of the books were produced by the artists and poets themselves [...] sometimes with the modest financial support of friends who did not censor or control the work.' Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-garde* (Chicago, 2012)., 136.

[26] Sergeui Oushakine, 'The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat', *Public Culture*, 13:2 (Spring, 2002), 191-214.

[27] Ibid., 194.

[28] Ibid., 194.

[29] Ibid., 207.

For Oushakine, the stylistic mimicry at stake in *samizdat* is not a case of indoctrinated imitation, but a calculated exploitation of an extant symbolic system. In essence then, when oppositional discourses overlap, it is not accidental that they do so. One oppositional force (normally the dissenting) will adopt the symbolic retinue of their oppressors to either subvert, exploit or inherit the power of their symbolism. Is it possible, then, that stylistic mimicry also extends to Suprematist typography? In what follows, I will explore the premise that Malevich and Kruchenykh were imitating the familiar signs and symbols of censorship in their books.

The above proposition is, I believe, a consistent continuation of much extant research on the topic. It is well established that the originality of the avant-garde came from modifying and mimicking extant symbolic forms. Often, this process involved referencing symbols from ideologies to which they were vocally opposed, such as organised religion. The influence of Orthodox manuscripts on Futurist books has been remarked upon at length.[30] This was not a pledge of allegiance or alignment with Orthodoxy as a belief system, but an appropriation of its visual means towards different ends (in this case, an allusion towards a reality laying beyond empirical sense-perception). A similar adaptation of extant symbolism to different ends is perhaps at stake in avant-garde appropriation of the censor's strike. Following Oushakine's argument, it is more powerful for the avant-garde to exploit and adapt an already-present symbolic discourse than begin anew. In what follows, I will explore the various visual qualities of the censor's cuts and strikes, before proceeding to a detailed comparison between this tradition and the design of avant-garde typography. Ultimately, I shall argue that the resemblance between experimental and expurgated books in early twentieth-century Russia can be attributed to a stylistic mimicry between the avant-garde and the censorious techniques of the very institutions that they themselves opposed.

Destruction as Literary Device

In 1913, Malevich and Kruchenykh were co-signatories of a manifesto entitled 'Pervyi vserossiiskii s"ezd bachei budushchego (poetov futuristov)' ('The First All-Russian Congress of Singers of the Future (Futurist Poets)').[31] This two-page declaration describes Futurist art as a waging of war ('we have armed ourselves against the world') and warns of an imminent 'explosion' of creative destruction.[32] The manifesto concludes with the artists helpfully breaking down their ambitions of total anarchy into three manageable tasks:

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[30] See, for instance, Janecek, *Russian Literature*, 84.

[31] Kazimir Malevich, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin, *Pervii vserossiiskii s"ezd bachei budushchego* (*poetov futuristov*), 1913. RGALI (f. 3145, op. 1, ed. khr. 586, l. 1-2). Henceforth, *Pervii vserossiiskii s"ezd*.

[32] 'Мы собрались чтобы вооружить против себе мир!' 'Треск взорвалей.' Ibid.

1. Destroy the 'clean, clear, honest melodious Russian language' [...]
2. Destroy the old, logical thought-systems with their laws of causality and toothless common sense [...]
3. Destroy the refinement, frivolity and beauty of cheap public artists and writers [33]

The three commandments all begin by repeating the same infinitive, *unichtozhit',* 'to destroy'. The rhetorical effect of this repetition reinforces the centrality of this command to Futurist literary endeavour and lays bare the paradox at the heart of Futurist poetic praxis; that creativity is enacted through destruction. Indeed, the manifesto goes on to explain that their newly released poetic miscellany *Troe* (*The Three*) fulfilled these goals.[34] Creative destruction was not a contradiction in Futurist terms. The verb *unichtozhit'* reappears constantly throughout the movement's manifestos: in 1918, Vasilii Kamenskii described the Futurists as seeking to 'completely destroy [...] the book in art'; Kruchenykh characterised the Futurists as 'principally destroyers'; and Malevich aspired towards 'the destruction of all culture'.[35]

The concept of creative destruction had a long history in nineteenth-century Russia and Europe, and the Futurists built on this synthesis of cultural currents. As Nina Gurianova has noted, the origins of their interest in negation can be traced to socio-political theories including Mikhail Bakunin's social anarchy ('the passion for destruction is a *creative* passion, too!') and Nietzsche's nihilism ('[do not] doubt the joy of even destruction').[36] This philosophical groundwork is an important reference point in understanding the overarching, anarchic ideology of Futurism, but it is limited in its applicability to understanding book design. The task of 'destroying language' was a directive enacted on both macro and micro levels, as a rallying cry to overhaul the literary establishment ('throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. from the Steamboat of Modernity') and as a targeted, instruction directed at specific details of literary texts ('abolish punctuation!').[37] Whilst the philosophical groundwork underlying the former has been explored at length, the latter remains under-explored. Yet, reference points for textual destruction as a targeted literary device are plentiful in Russian literary history. The *Pervyi vserossiiskii s"ezd*'s call to eliminate content, its command to destroy the written word, and its itemised list structure all had an unlikely

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[33] '1- / Уничтожить "чистый ясный честный звучный Русский язык" [...] 2 - / Уничтожить устаревшее движение мысли по закону причинности беззубый здравый смысль [...] 3 -/ Уничтожить изящество, легкомыслие и красоту дешевых публичных художников и писателей.' Ibid.

[34] С этой целью [...] взлетают в светь новыя книги «Трое» [...] и др.' Ibid.

[35] 'Книгу в искусстве [...] совершенно уничтожить.' Vasilii Kamenskii, *Ego-moia: biografia velikogo futurista* (Moscow, 1918), 6; 'Футуристам, разрушителям по преимуществу.' Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Kukish proshliakam* (Moscow, 1992), 36; 'Уничтожение всей культуры', Malevich, *Novykh sistemakh,* 20.

[36] Gurianova, *Anarchy.* 'Die Lust der Zerstörung ist zugleich eine schaffende Lust!' Mikhail Bakunin (published under pseudonym Jules Elysard) 'Die Reaktion in Deutschland. Ein Fragment von einem Franzosen' in *Deutsche Jahrbücher fur Wissenschaft and Kunst* 247-51, ed. by Arnold Ruge (Leipzig, 1842). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo,* trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York, 1967), 114.

[37] 'Бросить Пушкина, Достоевского, Толстого и проч. с Парохода Современности.' David Burliuk et al, *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moscow, 1912), 6. 'Уничтожены знаки препинания.' Burliuk, *Sadok*, 3.

precedent in an 1862 publication: *Sbornik postanovlenii i rasporiazhenii po tsenzure* (*The Charter of decrees and orders on Censorship*).[38]

Almost a century before Malevich and Kruchenykh issued their command to destroy language and eliminate content, the same verb so prized by Futurists – *unichtozhit'* – appeared in censorship decrees as an instruction towards specific categories of content in Russian literature.[39] If the call to 'destroy language' was a rallying cry of countercultural rebellion, a 'slap in the face of public taste', why then was it articulated through terminology (and, as we shall see, surface design) which, at face value, did not differ substantially from the literary establishment? Oushakine has demonstrated that even dissidents can be influenced by the dominant structures they claim to oppose, and it seems there are grounds for applying this interpretative model here. In the Charter of Censorship, the command *unichtozhit'* operates as an administrative instruction; in Futurist discourse, it is an anarchic call for creative chaos. In each case, however, this same declaration commands the elimination of offending literary content and results in the release of books in a fragmented, disjointed and deconstructed form. Can these overlaps be dismissed as entirely coincidental? By submitting key portions of the charter to comparative analysis with Futurist manifestos, I will argue that the strong terminological and rhetorical parallels between the two can be considered 'mimetic resistance'. In order to explore this at length, it is first necessary to clarify the various stylistic and surface details of the censor's 'cut', which, as shall be shown, were subject to far more considered aesthetic attention than is commonly credited.

The Counter-Intuitive Creativity of Censorship

The Charter of Censorship is a collection of rules, regulations and statutes regarding the control of published material in Imperial Russia. Its *raison d'être* was to identify and eliminate classes of textual content designated as '*podlezhashikh unichtozheniiu*', 'subject to destruction'.[40] The charter, therefore, contains more than a list of materials to be excised from publication. It is also a list of methods on *how* these excisions are to be enacted. Although censorship regulations were overhauled after 1905, nonetheless, the overarching review process remained consistent: all published material had to be submitted to censorship institutions for preliminary review, after which they could emerge in one of three forms. Those deemed ideologically sound were stamped, approved and released for publication, whilst those deemed to contain 'reprehensible' content were either 'banned entirely' (that is withheld from publication), or 'permitted with excisions', *pozvoliaenie c iskliucheniiam*. The latter is an area of

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[38] *Sbornik postanovlenii i rasporiazhenii po tsenzure s 1720 po 1862 god* (St. Petersburg, 1862).
[39] Ibid., 220.
[40] Ibid., 220.

interest for the analysis of avant-garde books. The charter describes how a censor should approach those 'places and expressions liable to destruction', providing a repertoire of appropriate responses.[41] These incorporate numerous different aesthetic strategies, often described in great detail, including the use of red pencils in preliminary comments, the impositions of elliptical dots in re-issued texts, and the selective covering of text with black typographic ink. Interventions were context-specific. Russian-language texts would often roll off the press with rows of elliptical dots replacing their banned content, whilst foreign texts were subject to interventions of a more makeshift, manual variety: hand-painted or pasted over with sheets of newsprint (figs. 12-13). Newspapers passing through the military censorship office would most often reappear with whole columns of text cut out from them in geometric white segments, while personal correspondence passing through the same office would often contain coloured-ink stamps, pencilled commentary and hand-drawn excision (figs. 14-15). All of these visual effects reappear in avant-garde books, which also feature missing columns of text, blank pages, over-writing with coloured pencil and collage, suggesting that there is scope for a wide-ranging comparison. My focus in what follows, however, will be restricted to the two most prevalent modes of censorship for foreign-language and Russian-language texts respectively: covering text with black typographic ink and replacing it with rows of elliptical dots.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian censors were so zealous with their over-inking, that their notoriety extended internationally. 'Have you ever seen a foreign newspaper which passed Russian censorship at the frontier?' enquired Sigmund Freud in a letter of 1897, expressing his amazement that 'words, whole causes and sentences are blacked out so that the rest becomes unintelligible.'[42] In 1854 the French printmaker Gustave Doré published a volume of prints entitled *La rare et extraordinaire histoire de la Russie sainte* (*The rare and extraordinary history of Holy Russia*), which included a caricature of texts passing through the hands of the Russian censor (fig. 16).[43] An overturned glass bottle labelled *encre* (ink) lies at the base of a page of text, the spilt ink rises up the page, obliterating over half, and gradually dissolving the rest into splintered segments of broken letters. The exaggeration inherent in caricature is in this case not that so great; figures 11-13 show similar effects seen in texts in circulation at the time.

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[41] 'Подлежащия исключению места и выражения.' *Sbornik postanovlenii,* 220.

[42] Sigmund Freud, letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 22 December 1897, in *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887*-1904, trans and ed. by Jeffrey Moussaeiff Masson (Cambridge, 1985), 287-289. For more on Freud and censorship see Peter Galison, 'Blacked-out spaces: Freud, censorship and the re-territorialization of the mind', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 45:2 (June, 2012), 235-266.

[43] Gustave Doré, *Histoire pittoresque, dramatique et caricaturale de la Sainte Russie* (Paris, 1854).

The black typographic ink used for censorship in Russia was colloquially referred to as *ikra* (caviar), in reference to its viscosity. Its aesthetic evolution was far from accidental. Far from thoughtless, administrative markings made at the whims of the censor, the form and application of these brushstrokes was the topic of considerable debate, much of which was enacted in official dictum. Imported foreign books had each of their editions excised by hand. There were many ways one could do this, the relative virtues of which were delineated over various editions of the charter. Originally, when books were deemed to contain 'inadmissible' material, any page containing such content would be torn out. This practice provoked the despair of booksellers, who in 1831 petitioned the Main Censorship Administration to minimise the spoilage of books. The Charter of Censorship was accordingly adapted in 1831 to give updated and surprisingly specific instructions on how censors were to 'excise' these offending passages:

> Members of the Main Censorship administration [...] inform the office that Moscow booksellers [...] request that in books permitted with excisions, the pages featuring places and expressions subject to deletion, are not torn out but struck out in order not to destroy those pages on which there is nothing reprehensible.

> In consequence of this [...] the former Ministry of Public Education proposed that [...] with regards to their foreign books [...] the censor will cut out or strike out the places subject to excision.[44]

Further feedback followed in 1855, when the Ministry of Education contacted the International Censorship Committee to note approvingly that of these two options, 'cutting out' (*vyrezyvanie*) or 'covering up' (*pokryvanie*), the latter was preferable:

> From the foreign newspapers I have received [...] I saw that the postal censor no longer cuts out the reprehensible places in these magazines as they did before, but covers them with typographic ink. I find the latter the preferable method of excision, as it is one in which the completely harmless parts of the work are often excluded.[45]

This letter was reprinted verbatim in the Charter of Censorship, situated alongside legal mandates – a

[44] 'Члены Главного Управления Цензуры, [...] предложил Управлению, что Московские книгопродавцы [...] просят, чтобы в книгах позволяемых с некоторыми исключениями, не были вырезываемы листки, на которых находятся подлежащая исключению места и выражения, но чтобы сии последний были вымарываемы, дабы таким образом не уничтожать и те страницы, на коих нет ничего предосудительного.
Вследствие сего [...] бывший Министр Народного Просвещения предлагал [...] в рассуждении принадлежащих им иностранных книг, равномерно и в книгах всех других лиц, вырезывать или вымарывать подлежащих исключению места.' *Sbornik postanovlenii*, 220.

[45] 'Из получаемых мною [...] заграничных газеток, я усмотрел, что почтовая цензура, поддержания исключению в сих газетах места не вырезываешь ныне как было прежде, а покрывает типографскими чернилами. Считая сей последний способ предпочтительным вырезыванию при котором нередко исключаются и совершенно безвредные части сочинений.' Ibid., 302.

positioning which indirectly attests to its authority. From then on, black ink overlays, circumscribed towards a minimal surface area, became the standard mode of textual alteration. Censors focused on such a specific, localised portion of the text that, in certain publications from this period, it is possible to find an entire page of unaltered text, amongst which a single word is isolated and carefully converted into black brushwork. This type of expurgation is therefore just as invested in content-preservation as content-deletion. Something of the aesthetic consciousness of censorship is also conveyed in contemporaneous accounts of censors at work. The late nineteenth-century account of a censor who worked in the foreign language division, reviewing Polish materials, described the various processes of cutting-out or blacking-out with a focus on materials, textures and modes of application that sounds almost artistic:

> In the next room there was a big, long table, on which he laid out the mock-ups for magazines, which contained crossed-out articles and information about the exclusions which he needed to make on all examples of a given publication. On the end of the table was a reservoir of typographic ink and various appliances for the cutting out and blacking out of articles. [...] The adulterated journals, richly coated and covered with a great quantity of ink, were then distributed to subscribers.[46]

The way the censor's workbench is described, emphasising its size and spaciousness, and the quantity of materials which were systematically laid out on it, is more reminiscent of an artist's studio than a bureaucrat's office. The specificity with which the writer refers to the materials, 'a reservoir of typographic ink' and multiplicity of 'appliances' used to enact excisions calls attention to its formal properties. Further emphasis is placed on the tactile surface qualities of ink, which, we are told are 'richly coated' (*obil'no samzannye*), as if describing paint or picture-varnish. This impression is heightened by the description of censors, later in this passage, as fulfilling 'feverish work', an adjective used more commonly for states of artistic inspiration than administrative duties.[47]

Other contemporaneous accounts attest to the states of creative stimulation which were inspired by the surface effects of censorship. For Freud, the aesthetics of such textual dislocation and disjunction were evocative enough to represent to him the forces operating to separate consciousness from the unconscious mind: 'Russian censorship of this kind comes about in psychoses and produces the

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[46] 'В особой комнате у него был большой, длинный стол, на котором раскладывались образцы газет с перечеркнутыми статьями известиями, по которым он должен был делать исключения во всех экземплярах данного издания. На конце стола помещался резервуар с типографской краской и разные приспособления для замазывания и вырезывания статей. [...] нечистые, обильно смазанные и пересыпанные огромным количеством песку газеты, затем рассыпались абонентам.' Kh. V. Emmausskii, 'Iz vospominanii varshavskogo tsenzora' in *Tsenzura v rossii v kontse XIX-nachale XX veka* ed. by N. G. Patrusheva (St. Petersburg, 2003), 69-79, 73.

[47] 'лихорадочной работе'. Ibid., 73.

apparently meaningless *deliria.*'[48] A variation of this type of 'deliria' is presented by the ambiguous references to censorship which pepper Kruchenykh's poetic lexicon. He referred to '*ikra*' three times in various *Zaum* ('beyonsense') poems published in 1913. These are all utterly, gleefully, nonsensical. However, new shades of meaning may be gleaned from them if we remember that *ikra* was a colloquial term for the censor's strike, of the sort which Freud argued is replicated in the disconnection of the subconscious. This is worth bearing in mind when we read the libretto for *Pobeda nad solntsem* (*Victory over the Sun*), which contains the absurd command 'control the caviar…', as well as a bizarre warning 'do not believe the old scales, they will put you on caviar'.[49] *Pomada* contains a similarly surreal reference to 'black evenings busy with caviar'.[50] To pinpoint a precise meaning in poems like this would be beside the point as *Zaum,* 'beyonsense', is intended to embrace the irrational and bypass conscious comprehension. It is precisely because of this that Kruchenykh was likely exploiting the double-meaning inherent in the term *ikra.* Multiplicity of meaning was the very point of his poetry, and the comical duality between these two possible definitions – gastronomic and expurgatory – would have suited Kruchenykh's characteristic tone, always infantile, always seeking to undermine authority and capitalise on confusion. Furthermore, there is evidence that censorship was on his mind as he designed and printed his poetry books. In his self-published miscellany *Zzzudo* (1922), Kruchenykh playfully prints in the back cover of his book design a stamp which reads 'Politodel of the Main Directorate of the State Publishing House and Printing Approves', followed by an illegible signature.[51] It is difficult to interpret this as anything other than tongue-in-cheek mimicry, calling attention the very signs of authority which his *samizdat* sought to avoid. Taken together, these willed misnomers and mimic stamping show that the poet drew on the culture of censorship as a literary source. Building on this, we can consider other ways in which he, Malevich and their contemporaries responded to the phenomenon of *ikra,* with regards to some of the key devices in their book: *slovanaiia massa*, *sdvig*, and signs of omission.

Censorship as Slovanaiia Massa

This chapter opened with a study of *Novykh sistemakh,* an example of Suprematist typography which perhaps bears the clearest parallel to the mangled manuscripts which emerged from the Russian

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[48] Masson, *Complete Letters,* 288. Original emphasis.

[49] 'держать икру…', 'Не верь прежним весам/ Тебя посадят на икру.' Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Pobeda nad solntsem* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 13, 6.

[50] 'Черных вечер заняты икрой.' Aleksei Kruchenyh, *Pomada* (Moscow, 1913), 8.

[51] 'Политотдел Главного Управления Государственного и печати разрешает.' Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Zzzudo* (Moscow, 1922). Not all versions of this publication feature this particular detail, this citation is taken from the copy held in the collection of the State Museum of V. V. Maiakovskii, Moscow. Illustrations and a detailed description of this edition can be found in Liudmila Zhukova (ed.) *Knigi A.E. Kruchenykh kavkazskogo perioda iz kollektsii gosudarstvennogo muzeia V. V. Maiakovskogo: katalog* (Moscow, 2002), 82-87.

censor's office. Reading the text is challenging. The pages are replete with blackened crossings out and revisions. In attempting to follow the diegetic flow of the words, one finds oneself constantly skipping over obstructed segments, attempting to piece together bisected blocks of text. A legible sentence only continues for so long before one of its words dissolves before the reader's eyes, deliquescing into a spill of black ink. The effect recalls books which were 'permitted with excisions', such as figure 12, which shows selected pages from an 1888 German-language history book, within which specific details of Romanov history have been removed for propriety.[52] The offending passages have been painted over with black ink, the unkempt brushwork matches the hand-drawn, hurried effect of Malevich's typography. In both cases, words are witnessed in the process of their deletion, as language dissolves into the indecipherable ink.

Malevich and Kruchenykh had a special interest in this style of lettering which bleeds and blurs beyond its boundaries, they called it '*slovanaia massa*', verbal mass. This term classifies the effect with their broader interests in inter-art abstraction, which also included *'zvukaia massa'* (sound mass) *'tsvetaia massa'* (colour mass) and '*chistaia zhivopisnaia massa*' (pure painterly mass).[53] *Slovanaia massa* is what remains when the material substance of writing comes to the fore, superseding and supplanting its signifying function. At the point where words wane and letters deliquesce, the boundaries between art and literature are obsolete, as the reader is transformed into a viewer, then back again, ricocheting into uncertain territory where word and image are indistinguishable. 'Verbal mass' may be the most exact translation, but 'textual texture' perhaps gets closer to what the artists meant by *slovanaia massa* because it emphasises the haptic qualities of writing. In a 1916 letter to the painter Mikhail Matiushin, Malevich argued that Kruchenykh must take his poems further by learning to 'tear the letter from the line, from its one direction, and give it the possibility of free movement'.[54] Malevich's call to 'tear the letter from the line' is significant for how it reinterprets the letter not as a phonetic character but as a material entity. As well as an abstract referent, it is a *thing,* a body of matter with a material presence which can therefore be subjected to physical, forced removals. We witness such abrasions as we read *Novykh sistemakh,* in which words are inverted from their 'one direction' and reversed to their original state of ink-spill, thereby calling attention to the graphic rudiments of language itself.[55]

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[52] Oskar Jäger, *Geschichte der Neuren Zeit, 1517-1789* (Leipzig, 1888). This source was included by Choldin in her 1986 exhibition, *Censorship in the Slavic world: An Exhibition at the University of Illinois Library* (Urbana, 1986).

[53] 'Звуковые массы.' Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, June 1916, in Kovtun, *Malevich*, 177-95, 191; 'цветовой массы […] чисто живописных масс.' Kazimir Malevich, 'Zapiska o rasshirenii soznaniia, o tsvete, o molodykh poetakh', in Shatskikh, *Sobranie Sochinenii,* vol. 5, 33-38, 35, 33.

[54] 'Мы вырываем букву из строки, из одного направления, и даем ей возможность свободного движения.' Ibid., 191.

[55] 'Построения живописных форм.' Malevich, *Novykh sistemakh,* 23.

Such typography serves to enhance the essay's core ideas metonymically. *Novykh sistemakh* is a text which repeatedly praises the destruction of things, the 'disintegration', 'decomposition' of art; accordingly its text cannot remain intact, unbroken.[56] The typography of *Novykh sistemakh* enacts the deconstruction it describes, falling apart, dismantling itself as words turn in on themselves, sentences splinter and the signs of authorship are repeatedly undone. This destructive process is not just explained but enacted in a text which is not exclusively made up of words, but words in states of decomposition, dissolution, revoking their own content, then beginning again, building themselves back up from blocks of indecipherable ink. This reading process visually embodies Malevich's eponymous 'new systems of art', which are defined in opposition to the 'old systems', a tradition which he argues is following a terminated trajectory, a Hegelian arc wherein having reached its highest rung, art is unable to move further forward into ever greater degree of naturalism and thereupon starts a retreat, 'power does not lay in conveying the completeness of the thing, but, on the contrary - in its breaking up and dissolution into component elements'.[57] It is in this process of climbdown that Malevich argues artists are set 'on the direct path of creativity'.[58] Rather than a substantive process, creativity is gradual deconstruction, essentially 'a movement in reverse, a decomposition and dissipation' of forms fading away.[59]

There is an inherent irony to this work, one which was illuminated by Oushakine. In developing Suprematism, Malevich introduced a radically new idea to art, one whose very originality was so novel that it not only benefited from, but *depended* on 'exploiting already present' devices which were identifiable and intuitively understandable by its audience.[60] A measure of incomprehensibility is, of course, the very point of movements like Suprematism – they are not supposed to be easy to understand. But this incomprehensibility has to tread a fine line: go too far and the artist risks rendering his work obsolete and irrelevant. The strategic mimicry of familiar literary symbols offers a way to navigate this impasse. By framing his work in the forms and trappings of a dominant discourse, Malevich can present a range of interpretive possibilities to the viewer who is able to recognise a familiar pattern, one to which they have an intuitive literacy. Learned instincts inform us when we apprehend paragraphs dissolving into pools of ink and single words struck-out with black. We cannot decipher them but can sense their irrecoverable meaning, their encoding of the *interdit* or the inexpressible. Drawing on the signs and

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[56] The term 'распыление' (disintegration, dispersion) is used twenty times in the text, whilst 'разложение' (decomposition) appears four times.

[57] 'Вся сила была не в том, чтобы передать полноту вещи, а на оборот распыление и разложение на ее составные элементы.' Ibid., 12.

[58] 'на непосредственную дорогу творчества.' Ibid., 15.

[59] 'Обратное движение – разложение, распыление'. Ibid., 7.

[60] Oushakine, *Mimicry,* 196.

symbols of censorship has another advantage: the artist here does not run the risk of being deemed unoriginal. The well-established identity of the early avant-garde as iconoclastic outsiders provides an in-built resistance to the charge: who would accuse the most radical of painters of replicating the most reactionary of institutions?

Censorship as Sdvig

In his 1913 treatise *Slovo kak takovoe,* Kruchenykh encouraged writers to maximise the pure potentiality encoded within semi-erased words. He advised that poets write with 'clumsy constructions', that they use 'chopped-up words, half-words' in order to introduce irregularity into their poems.[61] This 'chopping' and 'slicing' is usually interpreted on a linguistic level, but it had an optical register as well. We witness this in *Novykh sistemakh*, wherein phrases such as 'the construction of painterly forms' are bisected, mid-word with a small black square (fig. 6e).[62] This visible impediment is intentional as part of the reading experience, as the lost link has to be filled in by the reader, thus integrating guesswork and imagination into the literary encounter. This fragmentation of the text into piecemeal prose was central to the reading experience of Futurist poetry, which prized interruption, omission and allusions to non-completion. This feature was developed by Kruchenykh and Malevich as a specific literary device which they referred to as '*sdvig*'.[63] *Sdvig* is usually translated into English as 'shift', but a more precise translation would be 'dislocation', thereby implying a movement away from an original situation as well as a fracture, a breakage in the process of movement. Originally a painterly term, *sdvig* was appropriated by Malevich, Kruchenykh and their colleagues to indicate any deliberate distortion of aesthetic convention. In literary usage, Kruchenykh specified that these dislocations could be graphic or phonetic, and could be enacted on the level of paragraph, line or single word. Line-breaks, hyphenations, pauses and interruptions, often scattered in unexpected or grammatically incorrect places, were all types of *sdvig*, encouraged as a way to exploit the creative potential of the Russian language, by breaking it down in unexpected places and putting it back together in misfitting sections. Kruchenykh specified that such dislocations form the 'basis' of his poetry because 'through piercing poems [...] the *sdvig* is one of the most important parts of the poem. It changes the word, the line, the sound.'[64] Kruchenykh acknowledges that 'dislocations' were not a new technique which he invented, but that they have a long history in

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[61] 'Неуклюжих построек.' 'разрубленными словами полусловами.' Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, *Slovo kak takovoe* (Moscow, 1913), 1, 12. Citations are taken from the copy in the Russian State Library collection (some discrepancies exist between different versions of this publication).

[62] 'Построения живописных форм.' Malevich, *Novykh sistemakh,* 23.

[63] Malevich also uses this term several times in *Novykh sistemakh*, see 12, 13,

[64] 'Сдвиг насквозь пронизывает стих [...] он - одна из важнейших частей стиха. Он меняет слова строки звучание.' Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Sdvigologiia russkogo stikha* (Moscow, 1923), 36.

Russian literature, and whilst he does not cite the censor's strike as a forerunner, they do attune quite closely to the experience of reading the latter.[65] The censor's strike accords with the poet's own definition of *sdvig*; it breaks apart, dislocates the text, expels meaning.

We may compare this, for instance, to the temporal and grammatical leaps which are introduced into Gorkii's *Na dne* manuscript by the censor. At the level of literary device, the bars of ink which obscure certain sentences fulfil many of the stated aims of *sdvig* in Futurist poetic theory. Structurally, they dislocate the column of text into a trisected paragraph of three disconnected parts, an effect which, in a different context, Kruchenykh would integrate into his own poems, noting that this would help them 'achieve the very greatest expressiveness' by disrupting the logical flow of sentences in favour of the semantic staccato of non-sequiturs.[66] The *ikra* here dissolves the narrative, flow and distorts the grammatical cohesion, thus perhaps providing a template for Kruchenykh's interest in poems which operate on their own, beyonsense logic and 'not according to the rules of logic or grammar'.[67] Such a comparison is not purely speculative; indeed, Kruchenykh specifically invokes censorship in his 1923 treatise *Sdvigologiia* (*Shiftology*) whilst listing his repertoire of deconstructive literary devices. He defines his *zaum* poetry in relation to the 'limits' of linguistic norms: 'Where are these limits? [...] Which *censors?*' he asks in order to illustrate the barometers by which literary conventions are judged.[68] It is significant that Kruchenykh specifically invokes the practice of censorship as a signifier of literary boundaries because in doing so he also implies that it is these very boundaries which give shape to his literary efforts. Rather than an obstacle, it is here invoked as a borderline against which he can define his work, a necessary framework which gives shape and defines even as it delimits.

If we continue considering these case studies from the perspective of stylistic mimicry, we find that we are ultimately presented with two irreconcilable interpretive paths. The first would be to assume that, in replicating the forms of censorship, these artists understand and consciously subvert this symbolic inheritance. They are actively resistant and deliberately ironic as they subvert the very practice used to suppress language and meaning, in order to further it to their own ends. The second interpretation imputes less premeditation to the artists. This would be the claim that censorial practices were so resonant, so quotidian, that they were simply unescapable; they were an embedded part of the avant-

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[65] 'Из истории сдвигов.' Ibid., 6.

[66] 'Этим достигается наибольшая выразительность.' Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, *Slovo*, 12.

[67] 'Открываются речетворцу, а не по правилам логики и грамматики.' Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'Novye puti solve (iazyk budushchego smert' simbolizma)' in *Troe*, 22-37, 33.

[68] 'Где же пределы? [...] Каких цензуров?' My emphasis. Kruchenykh, *Sdvigologiia*, 38.

garde's *habitus.* That is to say, self-expression was impossible without drawing on the legacy of signs and symbols of the dominant literary establishment. The artists were condemned to operate within the cultural field which surrounded them and which gave sense to their ideas. As Pierre Bourdieu notes in a passage quoted by Oushakine 'at a certain point, the struggles of the dominated were so romanticized [...] that people finally forgot something that everyone who has seen it from close up knows perfectly well: the dominated are dominated in their brains, too.'[69]

These two interpretive paths – conscious subversion or subconscious compliance – can be applied to case studies beyond the paratextual graphic details, and even to that masterpiece of modern art, the *Black Square* itself. As well as on canvas, Malevich's most iconic form also appeared as a cover design for several of his books (fig. 17). In its lithographic form, it corresponds to another magazine cover released around this time; the June 1915 edition of the illustrated magazine *Lukomor'e* (*Bay of the Sea*) (fig. 18). This particular edition featured a cover design by Heorhiy Narbut, an illustrator who specialised in war stories.[70] However, periodicals which passed through the censor's office during World War One were subjected to particularly intense censorship. In order 'to shield viewers from reminders of the unpleasant realities of the current war', the magazine emerged with its cover design overlaid with a dense black rectangle, tilted at a slight angle.[71]

This resemblance to Malevich's *Black Square* (which, we should note, was never, in fact, a square, but a rectangle) has already been remarked upon by Aaron Cohen: 'like the censor's squares that shielded viewers from unacceptable war-time realities on the covers of popular journals, the form of the *Black Square* removed mass violence from nature and brought order to chaos.[72]' Cohen's observation is part of a wider project within which he considers how the dramatic social changes induced by the First World War affected avant-garde painting, as it dissolved the aesthetic boundaries between radical modernism and public culture during the war.[73] He draws short of claiming censorship provided a point of influence or conscious imitation for artists like Malevich, however, as we have seen, such a claim has genuine merit. Whether printed as an exemplar of artistic oppression or artistic experiment, the black square has the same function in both Narbut's and Malevich's cover designs: it indicates the underlying presence of something unknown and unknowable. In Narbut's cover design, the superimposed black square reduces

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[69] Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology,* trans. by Matthew Adamson (Stanford, 1990), 40. Cited by Oushakine, M*imicry,* 191.
[70] Betz, *Irony,* 45.
[71] Ibid., 45.
[72] Cohen, *Imagining,* 145.
[73] Ibid., 126.

his drawing to a pure expanse of unmodulated lithographic ink. In being reduced to pure materiality, it displaces any other semantic content, in much the same way that Malevich's original *Black Square* seeks to dissolve its own content, collapsing its communicative potential into abyssal ambiguity. This erasure of represented space is what constitutes both the creative core of Suprematist painting and the administrative exigencies of censorship.

Censorship as Signs of Omission

As we have seen, black typographic *ikra* was not the only technique used by Russian censors. Another common intervention took the form of elliptical dots, a device which was also found in the Futurist canon. This stylistic device has not received scholarly attention, but also, warrants a reassessment of its symbolic value as a form of mark-making; specifically, the way it expresses the simultaneity of both presence and absence in a single gesture. In this function, it was not distinct from some of the devices of Futurist poetry.

In *Slovo kak takovoe*, Kruchenykh encourages writers to deconstruct their work to lend the text a 'splintery surface.'[74] He cites the following poem by David Burliuk to demonstrate this:

Небо - труп!! Не больше!	The sky - a corpse!! No more!
Звезды - черви - пьяные туманом	Stars - worms - drunk with fog
Усмиряю боль ше-лестомь обманом	I suppress the pain with rust-ling, with deceit
Небо - смачный труп!!	The sky - a stinking corpse!!!
. . . .	. . . .
Звезды - черви - (гнойная живая) сыпь!!	Stars - worms - (purulent living) rash![75]

Part of the 'splintering' effect of this poem is found in the fifth line, which consists solely of a row of elliptical dots. The device operates on both a structural and a semantic level; as well as physically segregating the stanzas into bisected segments, Burliuk's perforated line breaks also serve to indicate a change of pace, idea or dimension in the poem. This type of textual stippling reappeared frequently in Russian Futurist poetry; almost all of the writers associated with this movement incorporate it into their symbolic repertoire at some point.[76] They were not alone in their creative exaggeration of ellipsis; their work was symptomatic of a resurgence of interest among the wider European avant-garde. Anne Toner has noted that this particular punctuation mark underwent a resurgence in modernism, and became a

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[74] 'Занозистая поверхность.' Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, *Slovo,* 3.
[75] Ibid., 6.
[76] See Kruchenykh's book collaborations with Mikhail Larionov: *Starinnaia liubov'* (Moscow, 1912); *Poluzhivoi* (Moscow, 1913); *Vzorval'* (St. Petersburg, 1913); and Vladimir Maiakovskii and Elena Guro's contributions to *Troe* (St. Petersburg, 1912).

favoured technique of early twentieth-century writers for its capacity to embody the 'hesitancies and interruptions of spoken language, the indeterminacies of thought, and the successive or fragmented nature of experience'.[77] This use of ellipsis is particularly visible in Guro's contributions to *Troe*, which consist of fragmentary, aphoristic observations written with an impressionistic prose style. Guro's verse alludes to brief, ephemeral states of mind, the nebulous nature of which is underscored by the way she divides and dissects her stanzas in unexpected places with dashed rows of dots, such as in the poems *Shalopai* and *Vuzdrovlenie* (*Exhalation*) (fig. 19) Guro also exploits the inherent capacity of ellipsis to operate as literary lacunae in her 1912 work 'Moemu Bratu' ('To My Brother'), the subject of which is the memory of the protagonist's deceased brother - or more specifically, its inaccessibility. The writer's incapacity to concretise her memories, grasp moments from the past is the theme of the poem. To express the elusive, intangible nature of the writer's striving for the past, Guro bisects her poem with a line break roughly at the halfway point:

Ты можешь спасти меня.   You can save me.
помолись обо мне.   pray for me.
·   ·
Как рано мне приходится не спать,   How long must I stay awake
оттого, что я печалюсь.   from my sadness.[78]

The elliptical line disrupts the reader's linear flow as they encounter content which is neither text nor negative space, but rather a type of embodied absence. This causes a disorientating change in narrative, a vacillating hinge which mirrors the subject of the verse at that point where Guro describes a hypnogogic state between waking and sleeping. The elongated rows of dots thus intimates an unrealised dimension to the text, one which cannot be adequately conveyed by lines of text or expanses of space, hence the writer relies on something in between, a 'sign of omission'.

Long before the Futurists began using elliptical rows to signal interruptions in their poems however, Russian censors had been using them to indicate excised content. In the late nineteenth century, it was common for censored books to be released with problematic content replaced by rows of sanitising dots. We find this, for example, in Nikolai Grecha's 1886 autobiography, *Zapiski moei zhizni* (*Notes from My Life*) (fig 20).[79] Here, many individual lines, and sometimes entire pages, dissolve into abstract stippling.[80] Aleksandr Nikitenko recalled that in 1853 the marks began to be seen as so potentially subversive that

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[77] Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge, 2015).
[78] From Elena Guro, 'Moemy bratu' in *Troe*, 80.
[79] Nikolai I. Grech, *Zapiski moei zhizni* (St. Petersburg, 1886), 349.
[80] Arlen Blium notes that this device was widely used. See *Russkie picateli o tsenzure i tsenzorakh* (Saint Petersburg, 2011), 295.

even an arithmetic textbook was refused publication approval by a censor 'because a series of dots had been placed between the figures in some problem. He suspected the author of some sort of hidden design.'[81] The Futurist's engagement with the 'splintering' effect of dotted line breaks in poems can be seen as another example of mimetic adoption of the aesthetics of censorship. Indeed, there is evidence that this literary device became a rich source for writers to mine in search of parody. The poet and journalist Evgenii Snow's 1906 poem *Basnia* (*Fable*) consists entirely of elliptical rows.[82] Snow here demonstrates how one can succeed in critiquing whilst also mimicking; the poem is an extended pastiche of the censor's strike, caricaturing the over-zealous control of literature which reduces it, quite literary, to nothing.

Such references offer a new framework within which to review one of great provocateurs of Russian literature: Vladimir Maiakovskii. In 1915, when Maiakovskii's poem *Oblako v shtanakh* (*A Cloud in Pants*) was published, it appeared in a drastically reduced form (fig. 21). 'The censors blew through it' he complained in his autobiography, 'six pages were entirely dots. Since then, I have hated dots'.[83] Given how vocally he despaired of creative sacrifices ('I have subdued myself, stepping on the throat of my own song'), Maiakovskii's encounters with literary censorship have always been characterised as an active defiance, a rallying for free expression.[84] Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy between the protestations of the poet and the practice of his poetry here. Maiakovskii bemoaned that the 'old regime' responded to Futurist literature only with 'cuts from the censor'. In the inaugural issue of *LEF* (1923), he emphasised the injustice and brutality of censorship by using a noun (*useknovenie*) which is usually used in the context of decapitation (*useknovenie glavy*).[85] And yet the very sentence which follows this protestation about the censors 'cuts' is followed by one which celebrates the uniqueness of the Futurist's own methods of literary cutting, 'our whiplike-lines, our splinter-strokes'.[86] These techniques of verbal truncation and syntactical cleaving are foregrounded as the most characteristic device of Futurist poetry. Thus, while Maiakovskii complained about the injustices of having his poems excised, the very aesthetics of these excisions became a source of imaginary power for the poet, re-appearing by his own hand in his own

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[81] Aleksandr Nikitenko, *The Diary of a Russian Censor,* trans. by Helen Saltz Jacobson (Amherst, 1975), 134.

[82] E. E. Snow, *Stikhotvornaia satira* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 374.

[83] 'Цензура в него дула. Страниц шесть сплошных точек. С тех пор у меня ненависть к точкам.' Vladimir Maiakovskii, 'Ia Sam', *Vladimir Maiakovskii, Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii, poem i p'es v odnom tome* (Moscow, 2011), 5-16, 13.

[84] 'Но я себя смирял, становясь на горло собственной песне.' Vladimir Maiakovskii, '*Vo ves' golos*', Maiakovskii, *Polnoe Sobranie,* 1030-1034, 1031.

[85] 'Старый строй [...] Футуристам отвечали цензурными усекновениями.' Osip Brik and Vladimir Maiakovskii, '*Za chto boretsia Lef*?' *Lef,* 1 (1923), 1-7, 1.

[86] 'Наши хлысты-строчки, наши занозы-штрихи'. Ibid., 1.

writing. A year after insisting that he 'hated' the elliptical rows disrupting his poem, Maiakovskii's wrote *Pro eto* (*About That*). At the heart of the poem is a void, an absence alluded to by the missing subject of the title, 'About *that*'. 'About what?' the poet asks in the first line, before proceeding to evade the answer entirely with a meandering, circumlocutory three-page prologue. The implication here is that the mysterious *that* of the title is an unmentionable topic. Eventually, Maiakovskii appears to be about to reveal all, announcing 'the name of this theme is -' before dodging at the last line and omitting the forbidden word in favour of five dots and an exclamation mark:

Эта тема день истемила в темень колотись   This theme darkened day into dusk
- Велела - строчками лбов   'Break' - it commanded, with the
                                                             lines of your brow

Имя   The name
    Этой   of this
        Теме: theme is:

           ......!   ......!

The reader is left to deduce the missing word from the five dots through the rhyme scheme (the preceding stanza ends on *lbov,* leading the reader to infer that the missing word is *liubov',* love). The row of dots functions here as the placeholders of a taboo subject, and there are several reasons to suggest that Maiakovskii is deliberately playing on the connotations of the censor's strike in doing so. The unspeakable theme of *Pro eto,* love, was in itself a semi-censored topic in 1923 when it was considered personal and petty to write about such putatively self-absorbed, individualistic themes. The reference to *strochki* (lines) may also be a play on words; it is used in the poem to refer to a lined brow, but the Russian term can also mean lines of text. This double-meaning is significant given that Maiakovskii precedes this word with the command 'break!'. The reference to a 'broken line' has a rich symbolic multiplicity. Its breakage is visually recreated in the staggered, laddered stanza below, but in a more allusive sense, the 'broken line' of poetry also recalls the mangled manuscripts, torn apart by the censor's interventions. All of these associations combine and culminate in the perforated line upon which the poem ends. This is a device which could have been lifted straight from the censor's charter and is used by Maiakovskii to operate as an indicator of an absent, unspeakable entity. Thus, the symbolic repertoire of censorship became a rich source of creativity for the poet, who mimicked and parodied it in his work in a conscious way.

This chapter has demonstrated that literary censorship in Imperial Russia was a more creative practice than is often acknowledged. Its cuts and strikes were not a simple case of stamping-out content, but were consistent with a considered repertoire of signs. These, like any signs, belonged to a system of signification, one which overlapped with that used in avant-garde books, which were contemporaneously circulating in the same field of cultural production. Stylistic commonalities between expurgation and avant-garde typography have been addressed across several different typographic devices: words dissolved in black typographic wash, perforated lines replacing lines of text, squares of solid black ink asserting their negative presence on book covers. Furthermore, the disordered reading experience itself which was so prised by vanguard poets has been posited to have been influenced by the discontinued lines of truncated texts which were a byproduct of censorship.

I have sought to demonstrate that this stylistic mimicry was not an inadvertent outcome but an inevitability, as censorship consisted of a complex network of inescapable cultural forces within which the works of the avant-garde 'were conceived (or caught), and whose traces they carried'.[87] Even dissidents were indebted to dominant symbolic structures; and yet, the anti-establishment status which has been identified as so central to avant-garde identity was reaching its end. After the revolution, artists like Malevich and Maiakovskii would be swept from the margins of the art world to its centre. The following chapter will explore what how the symbolic balance of their dissident/dominant mimicry was altered once their positions switched from rallying against the literary establishment to being employed within it.

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[87] Oushakine, *Mimicry,* 192.

CHAPTER TWO
Constructivist Design and Soviet Censorship

The Aesthetics of Glavlit

In June 1922, a new chapter began in the history of Russian censorship with the inauguration of *Glavnoe upravlenie podelam literatury i izdatel'stvo pri Narkomate prosveshcheniia RSFSR* (Head Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs at the RSFSR Narkompros), the Soviet censorship body known by its acronym: Glavlit. For the next twenty-four years, this institution would oversee every single piece of printed matter produced in the Soviet Union.[1] Given its scope and sway, Glavlit has unsurprisingly been the subject of a substantial amount of scholarship. Yet, as with much of the history of censorship, research emphasis has focused on its invisible, or extra-textual dimensions: its institutional ideology, operational mechanisms and professional hierarchies.[2] Its impact on literature has predominately been measured by the gaps it left therein: suppressed content, banned books and lost literary works. Yet, Soviet censorship also had a visible manifestation; indeed, open any book, journal, pamphlet or poster published in Russia from 1922-1946 and you will see Glavlit's presence quite literally stamped across it. Usually, these references are designed to be as inconspicuous as possible, blending seamlessly into the publisher's colophon, buried amongst bibliographic codes. Occasionally, however (and especially in the Constructivist canon), these stamps of censorial approval took on a new lease of life and creative flair.

The aesthetics of Glavlit - its logos, stamps, cuts and strikes - are the subject of this chapter. This is a topic which is closely related to the history of the avant-garde because several of these artists worked as graphic designers for publishing houses which fell under Glavlit's purview. This

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[1] Following Stalin's death in 1953, Glavlit's operations were taken over by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and its name was changed to *Ypravlenie po okhrane voennykh i gosudarstvennylh tain v pechati pri sovete ministrov* (Administration for the Protection of Military and State Secrets in the Press under the USSR Council of Ministers). Ermolaev, *Censorship,* 143.

[2] The most comprehensive research on Glavlit is by Arlem Blium, *Za kulisami 'ministerstva pravdy': Tainaia istoriia sovetskoi tsenzury, 1917–1929* (St. Petersburg, 1994); *Sovetskaia tsenzura v epokhu total'nogo terrora, 1929–1953* (St. Petersburg, 2000); *Tsenzura v sovetskom soiuze, 1917–1991* (Moscow, 2005); and T. M. Goriaeva, *Politicheskaia tsenzura v SSSR, 1917–1991* (Moscow, 2009); *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury: dokumenty i kommentarii* (Moscow, 1997). Important new research is also available in the six-volume work *Tsenzura v Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost': sbornik nauchnykh trudov,* vols. 1-6. (St. Petersburg, 2001). The most comprehensive English-language work remains Ermolaev, *Censorship.* See also several articles which have illuminated important aspects of censorship: Michael S. Fox, 'Glavlit, Censorship and the Problem of Party Policy in Cultural Affairs, 1922–1928,' *Soviet Studies*, 44:6 (1992), 1045–68; and Jan Plamper, 'Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s', *Russian Review,* 60:4 (October, 2001), 526–44.

professional proximity raises a related issue: how were artists to feel about censorship after the revolution? As we have seen, until now, their default stance had been one of vocal opposition, rallying against its curtailment of their creativity and stymying stipulations. After the revolution, however this situation changed. One of the major differences between Glavlit and its Imperial predecessors was the way in which its location within Soviet cultural machinery reconfigured the professional relationship between writers and censors, who were now (nominally at least) colleagues cooperating on unified work, employed by the same institution, Narkompros (*Narodnyi kommissariat prosveshcheniia,* the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment). The very establishment of Narkompros was premised on an effort to consolidate all cultural activity into an allied effort towards a unified goal. Thus, the past grievances of individual authors struggling against external agents were, ostensibly, rendered obsolete.

As several scholars have noted, this collegial harmony did not quite manifest itself in the reality of everyday working relations (which were still fraught with disputes and inter-institutional rivalries), however, the public criticism of censors, the open identification of them as adversaries was, temporarily at least, discontinued.[3] Artists like Malevich and Rodchenko, who had built careers as vehemently anti-establishment agitators were now absorbed into the Soviet cultural apparatus, as state employees.[4] Indicators of this armistice can be gleaned from certain minor details in graphic design. Glavlit, as we have noted, bore its physical presence on book spreads, albeit in markings which were easy to miss. References to the censorship body were habitually buried deep in the part of the book known as the 'publisher's peritext', that is 'the spatial category surrounding and inter-splicing in the text [...] that is the responsibility of the publisher'.[5] These are usually the unnumbered pages which encase the body text: fly leaf, title page, colophon, back matter. Despite being the sort of supplementary content the reading eye is trained to skim over, this literary zone was often a surprisingly creative space in Constructivist books. Its significance, however, is often overlooked, largely because Constructivist books are so often judged by their covers. Whilst the 'book' itself – the text, the body matter – was most commonly laid by anonymous typesetters in unremarkable arrangements, the covering sleeves displayed often spectacular design flair, frequently signed by famous artists. Nonetheless, it can be quite literally in the small print that we find the most concentrated manifestations of Constructivist design. Take, for example, the case study of Rodchenko's 1924 work on Sergei Tretiakov's poetry collection, *Itogo.*[6] With its distinctive gridded

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[3] See, for instance Fox, *Glavlit,* 1050.

[4] Rodchenko was employed at the Museum Bureau of *IZO* (*Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv Narkomprosa*) and the Museum of Painterly Culture (*Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury*). Malevich worked at several art schools and research institutions, including UNOVIS (*Utverditeli novovo iskusstva*) and GINKhUK (*Gosudarstvennyi institut khdozhesvennoi kul'tory*).

[5] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge, 1997), 16.

[6] Sergei Tretiakov, *Itogo* (Moscow, 1924).

backdrop and deliberately restrictive two-tone palette, the book's cover is composed with signature Constructivist aesthetics. Opening the cover, we find this same visual system continues throughout the book's interior; a grillwork of diagonal lines reappears on each page, mirroring the cover (fig. 22a-f). This is not purely decorative; by framing both the stanzas and their surrounding, supplementary material with the same, recurrent motif, Rodchenko unifies the entire book under one consistent aesthetic system. The 'publishers peritext' has a similar amount of attention lavished upon it. When listing the book's production particulars (publisher's address, printer's details, circulation numbers), Rodchenko arranges them in a complex casing created from a geometric framework of two overlaid, elongated 'Z' shapes (fig. 22f-g). This distinctive latticework mirrors the layout of the main text, serving optically to elide the distinction between text and peritext.

Of particular interest to this study is an inconspicuous five-digit code embedded amongst these bibliographic details; the numbers 16754, labelled 'Glavlit', indicating that the book had been reviewed and approved by censors (fig. 22g). Each of Rodchenko's post-1922 publications had to pass through Glavlit's censorship systems and none emerged entirely unscathed. Rather, the institution's imprints and authorisations are always encoded within the front matter. By and large, these are barely visible; strategically placed at the lowest register of the page and printed with a font size so small it demands squinting. There are, however, exceptions, within which Glavlit logos would become a fertile area of design. In 1927 Rodchenko collaborated again with Tretiakov on his book *Chzhungo*.[7] Here the Glavlit code is centred and playfully printed above an intricate illustration of a book rolling off a polygraphic press (fig. 23). Elsewhere, efforts are made visually to parallel the Glavlit reference code with the book's cover design, for instance in Ivan Mikhailov's 1928 *Chetvert' veka podpol'shchika* (*A Quarter-Century of Secret Agents*) and Henri Barbusse's 1925 *Rechi bortsa* (*The Fighter's Speech*) (figs. 24-25).[8] In each case, the colophon is carefully arranged into geometric shapes which mirror the austere orthogonal templates of the book's cover. This is achieved by adjusting the typographic kerning such that the block of text takes the form of a downward triangle or perfect square. The numerical references to Glavlit are therefore visually conceptualised in a way reminiscent of Constructivism's congenital abstract, geometric forms.

Similarly, in Rodchenko's design for Ilya Ehrenberg's 1926 book *Materializatisa fantastika* (*The Materialisation of Fantasy*) the Glavlit code is printed in a colophon structured around an opaque black bar, which appears Constructivist (fig. 26). This may at first appear to be a neutral graphic 'filler', but in fact it serves a symbolic function. Identical black bars reappear throughout the book's pages as headers, footers and dividers. They offer a visualisation of the underlying typographic 'grid',

[7] Sergei Tretiakov, *Chzhungo* (Moscow, 1927).

[8] Ivan Mikhailov, *Chetvert' veka podpol'shchika* (Moscow, 1928); Henri Barbusse, *Rechi bortsa* (Moscow, 1925).

anchoring all page elements to a common rhythm. This includes the bars used to underline both Ehrenburg and Rodchenko's names (emphasising their mutual authorship of text and image) and the discrete numerical code '78246'. The result is an integrative design which seeks to optically amalgamate Glavlit's authorisation with authored content (fig. 26c). The fact that artist, author and anonymous censor are all represented here with the same system of signs is not unusual; indeed, it accords with the ideology of Soviet publishing, within which all agents involved in the production of the book (writers, censors, publishers, typesetters) were intended to be a collaborative workforce. *Materializatsiia fantastika* is not the only example wherein Glavlit's codes are framed by these signature black bars. Indeed, this layout became something of a house style for certain publishing houses in the early 1920s. All books released by the publisher *Kinopechat'* used this design for its colophons (fig. 27). Aleksei Gan's designs for the iconic magazine *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* (*Contemporary Architecture*) similarly integrated belts of solid black around the Glavlit stamp, as if encasing it within a Constructivist chassis (fig. 28).
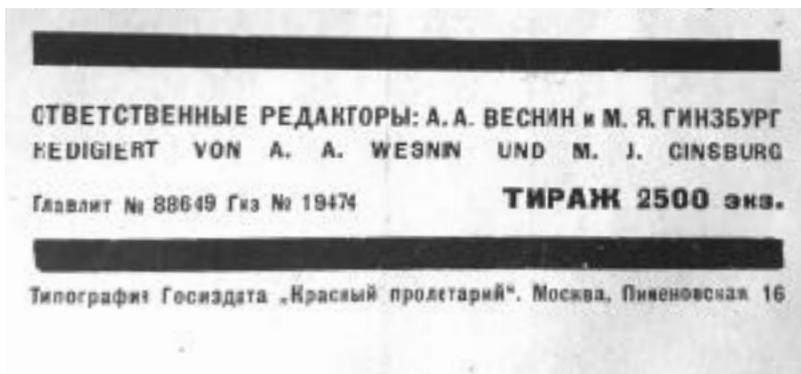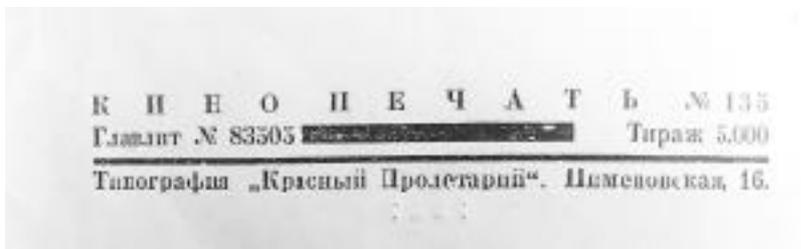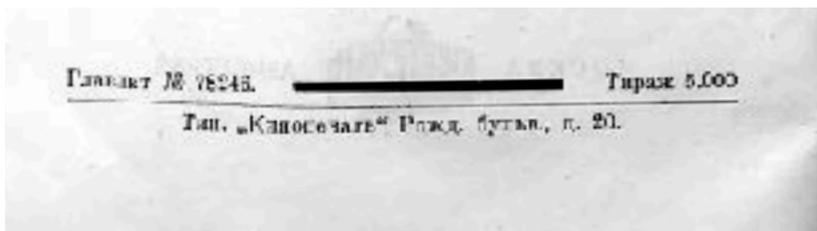
Fig. 26. (top)

Title page of Ilya Ehrenburg, *Materializatsiia Fantastiki* (Moscow,1927). Letterpress book.

Fig. 27a. (middle)

Title page of V. Shershenevich, *N. Bravin* (Moscow, 1927). Letterpress book.

Fig. 27b. (bottom)

Title page of G. I. Geronskii, *Alisa Koonen* (Moscow, 1927). Letterpress book.

The irreducible simplicity of the black bar (which Malevich called a 'brusok') makes it seem artless and unstylised, a neutral way of structuring a page without disturbing the textual content.[9] This, however, is patently not the case. This particular detail is perhaps *the* most signature form of

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[9] 'Брусок' Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 Risunka,* 1.

Constructivist typography. It reappears constantly through printed matter of the period, emblazoned on canonic book covers, integrated amongst dense columns of text or suspended over empty print space as pure, abstract illustration (figs. 29-32). This did not arise arbitrarily or by accident; there are no empty or ideologically redundant forms in Constructivism: it was a carefully crystallised aesthetic theory founded on the principle that there be 'nothing unplanned, unintentional' on the page.[10] Aleksei Gan emphasised that all design elements must be purposeful: 'everything must be conceived in a technical and functional way.'[11] This demand applied even to the most seemingly insignificant, non-textual elements; such features are never there merely to adorn, but are operational in the text. To understand more about the visual bearing Glavlit had on Soviet books, therefore, it is necessary to probe deeper into the semantics of this typographic system and, in particular, to reconsider a detail so elementary it routinely goes unnoticed: the black brusok bar.

The Brusok Bar

Gan's 1922 book *Konstruktivism* (*Constructivism*) remains perhaps the most canonical example of Constructivist typography.[12] The famously minimalist page design is composed of merely two elements; text and brusok bars. The central value of this motif to the movement is indicated by the cover (which some have argued was designed by Rodchenko), on which the capitalised word '*Konstruktivism*' is encapsulated within a rectangular black block (fig. 32a).[13] Different versions of this same form then reappear throughout the book itself, carefully integrated into the text as a means to underline, emphasise, structure or illustrate (figs. 32b-e).

Such stylised, simplified geometry has subsequently become so ubiquitous in contemporary design that it can be difficult for a twenty-first-century audience to appreciate how unusual and indeed, radical, a simple detail like an oblong bar would have been to the graphic design of the 1920s. One has to adopt historically-specific ways of seeing in order to apprehend it. There are two contextual details which are particularly important to bear in mind. The first of these concerns the historic context of book design in Russia which, in the 1920s, disbanded into two splinter groups known as the 'Leftists' and 'Traditionalists' (also called the 'Rightists'). Critics at the time cited Gan's *Konstruktivizm* as exemplary of the former, and this allegiance in what was often an openly combative association informed the movement's identity and ethos.[14] A distinctive grammar of ornament distinguished the groups from one another. The Traditionalists used a repertoire of

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[10] 'Ничего случайного, безучетного.' Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Moscow, 1922), 65.

[11] 'все должно быть осмыслено технически и функционально.' Ibid., 65.

[12] Gan, *Konstruktivizm*.

[13] Kristin Romberg discusses this possibility in 'Aleksei Gan's Constructivism, 1917-1928', unpublished PhD thesis (Columbia University, 2010), 194. A revised version of this thesis has recently been published, Kristin Romberg, *Gan's Constructivism: Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism* (Oakland, 2019).

[14] See A. M. Sokolov, *Spravochnaiia knizhka naborschika* (Khar'kov, 1925), 167.

illustrative, figurative forms; serifs, curlicues, vignettes and ornamental flourishes were all common in their work. The Leftist style was defined by the absence of this; straight lines, sharp angles, perpendicular corners and letters stripped of their serifs were the hallmarks of this movement. The friction between these two battling schools is key to informing our ways of seeing Constructivist design. This is complicated, however, by a misleading historiographical tendency to present Leftist book design as a much more dominant force than it actually was at the time. The characterisation of Constructivism as the 'house style' of Narkompros throughout the 1920s is false. Éva Forgács attributes this flawed assumption to an enduring tendency of Western scholars to romanticise avant-garde art, and accordingly overlook and underplay the prominence of Traditionalist design during this period.[15] And yet, as Sofia Gurevich has shown, the flamboyant florals and gilded embellishments of Symbolist books continued to thrive throughout the 1920s, with many publishers producing extensive print-runs of ornately decorated books.[16] Thus, whilst for a modern viewer, a black geometric bar appears as an unaffiliated sign with no intrinsic meaning, contemporaneous eyes would have understood it as a partisan symbol, identified within the vocal public tribalism between Leftist and Rightist artists.

Gan was invested in these debates, elaborating on the distinctions between the groups in several published articles and arguing for the superior social value of Leftist design. In his essay '*Konstruktivism v tipografiskim proizvodstve*' Gan defines a 'Rightist' typographer as one slavishly reliant on pre-designed modules of moveable type.[17] They therefore had little control and minimal creative input over their layouts, as they relied on a limited range of 'gothic, antique, chopped and decadent letters' in fixed styles and dimensions.[18] A Constructivist designer, by contrast, relied not on pre-fabricated fonts, but on a repertoire of basic blocks, which they had infinite freedom to rearrange. The lego-like system, which Gan entitled 'Typography without Type' ('*nabor bez shrifta*') can be easy to underestimate, or at least under-value its complexity, given that it was built around the unadorned, elemental simplicity of the black bar.[19] The Constructivism's defining typographic tendencies ran deeper than a preference for the austerity of rectilinear form. Gan emphasises that they concerned their relationship with the material and mechanisation of the creative process; by doing away with established type and stripping letters down to primary forms, the Constructivist designer not only had more creative control over their materials but also a more artistic

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[15] Éva Forgács, 'How the New Left Invented East European Art' in *Blindheit Und Hellsichtigkeit: Künstlerkritik an Politik Und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*, ed. by Cornelia Klinger (Berlin, 2014), 61-84.

[16] Sofia Guverich, 'Transmission Authority: Soviet Book Design and the World of Art circle 1917-1930', unpublished PhD thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2020).

[17] Aleksei Gan, 'Konstruktivism v tipografickim proizvodstve', *Al'manakh proletkul'ta* (Moscow, 1925), 116-119.

[18] 'Готических, античных, рубленых и декадентских букв.' Ibid., 118.

[19] 'Набором без шрифта.' Aleksei Gan, 'Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste', *Sovremennaia arkhitektura,* 2 (1926), inside back cover.

understanding of them, one which enabled them to control, blur or creatively challenge the turning point at which non-specific visual texture transitions into readable text.

This context is important for appreciating the semantic significance of this plain block, whose visually simplicity was inversely related to its conceptually complexity. Between its four corners was contained a condensed, cogent iconographic program, and thus it operated as an image and ideogram, a pictograph of sorts. Before proceeding to analyse the role this bar played in *SSSR na stroike,* there are two points regarding its development. The first is that Gan defined Constructivism's transition into polygraphy as beginning with 'the *typification* [... of] printed matter.'[20] Kristin Romberg notes that the term 'typification' (*tipizatsiia*) was central to Constructivist aesthetic theory, and consisted of a style of imagery made from building up modular forms.[21] During the 1921 discussions of 'The First Working Group of Constructivists' the need for a unifying and coherent modern style came to the fore, and with it, the attendant need to reduce their work to a limited repertoire of standardised forms. Later typologies of Constructivist typography would list these as 'simplified geometric forms: the square, the circle, the triangle'.[22] The second principle worth calling attention to is the fact that the brusok was not merely a polygraphic phenomenon, but one which was closely related, indeed, a direct descendant of, the avant-garde painting tradition. Gan noted that Constructivist designers and painters drew on the same repertoire of abstract forms whether they were creating mass-produced typeset or individual canvases: 'if he [the book designer] is a painter [...] then his production is a direct transfer of the canonized forms of the pictorial image of the easel plane to the book plane.'[23] Here, his thinking accords with the movement's non-hierarchical ethos, with Gan emphasising that these typographic forms transgressed typical distinctions between Fine Art and applied art. One can see how the 'easel plane' and the 'book plane' are melded in his 1924 design for the journal *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*. The iconic front cover, with its striking black square, has been cited as homage to Malevich, Gan's mentor throughout his early career (fig. 33a-c). The back cover, consisting of bureaucratic bibliographic listings, is less eye-catching than the front and yet also draws on this system of building design with standardised modular units (fig. 33d). When opened flat, we can see how these two pages mirror each other; the information listed in the editorial masthead is 'snapped' to a strictly rectangular block which clones the contours of the black square on the cover.

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[20] 'Типизацию как […] всей печатной вещи.' Gan, 'Nabore i verste'. The Russian term *poligrafiia* is used to refer to any range of printing; typesetting, typography, graphic design.

[21] Romberg, *Gan,* 252.

[22] 'примитивных геометрических фигур (круг, квадрат, треугольник).' Solomon Telingater, 'Poligraficheskoe iskusstvo v SSSR', *Poligraficheskaiia tekhnika,* 1 (January 1932), 31-32, 31.

[23] 'Если он живописец […] то и его продукция является прямым перенесением канонизированных форм живописного изображения станковой плоскости на плоскость книжную.' Gan, 'tipografskom proizvodstve', 117.

The means by which the metaphysical floating forms of abstract art transitioned onto the typographic page and became embedded in peritext and small print has been the subject of considerable study.[24] The previous chapters suggested that another conduit for this was a stylistic mimicry of censorship. This conceptual model, however, does not apply to works reviewed by Glavlit. Key to the earlier analysis was the artists' position as outsiders, agitators against a dominant institution. The artist's position in the field of symbolic power had shifted; by the time Glavlit was established, they had been absorbed into the institution of authority. Their design philosophy changed as their early tasks of destruction and anarchy transition into Constructivist world-building. Over the years, this would mean that their artistic language was applied to some increasingly extreme political purposes. The ensuing sections will explore whether these applications were congruent with the internal logic of Constructivism, or were rather an instance of it its calculated exploitation.

USSR in (de) Construction

During the 1930s, many avant-garde artists (including Rodchenko, Stepanova, Lissitzky and Solomon Telingator) were commissioned to work as designers on the state propaganda magazine *SSSR na stroike* (*USSR in Construction,* 1930-1941, 1945). This was a monthly periodical which defined itself as an 'illustrated journal' and sought to document visually the country's industrial progress through photo-essays. The magazine has proved a productive case study for scholars exploring how the visual language of Constructivism was adapted (and exploited) by the official regime throughout the 1930s.[25] The magazine exemplifies many of the complexities of this adaptation, because its prestigious editorial board was made up of several senior party officials, and its design team was a curious hybrid of adherents to both Leftist and Traditionalists design schools. In what follows, I will explore how the aesthetics of censorship in the magazine relate to Constructivist design.

SSSR na stroike's iconic cover remained consistent during the decade of its production (excepting special editions and themed editions, which were often released with covers reworked by guest designers, often incorporating photographic images into the design). Designed by Olga Deineka, the minimalist design consisted simply of the magazine's title printed in upper case in a large font, centred and set against a plain background. The visual impact came from the particulars of its

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[24] See, for instance Compton, *Avant-Garde Books;* Janecek, *Russian Literature*; Perloff, *Explodity;* Wye, *Russian Avant-Garde.*

[25] See Erika Wolf, 'When Photographs Speak, to Whom Do They Talk? The Origins and Audience of "SSSR na stroike" (USSR in Construction)', *Left History,* 6:2 (2000), 53-82. The majority of research remains in the domain of unpublished PhD theses, see, Wolf, 'USSR in Construction'; Katerina Romanenko, 'The Visual Language of Soviet Illustrated Magazines in the 1930s: *Rabotnitsa, Krestianka,* and *USSR in Construction'*, unpublished PhD thesis (The City University of New York, 2012); Konstantin Akinsha, 'The Second Life of Soviet Photomontage, 1935-1980s', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2012); Marie Collier, 'Visualising Socialist Construction: Soviet Architectural Photographs in Mass Printed Media c. 1928-1932', unpublished PhD thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2016).

printing. The journal was luxuriously produced on heavy stock with a rotogravure press. This technique is capable of transferring more ink to the paper than most other printing processes, and thus offers an intensity of pigment and richness of texture that ensures it remains a popular choice for Fine Art printing today. With its large-format folio prints and luminous range of jewel-like tones, the magazine looked like a work of art (fig. 34). This quality was recently highlighted at the Tate Gallery's *Red Star over Russia* exhibition (2017), where multiple editions of *SSSR na stroika* were framed in wall-mounted glass boxes, as if an art installation rather than a periodical publication.[26] This curatorial approach showcased the magazine's lavish production values. When arranged *en masse* the magazine's polychromatic vibrancy is intensified by the contrasts between its canary-yellow, pillar-box-red and sky-blue covers. This method of viewing presents the magazine almost as a series of abstract colour-field paintings, a revealing analogy which speaks to its aesthetic philosophy. There are several lines of continuity between *SSSR na stroike* and Russian abstract art (the resemblance between the magazine's design and Rodchenko's 1921 triptych of primary-colour abstract canvases, *Chistyi krasnyi tsvet, Chistyi zheltyi tsvet, Chistyi sinii tsvet* (*Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour*) is an important case in point). Yet there are other parallels with abstraction that can be explored here. In delving deeper into this design, I am going to focus on an area of book design rarely considered at length, the back matter. Supplementary in content and inconspicuous in design, the back matter of books has not traditionally been an area of aesthetic analysis. Yet, as it has been argued, the minute and marginal details of book design were embedded with just as much conscious design as the public face of front-covers, and, more significantly, this was where Glavlit's markings were printed.

The design for *SSSR na stroike*'s back matter was not standardised until 1934, but once it was consolidated, it was reprinted with little modification for the rest of the magazine's lifespan. Like the front, it consisted purely of stylised text set against a plain coloured background. The date was printed in the top right corner, and bibliographic information in a single, fully justified column in the bottom left. The print space is cordoned off into a rectangle, which is divided into four segments by three horizontal bars. Each of the elements printed on the magazine's back cover conform to a subtle geometrisation of content: the irregular, curving and modulated forms of text are forcibly configured into a clearly defined block, the typographic alignment positions the text to fall flush with both margins, confining the print space to an orthogonal barrier. This rectilinearity is reinforced by the stripping of serifs from the typeface, resulting in even a font with blunt contours. The only non-textual element on the page is the signature mark of Constructivist typography: the brusok bar, used here as a structuring device to distinguish different categories of information.

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[26] Tate Modern, *Red Star over Russia: A Revolution in Visual Culture 1905-55* (London, 2017-2018).

There are certain editions of the magazine in which the amalgamation of Constructivist form with masthead design became even more overt. This is particularly evident in issues in which avant-garde artists were commissioned to work as guest-designers, such as El Lissitzky and Sophie Küppers's work on the February 1933 edition. Here, the artists redesigned the back matter using abstract grey circles suspended against a white background (fig. 35). The muted monochrome and simplicity of the shapes recall the paintings of Lissitzky's *Proun* period. Other parallels with the avant-garde canon can be found in the March 1933 issue of *SSSR na stroike*, which incorporates a referencing system reminiscent of Lissitzky's design for Maiakovskii's 1923 poem *Dlia golosa* (*For the Voice*).[27] Here Lissitzky created a visual page-index using miniature geometric shapes rather than numbers as references (fig. 36). A similar system is utilised in *SSSR na stroike*'s back matter, where small quasi-Constructivist forms (black squares, circles and triangles) are appropriated as endnotes, used to attribute the authorship of individual images to specific photographers, whose names are listed on the masthead (fig. 37).

I raise these examples for two reasons. The first is to argue that these simplified and seemingly inconsequential details were recognised as allegiance to a particular, avant-garde artistic identity. Boris Kisin, a writer on polygraphic theory, in his book *Grafika v oformlenii knigi* (*Graphics in Book Design*), described various schools of Russian design in which he (disparagingly) included Constructivism.[28] He cited hallmarks of the movement as any rectilinear graphic element: a lack of paragraph indentation, sans-serif fonts and 'geometric forms (squares, circles, triangles, etc)' as signature of the movement.[29] I go into detail about this to demonstrate that these associations with the movement are not mere projections on the part of the viewer but are historically grounded in citations. The second is to hypothesise that this allegiance would have extended to censorship. In the mid-1930s, a particular mode of censorship, with a unique function, began to appear on *SSSR na stroike*'s mastheads. When Lissitzky and Küppers designed the May-June 1938 edition, for example, the masthead incorporated an opaque dark rectangle superimposed over two lines of text (fig. 38a). To the uninitiated, this could have easily been a conscious design detail, so seamlessly does it blend with the magazine's aesthetic. Yet, in this case, the bar served a highly political function which is only revealed when we compare the magazine's Russian edition to its French equivalent (fig. 38b). The names of three editorial board members are concealed underneath the overlaid bar: Aleksander Kosarev, Evgeniia Ezhova and Semen Uritskii. All prominent members of the Bolshevik 'Old Guard', they had fallen victim to Stalin's purges, their arrest and subsequent conviction on counterrevolutionary charges inaugurating the mandatory process of removing their names from all

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[27] Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Dlia Golosa* (Moscow, 1923).

[28] Boris Kisin, *Grafika v oformlenii knigi* (Moscow, 1938).

[29] 'геометрических форм (квадрат, круг, треугольник и т. д.)' Kisin, *Grafika,* 60.

Fig. 38. Sophie Küppers and El Lissitzky, back cover of *SSSR na stroike,* 5-6 (1938). Left: Russian edition, right: French edition.

printed matter.

Some historical context is needed to understand the nature of this censorship. *SSSR na stroika*'s publication coincided with the purge period, and due to the political seniority of much of its editorial board, it was severely affected by this widespread political violence. The aftermath of these attacks bore a visual imprint on the magazine design. From 1936-1938, its mastheads were erratically assembled and inconsistently printed. The ever-updated list of purge victims meant that the magazine's editorial listings were continually altered, redacted and reduced to remove any reference to the denounced. On occasion, these modifications were made before the magazine went to print, but often they were retroactively applied, once it had already rolled off the press. This mode of post-publication redaction is a less studied side of Soviet censorship. The vast majority of scholarship so far has focused on the more established processes and protocols behind the preliminary preview of material. But Glavlit could also intervene after publication, recalling, redacting and re-writing were necessary; indeed, these backdating amendments were a distinctive trait of press control during the terror. They are hard, however, to study. The makeshift quality of such censorship makes them difficult to track down; improvised and impromptu, they left little paper trail. There is a special quality about *SSSR na storike,* however, which makes it particularly suitable for illuminating this topic: it was published in four languages. Alongside its core Russian-language edition, the magazine was released internationally in English, French and Spanish translation. The logistical complexities of translating, reprinting and transporting tens of thousands of monthly magazines meant that the publishers were not always able to keep up to speed with the censorship demands initiated by the turbulent political climate. This led to many discrepancies between the different editions of any

given month. This disarray has translated into a useful historic lens, allowing us to compare and contrast different language versions, identifying what changes were made and why. In order to study censorship on the magazine's mastheads, I have catalogued every issue of *SSSR na stroike,* sourcing as many different versions of the magazine as possible, cross-referencing distinct versions of the same editions from various global collections and those issued in foreign languages in order to gain a comprehensive picture of editorial alterations. By considering the protocols, practicalities and design decisions which accompanied the purges, we can assess the extent to which the Constructivist language of the avant-garde was recruited for the tasks of censorship, thereby challenging the veneer of utopianism which has, for so long, been axiomatic of the movement.

The Editorial Board

Before proceeding with this comparison, a brief historical summary of the *SSSR na stroike* editorial board is necessary to contextualise the magazine's modifications. The purge of almost the entire editorial board (which featured numerous high-profile statesmen and members of the upper echelon of the Soviet political strata) from 1936-38 meant that from July 1936 onwards, the list of the editorial board members began to be altered, with names disappearing in ominous deletions, often overlaid with coloured bars. The first member to be arrested was Grigorii Piatakov, the magazine's inaugural editor-in-chief who had spent six and a half years in the role before his indictment in July 1936. Like many of those on the editorial board, Piatakov had occupied senior political roles in the regime, including a tenure as Chairman of the State Bank.[30] He appeared as a central defendant in one of the first of the Moscow show trials, the infamous 'Trial of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre' in 1937 and was subsequently convicted and executed. After this, his name, which had featured on the first seventy-eight editions of the magazine, was removed or, more precisely, camouflaged and covered up. In the June and July 1936 editions, for example, his editorial byline morphs into a thin blue line (figs. 39a-b).

Piatakov is something of an extreme example of the efforts made to erase all references to purge victims. His name is removed not only from the magazine itself, but also from the archival records registering its production. As has been noted, the remaining records are scarce, but certain documents have been preserved, including two OGIZ-Izogiz *tematicheskii plany* (thematic plans) from 1935-36, which list all releases the publishing house intended to produce that year. The references to *SSSR na stroike* here contain some ominous forewarnings of what was to come. The 1935 plan lists Piatakov's name alongside the magazine, but by 1936, all many of him - or indeed an other editor is removed - the journal is now only listed by its title, as if it were a surreal self-editing anomaly.[31] This

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[30] 'Piatakov', Novaia Rossiiskaiia entsiklopediia, vol. 13 (Moscow, 2014) 341-342.

[31] RGALI (f. 62, op. 1, ed. khr. 84).

marks an editorial absence which would come to characterise the magazine for the next two years as names were increasingly deleted from its mastheads and dropped from its records.

Also implicated in Piatakov's trial was Lev Mariasin, another former State Bank Chairman, who had been appointed to *SSSR na stroike*'s ill-fated editorial board only the previous year. Mariasin was arrested on December 1936, and accordingly, that month's edition of the magazine features a similarly censored masthead, wherein his name mutates into a blue bar. The following year, 1937, was one of the most turbulent and claimed the lives of the majority of the rest of the editorial board. Piatakov was briefly succeeded as editor-in-chief by Valerii Mezhlauk, whose short-lived appointment was in turn succeeded by that of Aleksander Kosarev, a statesman and *Komosol* (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) secretary, in 1938.[32] Kosarev only lasted for eleven editions before his name was banned and began being censored. Alongside him, Artemis Khalatov, Grigorii Grinko, Mosei Kalmanovich, Trifon Enukidze, Evgeniia Ezhova, Semen Uritskii and Mikhail Koltsov all perished.

The magazine's mastheads, with their multiple erasures, alterations and deletions, offer a stark illustration of the human loss of this period. So frequent are these missing references and erased citations that they make researching the magazine a curiously haphazard experience. One never knows exactly what one will find when ordering editions of *SSSR na stroike.* Not only have many of them been visibly censored, but other editions have become the site of 'unofficial' attacks by anonymous readers. Extant versions of the magazine (particularly those in collections in Russia) bear witness to extensive vandalism, wherein names are often scratched out with a scalpel or smudged out with spills of ink (fig. 40). Because of this, *SSSR na stroike* offers a singularly conspicuous case study of Glavlit's visible dimensions. There are two types of censorship prominent throughout the magazine; machine-made and hand-made. The former are official redactions made by the State Printer, Goznak (*gosudarstvennyi znak*) the latter unofficial alterations by anonymous readers.[33]

My focus here is on the mass-published, machine-made redactions. These offer a compelling, if disturbing, topic of study because of the extent to which they have a consciously aesthetic dimension. Far from a haphazard, hasty attempt to quickly cover offensive material, Goznak's marks of expurgation were often camouflaged carefully against the magazine's overall design. Their weight, width and placement on the page correspond closely to the text lineation, and they are always matched with the body text's precise shades of ink, often demanding unusual colour swatches. The more one looks at images such as figure 38, the more it appears that the censor was guided by both

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[32] 'Kosarev', *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia,* vol. 13 (Moscow, 1973), 299.

[33] Goznak are listed on every edition of the magazine, with the same credit printed at the bottom of the back matter: 'Бумага, краска, печать исполнены Гознаком.'

colour-matching and design symmetry. This is particularly evident when we compare the magazine's December 1936 edition to its uncensored September edition (fig. 41). There are two extra bars incorporated into the editorial credits in the former. Whilst the left-hand one is there to cover Mariasin's name, the right-hand one appears to serve no purpose other than visual balance. There is no underlying name beneath it, nothing to censor save for blank space. This gratuitous bar appears to be only there to dissimulate the censor's strike by integrating it closely within the magazine's design. In doing so, it exploits an indisputably Constructivist form. The flush justification, the consciously rectilinear over-printing; all these characteristics were, as outlined earlier, explicitly identified as hallmarks of the movement.[34] This seemingly insignificant, easily overlooked blue line therefore raises an intriguing question: did the visual systems of Soviet censorship exploit the Constructivist repertoire?

Fig. 41. Back covers of *SSSR na stroike* (details). Top: 12 (1936), bottom: 9 (1936).

The case study of the May 1937 magazine allows us to address these issues in depth. One of twelve *SSSR na stroike* issues designed by Rodchenko and Stepanova, this one was dedicated to the theme of 'Soviet Gold' (fig. 42a). The issue is notable for the extensive discrepancies between what should have been its identical editions. For example, the German-language version has a completely intact back cover (fig. 42ba), whilst the Russian-language ones feature conspicuously omitted credits. The mode of these deletions vary widely; some are heavily, crudely censored, with bold black bars covering multiple lines of text (fig 42c), others have their text subtly re-arranged with greater line spacing, giving the impression that no name has been omitted (fig. 42d), whilst still others have

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[34] Sokolov, *Spravochnaiia Knizhka*, 167 - 172.

pronounced blank spaces spliced between lines of text (figs. 42e). Seen side by side, these inconsistencies show that Soviet censorship was an imperfect machine. Far from clear directives, consistent rules and a well-oiled system, the discrepancies on display here suggest the magazines were being frantically re-arranged at the last minute, just as they were rolling off the printing press.

Fig. 42. Back covers of *SSSR na stroike* (details), 5 (1937). Left: 42c, right: 42e.

One particular edition of the magazine held in the collection of the Russian State Library in Moscow offers a striking example of the processes of post-publication redaction (fig. 42f). Two temporally distinct phases of censorship are visible here; the first is the Glavlit authorisation code printed at the base of the page (144126, indicating that the periodical had passed through pre-publication review). The second is the black bar printed over two rows of names in the masthead. Close inspection reveals that this bar was printed *over* the original text, indicating post-publication redaction. The even application of ink and flat consistent sheen could only have been achieved mechanically, most likely by an offset lithography machine. This indicates that the edition was censored at the printing factory responsible for *SSSR na stroike*'s publication: Goznak. Indeed, when given that Goznak provided all the inks for the journal, the precise chromatic matching of the censored and uncensored content strongly indicates that both where printed at the same site. The journal's disfigured masthead thus bears witness to two separate strata of Soviet censorship; preliminary review and retroactive recall. These two phases have not received equal attention in scholarship, which has largely focused on the first category, Glavlit's procedures of appraisal and approval. There has been very little study on processes of rescinding material post-publication, perhaps because this was often improvisatory or ad-hoc, conducted unofficially or semi-officially. Nonetheless, both worked alongside one another, requiring clarification of some of the procedures and protocols which led to both the magazine's publication and its redaction.

The topic has long been a notoriously difficult one for researchers, given the lack of historical records on Glavlit and loss of the *SSSR na stroike* archives after the Second World War.[35] Yet, the assembled sources are sufficient to piece together a preliminary understanding of how the magazine was censored. *SSSR na stroike* was published by OGIZ-Izogiz (*Ob"edinenie gosudarstvennykh knizhno-zhurnal'nykh izdatel'stv-izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva*), the division of the Union of State Book and Magazine Publishers (OGIZ) which dealt with Fine Art publishing. OGIZ-Izogiz had two house censors (*politrekatory*) appointed to them, who were responsible for reviewing and authorising all material pre-publication.[36] Archival records show that in 1937 these were V. B. Mordvinkin and K. S. Erinova. Their work began with the review of the annual *tematicheskii plan* within which OGIZ-Izogiz would list their intended release for the forthcoming year. Many more censorial checks and balances awaited at every stage of the magazine's production. Approval was required for every image and article to be printed in the magazine, and once secured, full maquettes and mock-ups for each individual edition had to be reviewed once more before being approved for printing. If at any stage Glavlit identified problematic material, directives were given to eradicate or adapt it and approval was withheld until modifications were made. Each issue was assigned a unique five-digit code as a reference for its passage through these censorship checks, and if deemed admissible for general release, this code was printed within its colophon.[37]

Although neither the *SSSR na stroike* nor Glavlit archives were preserved after the Second World War, there are comparable case studies we can draw on to gain a picture of what the production processes were like for magazines in this period. The selected documents of OGIZ-Izogiz preserved in the RGALI contain some of the publisher's correspondence with Glavlit. These tell a predictably stressful story. Publishers are constantly negotiating newly updated demands from censors, petitioning against requests that seem unreasonable and requesting deadline extensions for workloads that are deemed impossible.[38] Even the visual qualities of these correspondences draw a tentative characterisation of the power-balance within this relationship. Communication from OGIZ-Izogiz is often printed on personalised stationery, on textured letter-writing paper headed with colourful rubrics emblazoned with the publisher's logo. Many notes are handwritten, others are neatly spaced, clearly typed and often colourfully inked, with the author's name always clearly legible. Glavlit's replies, by contrast, are austere and invariably anonymous and sent on blank,

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[35] Wolf describes the difficulties of trying to locate archival sources for the magazine, noting that after six years of searching she 'finally gained access to a set of documents related to the editorial board of the magazine. Unfortunately, a natural disaster literally blew the roof off the archive before I was able to complete my examination of them.' Wolf, *USSR in Construction,* 11.

[36] The information is recorded in the annual '*shtatnoe raspisaniia*' (staff lists), RGALI (f. 652, op.1, ed. khr. 35). These are the only documents in which i have been able to find the censor's names printed, their correspondence with editors is never signed.

[37] For more on this process, see Klaus Waschik and Nina Baburina, *Iskusstvo russkogo plakata XX veka: real'nost' utopii* (Moscow, 2004), 288.

[38] The correspondence between the OGIZ-Izogiz editorial office and Glavlit is preserved in RGALI (f. 634, op. 1, ed. khr. 385).

unheaded paper, habitually printed with black typewriting ink. The language used in the correspondence is equally revealing. OGIZ-Izogiz often rely on stock phrases of thinly veiled franticness: 'We urgently need…' 'We are alarmed not yet to have received…', 'We simple cannot..'. Glavlit offers no such qualifiers.[39] Their prose is tersely precise, often seeming starkly at odds with the monumental consequences that these words conveyed. One sentence in a letter to the editor of a political album simply reads: '*Sniat' Kosareva*' - '*get rid of Kosarev*'. These two words presumably sent printmaking machines screeching to a halt as publishers scrambled to retract names already in production.[40]

Despite the difficulty of these demands, *SSSR na stroike*'s May 1937 edition made it through all these initial hurdles, as seen by the visible Glavlit stamp printed in the lower colophon, bearing the authentication code Б-40861. Officially, the processes of censorship ended here. Once Glavlit's approval was signed off, the text was entitled to be disseminated publicly. In practice, it did not work like this. As Michael J. Fox notes, 'the political editors worked in accordance with a set of guidelines, known as the 'secret list' (*sekretnaia perechen*).'[41] This document, with the full title 'Index of Information Not to be Published in the Open Press' contained numerous categories of classified information, topics and names. This index of the Soviet unmentionable had a particular quality which presented publishers with an ongoing problem; it was growing, and at a pace which outstripped even Glavlit's working capacity.

One of the thirteen categories of the secret list was 'the names of certain political figures whose actual roles have been excised from official history'.[42] During the period of the Moscow Show Trials, this was updated constantly as the quantity of arrests led to an exponential increase of historic revisionism. This meant that material which was already in production or circulation was often retroactively deemed inadmissible and demanded immediate updating. Given that these references were so politically dangerous, one may reasonably ask why the magazines weren't simply destroyed? Evidence gleaned from the magazine's print-run numbers suggests that this may have been the case; in 1936, *SSSR na stroike*'s edition was decreased by almost half, compared to the average print-runs of the previous six years.[43] The deterrent appears to be cost. *SSSR na stroike*'s high production values made it an extremely expensive product, and archival documents show that OGIZ-Izogiz in 1936

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[39] See RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 143).

[40] An oddly inverse relationship emerges between the severity of the request and the length of writing. Whilst instructions to erase unmentionable politicians can be dispatched in two words, elsewhere minor adjustments to photographs are described with intensive attention to detail. In a commentary on a collection of lithographic prints of Lenin, the censor devotes three page to detailed instruction of how to amend his image, including adding emphasis to the moustache. RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 143).

[41] Fox, *Glavlit,* 1053.

[42] Green, *Encyclopaedia,* 268.

[43] The 1936 magazine was released in 37,613 editions, compared to 66, 238, the mean average of the previous six years.

failed to meet its production targets, citing 'not only a lack of paper but to a large extent unsatisfactory editorial work and printing difficulties.'[44] Rather than destroy these extravagant publications, the cheaper option was to cover-up the offending names before releasing the magazines for sale.[45]

Archival collections show occasional examples of these last-minute directives. Correspondence between Glavlit and publishing houses include occasional telegrams, sent with curt instructions to make an immediate alteration to a text in production or to cease printing one ('*zaderzhite pechat*').[46] When orders from Glavlit came in at the last minute, they left publishers and printers to work to constantly pressured deadlines, sometimes unmanageable ones, as the *SSSR na stroike*'s inconsistencies prove. The May 1937 version is one such example; its German-language edition had slipped through the net, whilst its Russian language ones were hastily rearranged. In some editions this was done by rearranging the typeset block, removing the offending names and replaced with 'blank' typographic blocks. But a particularly interesting example is found in fig. 42c: here, the familiar form of the black brusok bar reappears, overlaid over text, underneath which the original names are vaguely discernible as a faintly raised relief. Rodchenko and Stepanova's names are credited, quite clearly, immediately above the black bar of censorship. The overt rectangularity of this form, the opacity of its ink and its high-contrast against the bright orange cover page all mean that, taken in oblation, it could easily be a design detail found in any one of their other publications. An act of expurgation aligns almost indistinguishably with their typographic oeuvre; this raises the intriguing prospect that the artists themselves had input or involvement in the magazine's censorship. The following section will reassess the magazine's printing procedures to explore this possibility.

The Design of Deletion

Glavlit and Goznak were two of the authorial 'hands' involved in this magazine's censorship, the former in the ideological sense, as they gave the actual order for removal, the latter in the manual sense, as they operated the typesetting machines. But working between these two institutions was also an extensive design and production team, and it is worth investigating the extent to which they had any input in the removal of names. As has been noted, a certain consistent design logic appears to underly these processes of redaction. There are seven editions of the magazine which feature names of the editorial board transforming into oblong bars. These were:

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[44] 'не только от недостатка бумаги но в значительной мере от неудовлетворительной редакционной работы и полиграфических затруднений.' RGALI (f. 652, op. 11, ed. khr. 7, l. 1).

[45] Glavlit had power to increase circulation ('*uvelichit' tirazh*') or decrease it. RGALI (f. 625, op. 1, ed. khr. 6).

[46] RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 7).

- No. 7, 1936 (designed by Nikolai Troshin, Piatakov removed from editor-in-chief byline with navy bar)

- No. 8, 1936 (designed by Rodchenko and Stepanova, Piatakov removed from editor-in-chief byline with black bar)

- No. 12, 1936 (designed by Zoe Deineka, Mariasin removed from the editorial board listing with blue bar)

- No. 5, 1937 (designed by Rodchenko and Stepanova, unidentified contributor removed from editorial board listing with black oblong)

- Nos. 5-6, 1938 (designed by El Lissitzky and Sophie Küppers, Kosarev, Uritskii and Ezhova removed from editorial board with burgundy oblong)

- No. 7, 1938 (designed by Nikolai Troshin, Kosarev removed from editor-in-chief byline with russet oblong)

- No. 5, 1941 (designed by Solomon Telingater, entire editorial board removed with black rectangle)[47]

There are several telling details about the above list. First is the variety of different ink colours used and the fact that in each case the ink swatch is carefully matched with the font colour. This careful and conscious selection in itself proves that those expurgating names were not indifferent to aesthetic considerations. Furthermore, the repeated, rectilinear motifs used over the course of these five years are chromatically and formally standardised, and carefully integrated with the magazine design. When considered as a group, their redacted names seem too consistent, too geometric and too closely camouflaged against the page layout to be enacted without a conscious visual strategy. Also intriguing is the prominent presence of the avant-garde elite as design contributors to these editions: Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Telingater are all credited alongside stark quasi-Constructivist shapes. Precisely what was involved in the artist's design duties is under however. The loss of the *SSSR na stroike* archive means that corroboration for any specific design or editorial tasks no longer exists. Without this, we can only draw provisional hypotheses using the evidence of the professional listings on the masthead, and the visual coding of the censor's strike itself. The detailed information on the back matter illuminates the magazine's working structures and its division and attribution of design tasks. There was no permanent design team or staff at *SSSR na stroike*; contributors rotated on a monthly basis. Nor was there a consistent 'chief designer' or 'creative director'; the various artists who worked on the magazine are credited as fulfilling different roles on different editions. Sometimes, contributors are listed as responsible for the 'artistic construction and edition layout', sometimes this job is referred to as the 'edition montage', and still elsewhere they are listed simply as

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[47] This list is, to the best of my knowledge, definitive. In compiling it I have consulted multiple different international collections of *SSSR na stroike.* However, given the multiple discrepancies found throughout the magazine's corpus, it is impossible to compile a truly exhaustive list of all instances of its censorship. *SSSR na stroik*e was issued monthly for over a decade in circulations of up to 70,000. Therefore close to a million editions were released during its tenure, the vast majority of which are lost or inaccessible.

the 'artist'.[48] In the first year of the magazine's production, Viktor Mikulin (the editor of *Sovetskoe foto*) is listed each month as responsible for the journal's 'technical artistic components'.[49] After his departure from the magazine, the person most commonly employed in design roles was Nikolai Troshin, a painter who had trained at the VKhUTEMAS (*Vysshiye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie*).[50] There are other, undefined, roles regarding the magazine's layout as well; each edition credits someone for the 'plan and text'.[51] The precise purview of any of these roles is unclear. Therefore, these inconsistent job titles only complicate the question of who was responsible for designing censorial redactions: it could feasibly have been any, or none of the above.

The question of whether artists like Rodchenko, Stepanova or Lissitzky were directly involved or recruited in post-publication censorship, then remains unanswerable. Tantalising though the possibility may be that designers re-appropriated their iconic art forms for the purposes of 'excising from official history', it remains just that: a possibility. There is no evidence to substantiate this theory. Presumably there was one individual, or a small group of individuals, responsible for this assignment, but there is no paper trail to identify who they were. And yet, the very instability of these various design roles contrasts sharply with the cogent and consistent style of censorship which was used in post-publication redaction. Whoever was responsible for these strikeouts was not working in an ad-hoc or arbitrary fashion. They were following a coherent, orderly iconographic system, and, as we shall see, this system was informed by the Constructivist canon.

What's in a Line?

This chapter has presented various instances in which the signs of Soviet censorship drew on Constructivist iconography. These cumulative case studies have contributed to a conclusion that the bars of censorship on *SSSR na stroike* were not just *similar* to Constructivism, they were *signature* of Constructivism; they would have been identified specifically with the movement. There are two criticisms one might levy against this hypothesis. The first would be to question how much one can truly read into a mark as studiously simple as the brusok bar? The sheer sparsity of the form poses interpretive challenges. One could claim that it is ungrounded to attribute a simple like a geometric bar it to a specific aesthetic school because it is too universal to be partisan; it is semantically neutral with no single meaning. A second criticism could further argue that it is erroneous to identifying Constructivist aesthetics in journals of the mid-1930s. as during this period the movement fell out of favour following a backlash against 'formalism'.

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[48] 'художественное построение и оформление номера', 'монтаж номера', 'художник'.
[49] 'художественно технической частью'.
[50] Troshin designed over a third of the magazine's total output, forty-six editions in total. See Wolf, *USSR,* 416 for a full list of the editions he worked on.
[51] 'план и текст'.

The validity of such criticisms can be assessed by using the sources of the wide selection of literature on polygraphic design which was published in Russia throughout the 1920-30s. There is a substantial corpus of such works, debating the relative merits of different typographic schools and advising upon the optimal way to *orformliat'* (compose) or *verstat'* (layout) a magazine or newspaper.[52] Many books on the topic exist, varying from the purely 'technical' to 'artistic', all provide clear instructions and explicit directives about polygraphic design, and in doing so, provide interpretations and readings of the symbolic value of non-textual elements, including structuring lines. These sources inform us as to how a contemporaneous readership would have interpreted the symbolic value of censorship in *SSSR na stroike.*

Throughout these sources, a unifying theme is the considerable attention they all pay to peritextual elements, in particular structuring lines (*lineiki*), which are deemed to play an 'essential part' within the Soviet polygraphic project.[53] The value attributed to these easily-overlooked graphic details trends towards hyperbole - Sergei Sredinskii argues that the careful arrangement of Soviet newspapers bear such high design values that one could plausibly compare them to works of art.[54] Kisin's praise, meanwhile, is so exaggerated that it sounds surreal, he goes so far as to claim that the careful attention paid to the arrangement of the publisher's peritext is evidence of communism's success over capitalism: 'at present, only in the USSR are there clearly formulated requirements for the title page. In the capitalist countries, the title pages are constructed quite arbitrarily.'[55] If not all the writers are quite so invested, one thing that they all clearly communicate is their literacy in *lineiki.* The dashes, strokes, strips, rules and underscores which framed the text are interpreted almost as if they constitute a rudimentary alphabet. Boris Viaemskii and Mikhail Urlaub, for instance, devote an entire subsection to the correct application of *lineiki* wherein they go into great detail advising designers on how they should be used.[56] They discuss whether it is better to have solid, broken or perforated lines, and consider the relative merits of end points which are '*tupoi*' (blunt), '*polutupoi*' (partially blunted) or '*tonkii*' (arrowhead).[57] They debate the preferred ratio of the height of *lineiki* to the height of the script and list the various functions which such lines can fulfil. Their instructions are specific: when *lineiki* are used 'to separate content which is only slightly distinction

[52] These include Boris Viazemskii and Mikhail Urlaub, *Tekhnicheskoe oformlenie gazety* (Moscow, 1934); Aleskandr Volzhinov and Mikhail Neiman, *Oformlenie i verstka politotdel'skoi gazety* (Moscow, 1934); Sergei Sredinskii, *Khudozhestvennoe oformlenie gazeti i knigi* (Baku, 1929); Igor Starobogatov, *Kak verstat' gazety* (Moscow, 1930); Boris Kisin, *Graficheskoe oformlenie knigi* (Moscow, 1946); and Kisin, *Grafika.*

[53] 'Существенная часть'. Volzhinkov, *Oformlenie,* 7.

[54] 'газета в построении своей формы постепенно выработала такие черты, которые позволяют сравнивать ее с произведениями искусства'. Sredinskii, *Oformlenie,* 45.

[55] 'В настоящее время только в СССР отчетливо сформулированы требования, предъявляемые к титульному листу. В капиталистических странах титульные листы строятся совершенно произвольно'. Kisin, *Graficheskoe,* 131.

[56] Viazemskii, *Tekhnicheskoe,* 67-68.

[57] 'тупой', 'полутупой', 'тонкий'. Viazemskii, *Tekhnicheskoe,* 67.

from the theme of the main text' then it is preferable to use 'double lines of a two-point thickness' however, when they separate content which *does* differ substantially, it is imperative to use 'single unbroken lines in the same height as the text'.[58] Aleksandr Volzhinov and Mikhail Neiman similarly acknowledge that structuring *lineiki* are 'needed to help the reader' and debate the relative merits of using *tonkii* (fine), *zhirnii* (bold) or *poluzhirnii* (semi-bold) lines.[59] They note that a designer must tailor a line's weight to its specific typographic function. When dividing two columns of text from one another, for instance, a designer should use 'fine lines' with a width 'between four-eight points', but when distinguishing one article from the next, *zhirnie* lines must be used for added emphasis.[60] Illustrations are provided to provide classifications and typologies of bars and lines, ensuring that future designers need leave nothing to guesswork. These clear directives attest to the semantic significance of these seemingly trivial visual details. That all these writers go into such detail on this topic proves not only that they were receptive to the subtle symbolic differences between these forms, but that they identified them as crucial for the reader's understanding of the text. They evidently believe that readers will be able to pick up subtle codes from *lineiki*, and that these will differ depending on whether they are exposed to ones with a 'width between four-eight points' or 'a two-point thickness'.[61] The treatises provide designers with a cogent grammar of these symbols and elucidation of its differing semantic values.

Another unifying trait of these polygraphic texts is that they consistently identify exaggeratedly bold and blunt brusok bars (as well as geometric forms and flush text justification) as Constructivist. These features are still singled-out despite the hostility several writers express towards the movement, Kisin for instance, laments that 'Constructivist formalism unfortunately, has not yet been completely eliminated from the work of our designers'[62] And yet, one can question the sincerity behind this statement when it is contextualised within the rest of his book, an irony of which is the way by which Kisin criticises Constructivism whilst simultaneously describing its positive impact on polygraphy. He approves of the geometrical simplicity of cover designs such as *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, for instance, as well as praising Constructivists for 'preserving a rectangular print space', albeit hastening to add that this 'can in no way can be interpreted as formalism'.[63] Kisin was writing at a time when a backlash against formalism had dominated Soviet aesthetic debate, he therefore justifies his approval by resorting to scientific explanation, citing theories of visual perception to

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[58] 'Для отделения мелкого необъединенного по теме материала применяются двухпунктовые двойные […] применяются гладкие тупые шестипунктовые тройные.' Viazemskii, *Tekhnicheskoe,* 67-68.
[59] 'должный помогать читателю'. Volzhinkov, *Oformlenie,* 7.
[60] 'Тонкие линейки […] в своем основании 4, 6, 8 пунктов.' Ibid., 7.
[61] 'толщину 2 пункта.' Ibid., 7.
[62] 'Конструктивический формализм, к сожалению, не совсем еще изжит в практике наших оформителей.' Kisin, *Grafika,* 32.
[63] 'сохранения прямоугольника полосы никак не может трактоваться как формализм'. Kisin, *Graficheskoe,* 93.

support his appreciation of Constructivism's congenital rectilinearity: 'a straight line is perceived by the eye with less energy expenditure than a jagged one, and, therefore, a band with clear contours is more convenient for visual perception than a band with a torn, snagged contours.'[64] Comments such as these are significant for this chapter's argument for two reasons. Firstly, they demonstrate that the backlash against Constructivism was perhaps not as extreme as it is often presented in secondary literature. Rather than a heartfelt critique, the denunciation of Constructivism often reads like a mere disclaimer, and the frequency within which the Constructivist debate arises in these books itself attests to the continued influence the movement had throughout the thirties. Secondly, they substantiate the claim that a contemporaneous readership would have identified black brusok bars not just as undifferentiated visual traffic, but as specifically Constructivist symbols. Identifying these parallels, however, does not so much clarify the logic of Soviet censorship aesthetics as further complicating the picture. They raise the thorny question, 'but why?' This chapter has so far demonstrated that Constructivist typographic elements were used for both preliminary review and post-publication censorship, by way of conclusion, I will suggests some deductions which we may draw from this.

The first explanation is the simplest: the aesthetic unity between *SSSR na stroike*'s censorial 'cuts' and its Constructivist design is purely the by-product of an effort to camouflage the marks of redaction against the layout of the page. It is simply a case of design consistency. However, if we situate these findings alongside the argument made in the previous chapter, which argued that the aesthetics of avant-garde book design were developed, in part, through the stylistic mimicry of censorship, then it seems possible that a more creative, conceptual engagement may be at stake here. This raises the prospect that the functions of censorship align with the internal logic of Constructivism as a symbolic system.

To consider this view, and to situate the case studies of *SSSR na stroike* within the broader discussion of this section, it is useful to consider another case study of the magazine: the back cover of the May 1941 edition (fig. 4). This image shows the most overt example of post-publication redaction ever included in *SSSR na stroike*. Here, it is not just an editor's individual name which is blacked out, but the entire column of the masthead. Everything other than the magazine's title, issue description and price is erased from view, as the whole paragraph is overlaid with an opaque black rectangle. The visual effect of the dense black block against the clean white page is strikingly Constructivist - the high-contrast colours, the matte, unmodulated ink and the perfectly

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[64] 'прямая линия воспринимается глазом с меньшей затратой энергии, чем зазубренная, и, следовательно, полоса с четкими контурами удобнее для зрительного восприятия, чем полоса с рваным, «дырявым» контуром.' Kisin, *Graficheskoe,* 94.

perpendicular angles are all hallmarks of the movement. Indeed, the effect is particularly similar to the iconic cover of *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, which also featured little more than a minimalist black letterpress square against a white background. This parallel is not coincidental; the May 1941 edition of *SSSR na stroike* was designed by Solomon Telingater, a member of the 'October' Group of Constructivists, and the artists who succeeded Gan as designer for *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*.[65] When he took over in 1929, Telingater opted to continue using Gan's iconic cover design of a stark black square printed against a plain page.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Telingater may have been intentionally invoking his prior oeuvre in figure 4. Given the lack of transparent information about *SSSR na stroike*'s production protocols, we cannot even be certain whether he was involved in the tasks of censorship, or whether it was enacted by an anonymous Goznak printer. Moreover, very little is known about the context or motivations underlying this particular instance of censorship, which is anomalous in the way that it appears to be primarily intended to cover up subscription information. This seems both draconian and somewhat senseless, two qualities which are likely explained by the fact that edition's release coincided with Russia's involvement in World War Two, a period during which periodical censorship became correspondingly more severe and less systematic. A similarly overzealous approach to that of the wartime censor who worked on *Lukomor'e* in 1915, who also printed a black rectangle over the magazine's cover, appears to be active here.

From left to right:
Fig. 18.   Heorhiy Narbut, front cover of *Lukomor'e,* 6 (1915), with censorship. Journal with photolithograph cover, 18 x 13.1 cm.
Fig. 3.   Aleksei Gan, *Sovremennaia Arkhitektura*, 3 (1926). Journal with letterpress cover, 34.3 x 24 cm.
Fig. 4.   Solomon Telingater, back cover of *SSSR na stroike*, 5 (1941). Journal with offset lithoraphy, 41.3 x 30 cm.
Fig. 17.   Kazimir Malevich, *Iz Kubizm i Futuizm k Suptematizmu, novyi zhivoposnii realizm* (Moscow, 1916). Book with with photolithograph cover, 18 x 13.1 cm.

Despite the multiple uncertainties which surround it, the May 1941 magazine is an illuminating source because it vividly encapsulates the formal echoes between the aesthetics of Constructivist

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[65] Telingater was a cosignatory of the group's founding declaration, 'Deklaratsiia Oktriabr' (vserossiiskoe ob'edinenie rabotnikov novykh vidos khudozhestvennnogo truda)', *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 3 (March, 1928), 73-4.

polygraphy, censorship, and avant-garde abstraction. This is seen when we situate the various covers alongside one another, as seen above (figs. 3-4, 17-18). These comparative case studies set off a pinball effect of points of influence and reference within the avant-garde repertoire. The Imperial censorship of the type seen *Lukomor'e* has been cited as a possible source of influence to the radical negativity of Malevich's black square. This image, in turn, was invoked in homage by Gan, and latterly Telingater, as they designed *Sovremennaia arkhitektura.* Finally, Telingater himself worked on an edition of *SSSR na stroike* which was again subjected to extensive censorship of a specifically Soviet bent. The chain reaction thus continues, ricocheting from designer to designer, but ending where it began, coming full circle, back to the wartime censor's workbench.

There is no one explanation for the various connecting nodes between these visually unified case studies. They could feasibly show mimicry or resistance, irony or earnestness, an easing of relations between artists and institutions, or the culmination of their conflict. They do, however, give credence to Komar and Melamid's observation of the potentially censorial nature of Malevich's legacy. The examples of *SSSR na stroike* substantiate this because of their active intention to adapt avant-garde language to meet a political purpose. It developed from a period when artists were within the Soviet system and trying to integrate their art to fulfil its needs more fully. The stylistic mimicry model utilised in the previous chapter is no longer applicable here because of the artists' changing professional allegiances. Rather than dissident outsiders rallying against a dominant structure, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Telingater and Lissitzky were now producing from *within* the dominant establishment. And yet, these professional allegiances themselves illuminate new ways to understand these interactions. They create a context of artists working alongside censors towards a shared goal and shows how their artistic ambitions are aligned with Glavlit's administrative ones. From this viewpoint, there is something logical about the continuation of their earlier style towards the tasks of redaction. Constructivism, after all, sought to unify itself with politics, it wanted to integrate itself into everyday design and be expedient to Soviet society. But in doing so, did it draw on something inherently appropriate - perhaps inherently censorial - about Constructivist language which lent itself to such tasks of content-negation?

Each of the four magazine covers in figures 3-4 and 17-18 are visually united as they all feature a back rectangle, and semantically united, as they all use this form to indicate a negated meaning. The purposes of this negation vary from the poetic to the prosaic: in Malevich's *Iz kubizm i futuizm k suptematizmu, novyi zhivoposni realizm,* we see an esoteric exploration of arts constituent incapacity to adequately communicate meaning altogether; whilst in Narbut's *Lukomor'e*, we see a government lackey striking-out images for a purely bureaucratic function. These are the two extremes of an

interpretive spectrum, within which *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* and *SSSR na stroike* occupy an uncertain place. The symbolic status of the black square seen in both of these Soviet journals simultaneously references both the metaphysical painting of the avant-garde and the editorial exigencies of political publication. Indeed, as this section has shown, these two poles of image-making were not altogether opposed.

Constructivism as a movement emerged during a time when the avant-garde transitioned from their early ethos of anarchic iconoclasm towards the socially-engaged tasks of world-building. And yet, strands of continuity persisted in both the theory and practice of art during these two different phases. The continued influence of 'creative-destruction' is evident in the origins of the Constructivist movement; Rodchenko repeatedly invoked the destructive language and negative symbolism as he developed his theories of Constructivism. In his 1921 essay 'Linea' ('The Line') Rodchenko describes the 'line' of Constructivism as 'a path of 'collision' which has 'destroyed' past art.[66] His choice of words is telling in that he opts to emphasise the inherently *deconstructive* capabilities of Constructivist form. He goes on to insist that, for art to be useful, it must be made by an artist/engineer capable of the twin poles of deconstruction and construction, some who can both 'build and destroy.'[67] Indeed, despite the name, a substantial part of Constructivist theory alluded to processes of breaking down. Rodchenko repeatedly referenced this: 'I think that the tasks of composition and construction play a particularly strong role only during the period of something's destruction (for example in the destruction of the object in Cubism, and in my period of destroying non-objective space).'[68] He characterised his creative work as governed by the twin dynamics, a space wherein art is 'invented, shredded, measured, dissected, calculated [...] reduced'.[69] This paring of antonyms alludes to a creative process which oscillates between an endless cycle of the counteractive forces of building and demolition. It is significant that, even though the brusok bar was conceived as a sort of universal model for form-building, it was also one which evolved from a philosophy of creative destruction. *SSSR na stroike*'s bars of excision no longer seem entirely oppositional to art when we consider that Rodchenko himself noted: 'we have no intention of adding anything, we intend to remove.'[70] We can therefore identify two, not incompatible strands of Rodchenko's Constructivists ambition: the first is the familiar aim of social expediency and utilitarian function, the second is the lesser-acknowledged continuity of creative destruction. When

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[66] 'путь столкновения [...] разрушен'. Rodchenko, *Opyty*, 92.

[67] 'строить и удалить.' Rodchenko, *Opyty*, 92.

[68] 'Думаю что задачи композиции и конструкции играют особенно сильную роль только в период разрушения чего-либо (так например в разрушении предмета в кубизме и в моем периоде разрушения беспредметной плоскости)'. с

[69] 'выдумано, измочалено, размерно, расчленено, вычислено [...] сделано доведено.' Ibid., 85.

[70] 'мы и не собираемся прибавлять. Мы собирались убавлять'. Rodchenko, 'Programma proizvodstvennogo otdela gruppy konstruktivistov INKhUKa', in *Opyty,* 129-130, 130.

these two facets of the movement are recognised as coexisting, they offer new insights into how the act of censorship is compatible with the internal logic of Constructivism. After all, given that the actions of removal, destruction and reduction underlined Rodchenko's Constructivist period, one could argue that the ambition to develop a universal language which could be integrated and utilised in everyday life is not so much forsaken by Glavlit, as fulfilled through it.

Section Two
Photography

Studies of Soviet censorship have long been predominantly concerned with the written word, but the censorship itself took a much broader view of its purview. Images were subject to equal amounts of control and surveillance in the Soviet Union, particularly the acclaimed category of photography. There were many ways by which photographs could be censored in the Soviet Union. Most of these existed beneath the realm of visibility: withholding an image's publication rights, cropping out content, choosing not to click the shutter in the first place. But often photographs bore the visible traces of their censorship and it is these examples which shall be under consideration here: acts of direct manipulation of the print surface itself, including airbrushing, retouching and defacing.

The two chapters which follow each concentrate on photobooks designed by Rodchenko and Stepanova, and commissioned and published by OGIZ-Izogiz; the 1937 military publication *Pervaia konnaia* and the 1934 album *10 let Uzbekistana*. Both chapters focus on acts of defacement directed at politicians denounced for counter-revolutionary activity, which are now able to be fully studied following the discovery of four previously unpublished versions of the albums, all replete with such defaced images. In doing so, this section seek to initiate a catalogue raisonné of instances of photographic defacement in Rodchenko and Stepanova's work, which enables the addressing of certain historiographic inaccuracies and authorial attributions which have prevailed about the albums since King's 1997 publication of *The Commissar Vanishes*.

The two chapters pursue distinct but related lines of inquiry, exploring the operational and aesthetics aspects of defacement respectively. Chapter three seeks to contextualise defacement as a historic practice. Often dismissed as mindless vandalism, it shall show that Soviet defacement was actually a carefully thought-out system of sign transformation. Chapter four builds on this work by exploring how acts of defacement can be situated within the stated aims of Rodchenko's photographic practice. The previous section showed that the Russian censor was not the external enemy against whom artists were constantly clashing, but rather that many of its aesthetics were internalised. The possibility of a morphological continuity with Rodchenko and Stepanova's earlier, painterly oeuvre, no longer becomes a mere speculative hypothesis, but a real and workable possibility.

CHAPTER THREE

Photographic Defacement in Pervaia konnaia

The Photobook: History in the (re)Making

January 1938 marked the twentieth anniversary of the formation of the Red Army.[1] To celebrate this jubilee, OGIZ-Izogiz released six large-format, richly-illustrated and luxuriously produced coffee-table books narrating a visual history of the Soviet military.[2] Half of these were designed by the husband-and-wife team Rodchenko and Stepanova.[3] Amongst these was *Pervaia konnaia* (*First Cavalry*) which focused on the Cossack army which had played such a decisive role in the Civil War (1918-1921) (fig. 43).[4] The pair were experienced in fulfilling such commissions. Three years earlier they had co-designed a similar large-format photo album, *10 let Uzbekistana* (*10 Years of Uzbekistan*), which was released to rapturous critical acclaim, with a *Pravda* review describing it as 'a wonderful work [...] with magnificence and subtleties of craftsmanship [...] oh, would but that all out polygraphy achieved such levels of skill! [...] this album is richly and brilliantly made!'.[5] Rodchenko predicted that, if successful, *Pervaia konnaia* would instigate a 'swell of work'.[6] He wasn't wrong. Within the next two years he and Stepanova would receive five further commissions, and particularly lucrative ones at that.[7]

The stakes, then, were high. The brief was to create an album which chronicled the cavalry's

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[1] The Red Army was officially inaugurated by the Council of People's Commissars on 28 January 1918, although technically its existence preceded this, and can be traced back to the night of the revolution.

[2] The most famous of these is *Raboche-krest'ianskaia armiia* (Moscow, 1934), which was designed by Lissitzky and issued in the comparatively large circulation of 25,000 editions. Other examples include *Stalin i krasnaia armiia* (Moscow, 1933), *Udarniki boievoi i politicheskoi podgotovski RKKA* (Moscow, 1933), *Krasnoznamennyi baltiiskii flot* (Moscow, 1934), *15 let Pervoi konnoi armii* (Moscow, 1935) and *Krasnaia armiia* (Moscow, 1938).

[3] These are *Pervaia konnaia* (Moscow, 1937), *Krasnaia armiia* (Moscow, 1938) and an ultimately unpublished album entitled *20 let RKKA*.

[4] Little has been written about this album, but for a brief discussion on its design, see Karasik, *Soviet Photobook*, 316.

[5] 'Замечательная работа [...] великолением и тонкости работы [...] ах, если бы наша полиграфия достигла подобного умения! [...] богато и здорово сделан этот альбом!' *Pravda*, 350 (21 December 1934), 4. The album was also positively reviewed in *Izvestiia* on the same day. One may be tempted to dismiss this hyperbole as the pandering of the relentlessly positive Soviet press. Reviews of Rodchenko and Stepanova's albums however were genuinely critically perceptive. Their English-language album *Moscow* (Moscow, 1939) for example, was lambasted by critics as 'evoking a feeling of annoyance' and giving 'the impression that the material fell into incompetent hands.' 'вызывает чувство досады [...] впечатление такое, что материал попал в неумелые руки.' P. Krasnov, *Sovetskoe foto*, 7 (1939), 31.

[6] 'Подъем в работе'. Rodchenko, *Opyty*, 297.

[7] The further five commissions Rodchenko and Stepanova received were *Krasnaia armiia* (Moscow, 1938), *Moskva rekonstruiruetsia* (Moscow, 1938), *Parad molodosti* (1939) and the English-language *Soviet Aviation* (Moscow, 1939) and *USSR Red Army and Navy* (Moscow, 1939). Records show that OGIZ-Izogiz habitually paid the artists responsible for the *oformlenie* (layout) of albums up to three times that of the editors. Invoices from another OGIZ-Izogiz album from 1935 show that the artist was paid 5000 roubles, whilst the editor was paid 1500 roubles. RGALI (f. 652 op. 1, ed. khr. 19).

progress from 1919 to 1921 'as it moved from the Southern Front in Poland on to the Wrangel Front'.[8] This may have initially seemed a straightforward task; OGIZ-Izogiz photobooks followed a fairly standardised format, commemorating Soviet history through full-colour photographs, overstated achievements and aggrandising narrative arcs. The artists had proven their ability to meet such editorial expectations. Moreover, considerable political clout lay behind the album's production; whilst working on it, Rodchenko and Stepanova were able to secure interviews with high-ranking army generals including the head of the Red Army, Kliment Voroshilov himself.[9] And yet, despite their experience, despite the earlier templates and political connections, *Pervaia konnaia* proved to be a problematic commission. The difficulty, as Stepanova noted, was that there was 'no systematic history of the First Cavalry Army in books on the Civil War'.[10] With no stock storyline, no fixed *dramatis personae* to draw on, she and Rodchenko had to fabricate one.[11] They had to 'piece together the events from the memoirs of participants and from newspaper and magazine articles, and the material had to be gathered in fragments, laboriously and over a long period of time.'[12] In doing so, even access to prestigious interviewees like Voroshilov was only so helpful. This album was intended to be a primarily visual affair, narrating its history through images, not interviews. Indeed, the very ethos of OGIZ-Izogiz was rooted in an unshakeable faith of the evidentiary function of the photo: 'the photo speaks much more convincingly in many cases than even the most brilliantly written article'.[13] OGIZ-Izogiz dismissed the factual value of 'words and numbers' because they could be 'distorted and discredited'.[14] In order to truly substantiate history, the publishing house 'decided to turn to drawing with light, to the work of the sun – to photography.'[15]

This extolment of photography's merits presented Stepanova and Rodchenko with gainful employment, yet creative gridlock. Only photographs could verify their story, and barely any existed. Preserved visual records of the First Cavalry Army were scant in quantity and poor in quality. The only archive of original sources that the artists had access to was the Central RKKA Museum Archive, but the photographs preserved here were small-format contact prints.[16] Stepanova wrote that she

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[8] Varvara Stepanova, 'How we made the First Cavalry Album' in Lavrentev, *Stepanova,* 188. This source, an original essay written by Stepanova, it has only been published in English; the original Russian manuscript remains unaccessible in a private collection.

[9] Ibid., 188.

[10] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.

[11] The design difficulties faced by Stepanova have been overlooked and misconstrued in scholarship on this book, which has interpreted their lack of resources as a boldly minimalist aesthetic choice: 'Rodchenko and Stepanova have resisted the temptation to complicate matters. They have generally used the pictures one to a page to gain maximum impact.' Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History,* vol. 1 (London, 2004), 170.

[12] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.

[13] *USSR in Construction,* 1 (1930). This quote is taken from the English edition, which featured a substantially abridged version of the opening editorial written by Maksim Gorkii, which was printed in full in the Russian-language edition, from where subsequent references are taken.

[14] 'Возможности искажать и порочить показания слов и цифр'. Maksim Gorkii, *SSSR na stroike*, 1 (1930), 1.

[15] 'Мы решили обратиться к светописи к работе солнца - к фотографии.' Ibid., 1.

[16] Now known as the *Tsentral'nyi muzei vooruzhennykh sil* (Central Armed Forces Museum), Moscow.

was determined to bring this material 'to life', using the few small, sepia snapshots available to her to assemble an album of polychromatic pages and pyrotechnic graphics.[17] This, then, was the first problem: how to create a vivid visual narrative from such lacklustre material. The answer lay in the editing suite, in which Rodchenko and Stepanova were adept at upgrading and enhancing imagery. The historic photograph of the 'Special Caucasian Brigade' (*Osobaia kavbrigada*), for example, was as historically important as it was visually uninteresting. The unfavourable size ratio of soldiers to scenery failed to look threatening, and the composition was stratified into three horizontal bands which dulled any dynamism. Stepanova notes that careful photo-editing was used to 'add clouds' to the expanse of empty sky, and to subtly insert 'extra ranks of Red Army men' into the line of command (fig. 44).[18]

After passing through this proto-photoshopping, the newly animated album was released on February 1937.[19] It was then that the serious problems started. The album's timing could not have been worse; a mere four months later, on 11 June 1937, a secret Soviet military court would charge nine senior army officers with espionage and sentence them to execution.[20] This marked the start of Stalin's purge of the Red Army which would continue for several years, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers. The fallout of this purge included the hasty recall of *Pervaia konnaia.* The album now amounted to illegal literature for the way it adulated officers newly denounced as public enemies. Rodchenko and Stepanova returned to the editing suite to work on a new edition. Now, the photo-alteration skills which they had used to fix the faces of the First Cavalry in the public imagination needed to be applied in order to remove them from it.

The second version of the album with significantly reduced pagination was re-released in 1938; the original 386 pages were now abridged to 282. This reissue a mere year after its original publication was a curiously clandestine affair. OGIZ-Izogiz's *tematicheskie plan* lists all the works in production that year, but makes no mention of *Pervaia konnaia*'s re-appearance and neither Stepanova nor Rodchenko discuss reworking the album in their diaries.[21] Nonetheless, no mystery surrounds the motivation behind this recall - it was necessary to remove any reference to army officers who had appeared as defendants in the military tribunal. There now exist two editions of *Pervaia konnaia,* from 1937 and 1938. Reading these side-by-side offers a unique snapshot of Stalinist

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[17] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.

[18] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.

[19] Rodchenko notes this a diary entry of 23 February 1937, 'Вышел альбом «Первая конная»'. Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 297.

[20] The trial is known as the 'Case of Trotskyist Anti-Soviet Military Organization'. For trial proceedings see *Protsess antisovestskogo trotskistskogo tsentra (23-30 ianvaria 1937 goda*) ed. by Nikolai Starikov (Moscow, 2015). For a detailed history of the Red Army purges, see Oleg Suvenirov, Tragediia *RKKA 1937-1938* (Moscow, 1998), Peter Whitewood, *The Red Army and the Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Soviet Military* (Lawrence, 2015) and Nikolai S. Cherushev's two-volume biographical encyclopaedia; *Rasstrelianniia elita RKKA: komandarmy 1-go i 2-go rangov, komkory, komdivy i im ravnye* (Moscow, 2002) and *Rasstrelianniia elita RKKA: 1937-1941: kombrigi i im ravnye* (Moscow, 2004).

[21] RGALI (f. 613, op. 1, ed. khr. 28).

history: the first shows its invention, the second its erasure. The 1938 version is replete with blank pages and negative spaces, citations without referents, all of which bear witness to history in the re-writing, historic records straining to align to official account (figs. 44-46) When compared with its predecessor, the discrepancies between them illustrate how the 'systematic history' of the First Cavalry was not a static narrative, it a malleable, mutable one, narrating a history which was regularly redacted and reorientated.[22]

The hybrid genre of the photobook has become a topic of great interest in recent research, within which the Soviet photobook occupies its own sub-genre.[23] More permanent than a newspaper, more transportable than an archive, the photobook was used for constructing and consolidating an official visual memory bank, fixing a definite account of history.[24] The problem, of course, was that the proposed plot lines of Soviet history were recurrently unstable. Chronicles such as *Pervaia konnaia* were protean and shifting under the pressure of Stalinist denunciation. Characters were dropped in and out of the official story, with heroes and villains changing places as political incriminations fuelled a rising tide of suspicion. To fully appreciate the social value of the photobook, therefore, we have to look not just at what was included, but at what was omitted, and how. *Pervaia konnaia* offers a rich insight into this phenomenon; the gaps, blank spaces, and captions without images all vividly illustrate how the artists used images of absence and spaces of erasure to five form to how the past was preserved.

Previously only these two official versions of the album were available for comparative study of editorial changes. However, as with *SSSR na stroike,* there were two ways of altering content and abridging narrative in photobooks: the official and the unofficial. This chapter shall present new archival findings of the latter, in the form of personal editions of the album owned and altered by Rodchenko and Stepanova themselves. The artists, whilst reworking the new maquette, were faced with the problem of what to do with their own versions of the original. As the devastating repercussions of the military purge continued to ripple on through 1938, they extensively defaced their own artwork, painting over faces with black ink and striking out entire pages with scalpels. These newly uncovered versions, showing changes made ad-hoc and by hand, present rich new material to assess the diversity of practices of photographic censorship in the artists' oeuvre. My purpose here is to present these findings, document the various modes of deletion and erasure found within them, and clarify some of the conceptual and practical preconditions of defacement, before

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[22] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.
[23] Parr, *Photobook* and Karasik, *Soviet Photobook*.
[24] As Frederic Corney has demonstrated, the consolidation of Soviet collective memory was not left to chance in Soviet Russia; several institutions existed to choreograph it. Frederic Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca, 2004).

progressing to aesthetic analysis in chapter four, which will consider the ways in which this interlaces and overlaps with their painterly and photographic practice.

Iona Iakir: The Commissar Vanishes

The alterations made to *Pervaia konnaia* throughout its turbulent editorial history are encapsulated by the differing depictions of a single army officer: Iona Iakir. Iakir had joined the army in 1917, in a low rank.[25] Within two years his achievements were such that he was awarded the highest Soviet military award of that time, the Order of the Red Banner, not once but twice, meaning that, by the end of 1919, he was one of the most heavily decorated Red Army commanders.[26] His stratospheric rise made for a compelling story, perfect for *Pervaia konnaia.* However, the humble origins which made Iakir's story so enticing simultaneously made it very difficult to depict. Plenty of images existed of him from the 1920s and 30s, after his awards and promotions, but it was hard to source images of him during the Civil War itself, when he was still a simple foot-soldier. And yet, these were crucial for communicating the unique heroism of Iakir's story, whose value lay in it its upward mobility, its ascending narrative arc, a military variant of the 'rags to riches'.

Only one image of Iakir on the battlefield during the Civil War was available to Rodchenko and Stepanova (fig. 46c). This undated shot shows him in military gear amongst a group of five other Red Army soldiers at the Southern Front. As the only illustration of an otherwise unrepresented part of Iakir's biography, the photograph was a valuable source. What it offered in historic accuracy, however, it lost in artistic value: the group of soldiers are caught off-guard, each looking in different directions, set against a plain wall, with a dirty window; the exposure is low contrast; and the image is slightly out of focus, with an awkwardly angled composition. Rather than a courageous young soldier, about to pull of an indomitable defence of Odessa, Iakir is here seen with a vacant stare, leaning on his rifle like a walking cane, whilst barely able to move under his restrictive winter padding. The paragraph of text which accompanies the image emphasises the dynamism and courage of the young commander who 'energetically prepared' his 'fearless division'.[27] To make the image align more with the tone of these descriptors, the artists relied on liberal use of *retouché* (fig. 46d). The image was cropped so that Iakir became the focal point, and airbrushing was then used to obliterate unnecessary details and intensify highlights. To adjust the tonal contrast and enhance outlines, Iakir's outfit was painted over (most likely with an inkjet gun), with darker ink sprayed over the shadows and outlines, and highlights accentuated with white. The original, grainy texture of the print is smoothed out, Iakir's black boots and rifle heel now stand out against the dark ground, his weapon glints in the light, and

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[25] 'Iakir' in *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia,* 30 (Moscow, 1978), 479-480, 480.

[26] Ibid., 480.

[27] 'энергично готовит', 'бесстрашного командира.' *Pervaia konnaia* (1937 edition).

his facial expression is adjusted to make it more flattering and focused. The final image is so heavily airbrushed that barely any of the original, underlying photograph shows through.

But the art of editing was not to end there. Iakir's downfall was as drastic as his rise. He was arrested in May 1937 alongside Mikhail Tukhachevsky, and appeared as a defendant in the secret trial known as the 'Case of the Trotskyites Anti-Soviet Military Organisation'. Subsequently denounced as a Trotskyite, his image was removed from the 1938 version, in which the page which had featured his portrait is reduced to a blank verso (fig. 46b). But there is also a third version, a chronological mid-point between these two, that is perhaps most revealing about some of the peculiarities of the Soviet photographic enterprise. This is the image which appeared in the two versions of the album in the artists' personal collection, wherein black Indian ink is painted over Iakir's face, reinventing him as a faceless spectre (fig. 46e-f).

Photographic defacement is an established cultural stereotype of Stalinism. The gesture, on the one hand, seems in need of little explanation; there is such an intuitive connection between defacement and social exclusion that we are able to grasp instinctively, without conscious reasoning, why such faces were blacked-out. Our instincts are informed partly by the familiarity of the gesture, which is at once both ancient and contemporary, with iconoclastic equivalents found in countless historically and geographically diverse visual traditions. Yet, whilst we can trace several lines of equivalence between the modes and motivations of iconoclasm in *Pervaia konnaia* and the global history of images under attack, its unique characteristics are rooted in a specific time and place. Although practices of Soviet photographic defacement have become so well known that they have passed into popular culture references, there remains a lack of serious, critical consideration of their function as images.[28] Why such photographs were partially defaced rather than entirely destroyed remains a source of debate. One can infer that the damaged image retains some communicative value, but what, specifically, is being communicated - a condemnation? A deterrent? A warning? A pledge of allegiance or an act of resistance? Moreover, the two new albums are striking for the diversity and variety of modes of excision found within them. What do these differing modes of defacement tell us about the practice as a social ritual? Works such as these operate somewhat as the opposite of illustration which, from the Latin *lustrare,* is etymologically associated with illumination, casting light. The photographs under consideration here, by contrast, seek not to cast light on their content, but shadow. What seems perhaps the most intriguing aspect of defacement is that fact that it is not apprehended as mere negation, but also as substantive. It thus retains a semantic complexity which refuses to be pinned down. To explore these issues systematically, I aim here to initiate a

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[28] Cinema is one example of this; Armando Iannucci's 2017 film *The Death of Stalin* ends with credits within which each of the actors have their face's blacked out.

catalogue raisonné of defacement found in *Pervaia konnaia*. By charting and analysing its material and visual properties, I will address the issues of intention, agency and authorship which underlie them.

A Catalogue of Defacement in Pervaia konnaia

Rodchenko and Stepanova retained two versions of the 1937 edition of *Pervaia konnaia* in their personal collection. These are now in the possession of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts and the Moscow Multimedia Art Museum (MAM).[29] Both copies have been defaced, albeit with several discrepancies between them; the Pushkin edition contains a total of twenty-one defaced photographs, the MAM copy has only nine photographs altered, but four of its pages have been removed in their entirety (figs. 44-56) The targets of the attacks are military personnel who had been convicted of counter-revolutionary charges. These include seven army officers, in ascending order of rank: Konstantin Ozolin (a brigade commander who also worked on the album's editorial team, fig. 48), Daniil Serdich and Nikolai Rakitin (both division commanders, figs. 48-50), Boris Gorbachev and Ivan Kosogov (both corps commanders, figs. 51-52), Iona Iakir (an army commander of the first division, figs. 46, 54-55) and Aleksandr Egorov (a Marshal of the Soviet Union, the highest military ranking) (figs. 56). Excised alongside these army officers was Józef Unszlicht, a politician and *politburo* member who joined the army as the deputy commissar for military and naval affairs (fig. 57). All were arrested in 1937 and executed between 1937-1938, with the exception of Egorov, who was arrested a year later and executed in 1939. The specific targets of attack in the album are the two most indexical signifiers of human identity: the face and name. In most cases, the figure remains identifiable, but facial features have been struck out, and, in all but one case, so has the caption naming the subject of the photograph.[30] In six instances passages of text are also censored (fig. 58). These include paragraphs describing military history which mention any of the eight victims, facsimiles of letters and correspondence signed by any of the victims, and the editorial listings printed in the album's back matter.

It has always been assumed that photographs such as these were defaced by Rodchenko himself.[31] However, when one looks through these case studies as a collection, the inconsistencies in the manner of defacement in the different copies open this assumption to debate. Different materials, modes of excision and penmanship are employed at different points in the album. The only consistently unifying quality amongst all these images is that their alterations were made by hand. Whilst the attacked images of army officers seen in the album do not form one aesthetically

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[29] These were uncatalogued new acquisitions at the time of research, hence archival record descriptors are unavailable.
[30] The exception being figure 11a, an image of Iona Iakir from the Pushkin version.
[31] As cited by King, *Commissar*, 170-182; Dickerman, *Camera Obscura*, 140; and Karasik, *Soviet Photobook*, 272.

cohesive group, we can isolate several sub-groups with shared traits. Firstly, we can divide the images into two broad categories; additive defacement (the application of material to the surface of the image) and reductive defacement (the removal of material from the surface of the image). Additive defacement, the most common category of excision, is most often enacted by painting over offending material with a brush and Indian ink. This appears in a total of nineteen images. Nonetheless, this shared medium does not result in a visually uniform group. The ink may be the same raw material in each case, but it is diluted to varying degrees, rendered opaque in some images, and almost entirely translucent in others. Figure 52b, a portrait of Boris Gorbachev, is particularly anomalous; the original photograph is defaced with ink, and then a square sheet of paper is pasted over the top, apparently as an additional mode of coverage. The reason for this extra precaution is unknown, and it is unusual because Gorbachev was not one of the more notorious characters found in the album. However, it should be noted that this mode of disguising images (by pasting over paper) has been found in other versions of *Pervaia konnaia,* such as the long strip of paper applied over an image of Iakir by an unknown individual in another edition of the album held in the collection of the Russian State Library Department of Publications (fig. 54c). Alongside their over-painted images, there are several examples of reductive defacement throughout the two albums. Significantly, this mode of excision is almost exclusively reserved for images of Egorov. All four pages featuring images of Egorov have been removed from the MAM edition in their entirety, cleaved away

Top row, left to right
Fig. 51a. Photograph of Ivan Kosogov, Pushkin version.
Fig. 50a Photograph of Nikolai Rakitin, MAM version.
Fig. 52d. Photograph of Boris Gorbachev, MAM version.

Middle row, left to right:
Fig. 48b. Photograph of Konstantin Ozolin, Pushkin version.
Fig. 49b. Photograph of Daniil Serdich, Pushkin version.
Fig. 53b. Photograph of Ivan Kosogov, Pushkin version.

Bottom row, left to right:
Fig. 56b. Photograph of Aleksandr Egorov, Pushkin version.
Fig. 56d. Photograph of Aleksandr Egorov, Pushkin version.

from the spine with a scalpel. A thin sliver of the shaved page remains in each case and comparison with intact versions of the album enables us to identify which pages were removed. In the Pushkin version, by contrast, another method of excision is used, as three of his portraits are partially rubbed out with an eraser (figs. 55).

The numerous inconsistencies are telling. They enable us to elicit certain contextual details about the album's deconstruction, suggesting that not all the excisions were executed by one agent, or at least, not in one sitting. On a simple level, they provide a rough timeline of the different sittings through which the album was altered. For instance, the three main materials used to deface images (ink, crayon, eraser) correspond broadly (but not exactly) to the three different years of the military purge (1937-1939). That is, the four officers who perished in 1937 (Iakir, Unszlicht, Gorbachev, Rakitin) have their images painted over with Indian ink. The three who lost their lives in 1938 (Kosogov, Ozolin, Serdich) are covered with black crayon, whilst Egorov, who was executed in 1939, has a substantially different treatment to his image. This sequence is made particularly clear when the photographs are arranged according to the presumed date of their defacement, as in the table in fig. 61. This divides the material into three clear-cut subsets. These distinctions suggests that the different styles of defacement can be explained by the simple question of chronology. That is to say, in 1937, the artists used a brush dipped in ink to excise Gorbachev's image, then when revisiting the same page a year later, they used a black pen to remove Kosogov's portrait. At first glance, it would seem there was no conscious aesthetic criteria involved in the decision, and that perhaps purely circumstantial factors - such as the ease of access to materials - explain the discrepancies we find here.

However, it is not quite so simple. The chronological categories found in the MAM version do not correspond to the Pushkin version, wherein Kosogov and Gorbachev are treated analogously, whilst Ozolin and Serdich are not defaced at all. Furthermore, there are other examples which seem to prove that design decisions *did* influence the form of defacement. In several of the images, the manner of excisions is intended to match the aesthetic context of the page as a whole. This is true, for instance, of the censoring of Unszlicht's name (fig. 59). Three facsimiles of letters signed by Unszlicht are included in the album, and his name is crossed out in each. However, different colours of ink are used: black for pages of black text, and red for pages of red text. This different colour swatches ensures that the act of censorship is always chromatically coordinated with the page layout. Switching between red and black ink may seem a trivial detail, but it bears witness to a conscious decision tonally to blend the mark of excision with the body text.

An even more striking example of what appears to be a calculated aesthetic strategy is the

treatment of Egorov's portraits (figs. 55). Two different methods of visual deletion are used here. Firstly the portrait itself is excised by partially rubbing out with an eraser (although Egorov here remains easily identifiable, not so much erased as merely reduced to a ghostly rendering). Secondly, his military insignia (his uniform chevrons and the medals pinned to his lapels and pocket flaps), are covered over with a black wax crayon. Thus defacement here does not appear to be a haphazard rush to destroy an image. Rather, it is customised to cover the different human and material indices of identity, tailoring different modes of excision to the different referents. The censorship of symbols of military affiliation in this manner was not uncommon during this period, but what is unusual about this image is the juxtaposition of two different methods on a single image, which delete aspects of it in different ways; one causes the picture to bleach and fade, the other to obscure and darken.

The various data points provided by these albums resist neat analysis. As soon as one page tempts us with the possibility of drawing a conclusion about the photos, another page contradicts it. It would be spurious to claim that there was a strict aesthetic system or a cogently worked-out symbolic coding at stake in these albums. However, it would be equally inaccurate to dismiss the interventions as mindless vandalism, as random acts of violence executed without reflective thought. Close visual scrutiny of the material reveals a range of actions that lie somewhere at the intersection of conscious and subconscious action, guided by circumstance and occasionally over-ridden by choice.

Issues of Authorship

The question of precisely who was responsible for *Pervaia konnaia*'s defacement is a deceptively complicated one. Even if interpreted at its most straightforward level (that is, ascertaining whose hand controlled the direct application of ink, rather than which institutional mechanisms coerced or ordered it) definitive answers prove elusive. Whilst neither of the two defaced versions of *Pervaia konnaia* have been published, there has been some research surrounding a comparable case: Rodchenko and Stepanova's 1934/35 album *10 let Uzbekistana,* which became well-known when David King included it in his 1997 compendium of Soviet photographic defacement.[32] In his book, King specifies that it was Rodchenko who was 'faced with destroying his own artwork' and that he was 'compelled to deface his own book [...] using thick, black Indian ink'.[33] King's evidence to back up this claim rested primarily on the album's provenance: it was the artist's own edition and kept in his personal possession. Given that it was revisited multiple times over the course of several years in ongoing acts of iconoclasm, it is difficult to envisage who other than the owner would have had access or incentive to deface it. King's conclusion was corroborated by the album's then-owner, the

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[32] King, *Commissar Vanishes,* 170-182.
[33] King, *Commissar Vanishes,* 170, 14.

curator of the Rodchenko/Stepanova archive and grandson of the artists, Aleksandr Lavrentev. To this day, Lavrentev remains the world expert on Rodchenko and Stepanova, publishing extensively on their lives and work, exhaustively editing their correspondence, compiling multiple monographs and authoring several biographies of the artists.[34] His attribution of the album's defacement to Rodchenko has become the received and accepted view, repeated since by numerous scholars.[35] In an interview with Lavrentev in June 2017, he reiterated that Rodchenko had defaced the albums, compelled by a desire to preserve his work.[36] The fact was indisputable, Lavrentev insisted, given that access to the albums was restricted to Rodchenko and Stepanova, as was any incentive to safeguard the albums through censorship. The evidence provided by *Pervaia konnaia*'s masthead, however, indicates that Stepanova's contribution superseded Rodchenko's. The editorial masthead lists the album's contributors as follows:

> Editorial committee - S.B. Reizin (editor in chief), S.F. Grai and K. I. Ozolin
> Artistic plan and album script - Varvara Stepanova
> Artistic layout of the album, case and binding - A.M. Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova[37]

Stepanova is here credited with sole responsibility for the album's creative concept and written content, whilst she and Rodchenko together are acknowledged to have collaborated on its execution, such as layout and bookbinding. As the primary author and creative director of this project, Stepanova would have been invested in both the construction and deconstruction of the compromising images. She also would have had means to do so, as she and Rodchenko 'shared the same studio, materials, commissions and friends'.[38] Therefore, whilst the evidence provided by Lavrentev's privileged family access and biographical knowledge of the artist is enough to exclude the presence of a third party as having a stake in the album's defacement, it remains inconclusive which of the two artists were involved.

In order to explore these issues of authorship in more depth, it is necessary to establish the procedures of editorial approval surrounding its production. The procedure of designing and publishing photobooks was full of checks and balances at every stage. Firstly, each of its 'raw' materials, such as photographs and drawings, had to be individually authorised by the album's commissioning editor. A maquette was then assembled which needed to be signed off not just by the

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[34] See, for instance: Rodchenko, *Opyty;* Stepanova, *Chelovek*; Lavrentev, *Stepanova*; Aleksandr Lavrentev, *V gostiakh u Rodchenko i Stepanovoi* (Moscow, 2014) and *Rakursy Rodchenko* (Moscow, 1992).

[35] For example, Dickerman, *Camera Obscura*, 140 and Karasik, *Soviet Photobook,* 272.

[36] Kamila Kociałkowska, interview with Aleksandr Lavrentev, 29 June 2017, Strogonov Moscow State Academy of Arts and Industry, Moscow.

[37] 'Редакционный комитет - С.Б. Рейзин (главный редактор), С.Ф. Грай и К. И. Озолин. Художественный план и сценарий альбома - Варвара Степанова, Художественное оформление альбома, футдяр и переплет - А. М. Родченко и Варвара Степанова.' *Pervaia konnaia* (the album's pages are unnumbered. This information appears on the colophon on the final page).

[38] John Bowlt, 'Introduction' in Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 7-9, 7.

head editor and director of OGIZ-Izogiz, but also by Glavlit, the ministry of culture and Goskompechat' (The State Committee for Printing Matters). If permission was given to proceed to printing, the first proofs additionally had to be reviewed and authorised by the relevant division of the Central Committee (TsK) before public dissemination.[39] The artists' working patterns have been described by their daughter as follows:

> Once Stepanova had entered the client's name in the workbook, she would begin to familiarise herself with the scope of the publication and select the material, the outline and the composition for the covers. [...] The preliminary sketches that Rodchenko produced served as the first clue, just the faintest image of what a book, a cover, or an album might look like. Stepanova would then work up this idea using all available polygraphic resources. After this came a group decision on page layout [...] The final demonstration model to be shown to the publishing house was beautifully worked out right down to the last detail. The dust jacket was glued on cardboard, the text written out, the binding made with typographic printing and the montages for the page layout made from actual colour photographs.[40]

In this account, Stepanova is credited with responsibility for 'the administrative tasks surrounding the albums'.[41] Her workbooks show that she 'kept a detailed record of when materials were received, tried to keep to the deadlines for submitting sketches and preparing the originals. She took care of the actual mechanism of book publishing, seeing the text and illustrations through the editorial offices and the print shop'.[42] This labour division between taking photographs (Rodchenko) and procuring the necessary editorial authorisations for their reproduction (Stepanova) is also represented in the artists' correspondence during Rodchenko's 1933 photographic expedition to the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Canal.[43] During this period, Rodchenko posted his photographs back to Stepanova, who was responsible for pitching and selling them to various magazines and publishing houses. Stepanova's letters display her knowledge of censorship protocols; she advised Rodchenko about how to stage his photographs to ensure they met authorisation criteria, she kept him updated on what was 'forbidden' to depict, and kept abreast of changing regulations for submitted photographs with such precision that she noticed when the size regulations changed by a matter of centimetres.[44]

The correspondence illuminates Stepanova's dexterity and expertise in meeting editorial requirements for photographs. Her abilities were informed by the professional experience she

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[39] For a detailed discussion of this process see Waschi, *Iskusstvo*, 288.
[40] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.
[41] Ibid., 188.
[42] Ibid., 188.
[43] See Wolf for an extended analysis of this correspondence: Wolf, *Avant-Garde*, 1997.
[44] 'Ничего касающегося стройки и плотины, где можно понять конструкцию, или увидеть пропорции размеры и т. д. печатать нельзя'. 'Вообще все фото 24 х 30 не дошли.' Stepanova, *Chelovek*, 276.

received from working as an art editor on journals such as *Sovetskoe kino*, *Kniga i revoliutsiia*, *Radioslushatel'* and *Sovetskaia zhenshchina*. She was strategic in who she approached and how. Upon assessing a batch of photos which Rodchenko sent her in 1933, she concluded that they would be unsuitable for *Prozhektor* and *Ogonek,* but possibly satisfactory for OGIZ-Izogiz, and paid a personal visit to the editor of the publishing house, Elizaveta Petreikova, to secure image permissions.[45] When a delay with payment ensued from Petr Krasnov (the managing editor of *SSSR na stroike*), she resolved to approach Mikhail Kol'tsov (director of the Magazine and Newspaper Trust) instead, noting that 'he, of course, will be able to receive authorisation for them.'[46] She used strategic omission to increase her success rates, 'of course, I will not tell Krasnov that all [the photographs] were suppressed'.[47] Rodchenko's diary entries also describe Stepanova as taking responsibility for post-production work on photographs, 'Varvara is working on the selection of photos for the album *20 Years of RKKA*'.[48]

The reason this is worth reviewing at length is because, cumulatively, this evidence reinforces the picture of the working patterns between the pair as one within which Stepanova invariably took responsibility for meeting editorial requirements and staying informed of censorship regulations. The censorship of photographs in one's possession was, ultimately, an administrative task. Its fulfilment required that one kept oneself up to date with rapidly changing censorship protocols, which in itself necessitated communicating with publishing house editors. Thus, rather than a single attribution to Rodchenko himself, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the albums were defaced just as they were created; with both artists involved.

Issues of Agency

Clarifying issues of authorship, in this case, does not correspond to a clarification of agency. Indeed, there is no straightforward answer to 'who' was responsible for photographic defacement because this was not a decision made by one single author, but rather one manifestation of a nationwide social ritual, guided by a multiplicity of agents. Unlike the previous chapter, where the ordering and enactment of censorship could be isolated within the machinations of Glavlit's offices and Goznak's printing presses, here we consider case studies where defacement expanded out into personal lives and was inflicted onto private possessions. It melds iconoclasm 'from above' and 'from below', to use Martin Warnke's formulation.[49] The album's value as a case study lies in the rich sources available to explore motivation at both the institutional and individual levels. These include sources from the

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[45] 'Схожу к Петрейковой'. Stepanova, *Chelovek,* 276.
[46] 'Он, конечно, сумеет получить на них разрешение'. Stepanova, *Chelovek*, 277.
[47] 'я конечно не скажу что все запретили'. Ibid., 276.
[48] 'Варвара склеивает альбом «20 лет РККА»'. 12 January 1937 diary entry. Rodchenko, *Opyty*, 296.
[49] Martin Warnke, 'Bilderstürme' in *Bildersturm: Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks*, ed. by Martin Warnke (Frankfurt, 1977), 7-13.

highest chain of command: Stalin himself, who had a copy of the album in his personal library, and annotated its margins with his observations about its content.[50]

Scholarship of the past few decades has taken different approaches in conceptualising the relationship between the two ends of this chain, the 'vehicles of power' and its 'point of application'.[51] Whilst early Soviet history presented a simple top-down oppression from the powerful to the powerless, more recent literature favours a de-centred approach, as famously conceptualised by Foucault:

> Power is not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others. [...] Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands [...] Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation.[52]

The following analysis is guided by this insight, meaning that a defaced photograph is not merely the act of an oppressed individual acting under duress, but can itself be seen to manifest a semiautonomous formal agency. The following two sections are divided by sources, considering how we can understand *Pervaia konnaia* to be affected 'from above' (at the level of institutions) and 'from below' (at the level of the individual), but maintaining awareness that these are interactive operations. The painterly marks of defacement created by Rodchenko and/or Stepanova are not just the site of oppressive power, but the locus where that power is exerted.

Joseph Stalin's Annotations

Stalin was committed to his library collection which, by the time of his death, numbered some 20,000 volumes.[53] Most of the books were dispersed after his death and, in the seventies, King procured an edition of *Pervaia konnaia* from Stalin's library which is now in the collection of the Tate galleries in London.[54] Its provenance is proven by the official stamp of Stalin's library on the title page, impressed below his signature (fig. 60a). Furthermore, a dedication handwritten on the flyleaf, signed from the 'workers of the 21st typographic division', reads 'Comrade Stalin, beloved Iosif

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[50] TGA (DKC 94 (47+57) 329.15 (093) '1938' PER).

[51] Michel Foucault used these term in 'Two Lectures' in *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977,* ed. by Colin Gordon (New York, 1980) 78-107, 98.

[52] Ibid., 98.

[53] Geoffrey Roberts, 'Stalin's Personal Library' in *SRCSS* (*Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies*) *Digest* (Spring, 2013), 11-13, 11.

[54] TGA (DKC 94 (47+57) 329.15 (093) '1938' PER).

Vissarionovich, thank you for our happy work!', and Stalin's signature itself is inscribed in the top right hand corner of the frontispiece (fig. 60b-c).[55] The fact that Stalin owned an edition of *Pervaia konnaia* accords with the wider priorities of his library, the holdings of which reflected his extensive interest in military affairs, with a particular focus on the Russian Civil War.[56]

This rare document offers unique insights into the editorial imperatives underlying some of the album's alterations. There were several visual and textual amendments made to *Pervaia konnaia's* reissued version, which was released in 1938, at the reduced price of sixty roubles.[57] Whilst most of these changes corresponded to the list of defendants in the military trials, there were also other adaptations made to the overall narrative. For instance, the first chapter ('The Genesis of the Cavalry') was removed, and the last chapter ('The Cavalry Today') was much abridged. Additionally, seven pages of photographs devoted to the post-Brest-Litovsk German occupation of Ukraine were withdrawn, as were poems by Viktor Gusev, Demian Bedny, Alexei Srukov and Vladimir Maiakovskii. Stalin's preserved personal commentary casts some clarity on the motivations for these editorial amendments. Adding credence to Stepanova's claim that the creation of the album was a 'serious and responsible' task, Stalin's annotations in the margins prove that he read it with critical attention to detail.[58] This was typical of his engagement with his library collection. As Geoffrey Roberts notes, 'Stalin was a highly active reader. He kept different coloured pencils close to hand and extensively annotated many of his books. Passages that caught his eye – for negative as well as positive reasons – he underlined.'[59] The personal edition of *Pervaia konnaia* bears witness to this schematic mode of thinking. Stalin's comments provide an intriguing lens through which to view his personal priorities, because they demonstrate that there was one theme which caught his attention above all others: Voroshilov's depiction throughout the album.

There are three pages of the TGA version of *Pervaia konnaia* which have been marked by Stalin, all of which are focused on the representation of Voroshilov. As noted, Voroshilov was consulted and personally interviewed during the album's assembly, therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that his role is so lionised throughout. Stalin's comments are not explicitly critical of this, but they call attention to and query it. The album's opening editorial, which provides a brief outline of the history of the First Cavalry, exalts Voroshilov's contribution to its success. It describes Voroshilov as 'now the leader of the Red Army [...] it was he who infused iron proletarian discipline into the ranks of the First

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[55] 'Тов. И. В. Сталину, Горячо любимому Иосифу Виссарионовичу спасибо за наш счастливый труд! Работники 21 типографии и.м. Ивана Федорова.' TGA (DKC 94 (47+57) 329.15 (093) '1938' PER).

[56] Ibid., 12.

[57] The original price was ninety roubles. The discount presumably reflects the editor's desire to incentivise the album's owners to invest in replacement copies.

[58] Lavrentev, *Stepanova*, 188.

[59] Ibid., 188.

Cavalry and educated the peasant masses of the First Cavalry in the spirit of the greatest devotion and trust'.[60] Stalin underlines the phrase 'now the leader' (*nyne vozhd'*) with a blue fine-nibbed pen. He draws an elongated question mark in the margin alongside the following four lines which credit Voroshilov with inspiring 'discipline', 'devotion' and 'trust' in the army ranks. In the blank space of the page header above this passage, Stalin asks 'and why?' ('*a dlia chego*?') (fig. 60d).

When the album was re-issued in 1938, the entire editorial was omitted. This hardly seems coincidental. Stalin's marginalia was almost certainly a contributing factor, as the album's editors were likely privy to his remarks. As Roberts notes, 'while Stalin's cursive script was a scrawl, he reserved his neatest longhand for his books', this conscious effort towards legibility suggests that he made his annotations with an anticipation of a future readership.[61] Elsewhere, Voroshilov's heroic presentation – regally portrayed on horseback with a caption describing him as 'pulling together all the revolutionary forces of southern Russia' – attracted Stalin's interest. Stalin calls attention to this phrase with an elongated tick in the margin (fig. 60f). This mark in itself seems insignificant, but when aligned with the general schema of Stalin's annotations, it accords with a taxonomy of his most common proofreading marks. The regularity of annotations have been interpreted as a marker of the attention with which he read. Whilst there are certain volumes in his library which he read (and marked) comprehensively, there are others which demonstrate only a cursory engagement, a selective reading, and *Pervaia konnaia* is one such. The marginalia bears witness to a limited interest, directed only at only Voroshilov's representation. There is a poem, for instance, by Viktor Gusev, which describes the relationship between the leaders of the party and army as one of mutual respect and fondness. It includes the line 'smiling, Stalin thought of Voroshilov'.[62] This reference once again prompted the emergence of the blue pen; it is underlined with the enigmatic phrase '*exactly*!' ('*Imenno!*') written in the margin (fig. 60f). Why these enigmatic annotations were focused on Voroshilov is unknown. He was, of course, one of few members of the Red Army's upper echelon to survive Stalin. Of the original five 'Marshalls of the Soviet Union', he was one of only two who didn't perish during the purges. And yet, the ambivalence surrounding Stalin's reaction to his representation here is further attested to in some preserved correspondence of OGIZ-Izogiz censorship. Tension and tentativeness is recorded in discussions of how Voroshilov was to be represented in other publications of this year. A censor's comments for another 1938 OGIZ-Izogiz album, for example, takes issue with Voroshilov quotations which are taken out of context and

[60] 'Ныне вождь Красной Армии [...] Это он внедрял в ряды Первой Конной железную пролетарскую дисциплину и воспитал крестьянские массы Первой Конной в духе величайшей преданности и доверия'. 'Ot redaktsii', *Pervaia konnaia* (1937).

[61] Roberts, *Library*, 12.

[62] 'Улыбается Сталин задумался Ворошилов.' *Pervaia konnaia* (1937).

deemed to be factually distorting, compelling the reader towards inaccurate conclusions.[63]

Whilst the full editorial history of *Pervaia konnaia* has not been preserved (largely because of its high quantity of counter-revolutionary content), there is a useful comparative case study to shed light on the editorial decisions and protocols underlying its alterations and defacement. These are the archival documents surrounding the reissue of another OGIZ-Izogiz album in 1938, entitled *Biografiia V.I. Lenina i I. V. Stalina* (*A Biography of V.I. Lenin and I.V. Stalin*).[64] The preserved correspondence between Glavlit and its editor details the reasons why the *Biografiia* had to be recalled and reissued in 1938. The sheer length of this paper trail, comprising 146 pages of correspondence from January 1937 to June 1938 attests to the overwhelming amount of red tape regarding publication in this period. The majority of the correspondence is between Glavlit's political censor (identified as 'Comrade Shatrovskii') and OGIZ-Izogiz's chief editor (V. B. Uritskii). Shatrovskii sends Uritskii numbered lists stating the changes 'which should be brought forward following received instruction'.[65] There is a discrepancy here between the significance of the editorial amendment and the length of its instruction. Minor tweaks to text often necessitated long-winded epistolary trails (witness the five pages of instructions devoted to the correct photographic positioning of Lenin's hands).[66] Instructions to remove the images of politically delegitimised citizens, by contrast, came with executive orders. In one letter, Shatrovskii specifies that he has 'received instructions' of two alterations which need to be made to the album. The first regards the correct captioning of images and is so meticulously detailed that it is subdivided into numerous tasks taking up two pages. The second simply reads, 'remove the list of editors in this and other publications'.[67]

The reasons for this redaction are not made explicit, but numerous passing references to 'enemies of the people' and 'Trotskyites' exhibit the Manichaean worldview, categorising citizens within a duality of allies and adversaries. This document further reveals that whilst the ideology of censored content was important, the optics were also taken into consideration. Hence the instructions not only refer to that which must be removed, but also give suggestions on what should replace it. One telegram reads, 'it is instructed that the names of comrade Kononov and Apel'khot [are printed] instead of the signature of Comrade Uritskii.' Another offers more generalising advice:

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[63] 'Такие цитаты цитируются товарищем. Ворошилов о Сталине, по сути, искажает мысли Ворошилова и подталкивает читателя к неверным выводам'. RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 7, l. 67).

[64] RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 7). Whilst archival records exist documenting the editorial discussions accompanying the album, I have not been able to find any record of its release or its final, published versions. It possibly had its title changed, or, more likely, had its publication denied at the last minute.

[65] 'Согласно полученных указаний надо внести следующие'. RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 7).

[66] RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 143).

[67] 'Снять список редакторов в том и другом издании.' RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 7).

'in place of removed texts and illustrations, please place a photo of Comrade Stalin.'[68] On 5 April 1938, after sixteen months of this exchange, during which Uritskii had been redacting names of arrested colleagues, the correspondence takes on a Kafkaesque twist, as he himself is removed from the album. A telegram reads:

> To the Head of Glavlit, Comrade Satchikov,
>
> Following the order of the department of Culture and Propaganda TSK VKP(b), Comrade Stetskov, the publication of Izogiz's Album-exhibition 'Biography of V.I. Lenin and I.V. Stalin' must be released without the signature of the editor-in-chief.[69]

From this point on, Urtiskii's name is visibly erased from several pages of the correspondence, which are signed off by an anonymous black mark. Given that the album's timeline corresponds exactly to the period during which *Pervaia konnaia* was being reissued, it is possible that a similar set of correspondence existed, pertaining to its alterations.

The letters concerning the publication of the *Biografiia V.I. Lenina i I. V. Stalina* are useful in shedding light on the protocols of editorial amendments. They tell us precisely who was involved, how orders were given and who was authorised to give them, and confirm that the instruction to remove specific personalities from publications came from high up in the chain of Glavlit's command, indeed from the head of Glavlit himself, Nikolai Satchikov. Furthermore, they confirm that artists employed on the album's design would have been involved in the process. Although the preserved communication does not include any correspondence with the artists themselves, their role in these reissues is alluded to; the minutes of OGIZ-Izogiz meetings discussing imminent alterations to be made to albums contain imperatives to 'swiftly come to an agreement with the person in charge of the album's layout', indirectly attesting to their influence over the final product.[70] This lends weight to the hypothesis that Stepanova, as *Pervaia konnaia*'s primary author, would have also been privy to similar discussions.

Thus, this section has demonstrated the complex collaboration between state apparatus and individual agency in the defacement of *Pervaia konnaia*. The 'strike' of censorship itself can be attributed to an individual, it was not a spontaneous action, but one guided and informed by critical attitudes and political events. Rodchenko and Stepanova would have both had privileged access to the ongoing editorial discussions regarding the fate of the album but retained some autonomy over

[68] 'На месте снятых текстов и иллюстрации помещается фото товарищ Сталин.' Ibid.
[69] 'Начальнику Главлита, По указанию Отдела Кулбтуры и Пропаганды ЦК ВКП/б/ Стецкого издаваемая Изогизом альбом-выставка Биография ВИ Ленин и И В Сталина должна быть выпущена без подписи ответственного редактора.' Telegram dated 5 April 1938. RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 7, l. 67).
[70] 'Срочно договориться с оформителем альбома'. Ibid.

the precise methods and markings of its censorship. Establishing the chain of command underlying the album's re-issued alterations, however, still does not answer the question of why, in the whole spectrum of iconoclastic actions, defacement became so ubiquitous during this period.

Conclusion

With detailed analysis of two newly unearthed archival copies of the album *Pervaia konnaia,* this chapter has challenged the received authorship of the album's defacement and offered new insights and approaches to the reading of acts of iconoclasm in Rodchenko and Stepanova's oeuvres. Initially, the strange combination of divergent formal systems within *Pervaia konnaia* seems inchoate, an unstable assembly of conflicting forces, to which the spectator is unable to apply a clear visible code. By calling attention to the various visual strategies which co-exist on the album's pages, this section has sought to demonstrate that this was not the case. It has explored the practicalities of editorial intervention and censorship in this type of media, a contextual groundwork which has paved the way for further study of defacement in the artists' output in chapter four, which will consider a further case study of the album *10 let Uzbekistana.*

Chapter Four

Counterfactual Photography: 10 let Uzbekistana

The Headshot

The album which has most strongly been associated with defacement in Rodchenko and Stepanova's work is *10 let Uzbekistana* (*10 Years of Uzbekistan*), a publication commissioned by OGIZ-Izogiz as part of a spate of releases celebrating Central Asia and released in December 1934 (fig. 61).[1] The mid-1930s marked various ten- and fifteen-year jubilees of Soviet rule in the Eurasian satellite states, and the hybrid genre of the photobook, with its mix of imagery, storytelling, and statistics proved the perfect medium to commemorate such anniversaries. The standard format for such publications was to take a specific country during a confined chronological period (a decade, or nearby factor of five), and visually document its improvement during these years. A string of publishing houses released albums celebrating ten years of Soviet rule in Georgia, fifteen years in Azerbaijan and fifteen years in Kazakhstan.[2] These photobooks fulfilled a clear propagandist function. They were Soviet success stories bound in folio-sized hardback, full of glossy, polychromatic images of thriving industry, fertile farmland and eternally cheerful populace.

10 let Uzbekistana is divided into six chapters, each devoted to a different aspect of the country: its politicians, its people, its agriculture, industry and culture. It is the second of these chapters, entitled *Partiia i pravitel'stvo* ('Party and Government') which will be the focus of study here. It may be initially unclear why this particular chapter is of such interest from an artistic perspective; it consists, almost entirely, of a repository of photographic portraits, headshots of statesmen and politicians (figs. 62). There is, at first glance, nothing avant-garde about these rows of mugshots. They are, quite literally, colourless, identikit images of officialdom, arranged in systematic grids and rows. Yet, they fulfilled a concrete social function which Rodchenko's long-time collaborator and chief photographic theorist, Osip Brik, identified as specific to his artistic practice. Writing in 1924, Brik observed that the power of photography lay in its ability to produce an 'active fact, a document.'[3] This capability was particularly resonant when it came to portraiture, he maintained, because, unlike a drawing or a

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[1] The full title is *10 let Uzbekistana SSR* (*10 years of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic*) (Moscow, 1934).

[2] *10 let Sovetskogo Tiflisa, 1921-1931* (Moscow, 1931); *15 let Azerbaidzhanskoi sotsialistichestkoi sovetskoi respublik 1920-35* (Baku, 1936); *15 let Kazakhstoi ASSR* (Moscow, 1936). Other similar publications on this theme include *Stroitel'stvo sovetskoi Turkmenii* (Moscow, 1931); *Desiatiletie natsional'no-territorial'nogo razmezhevaniya srednei azii: Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan. Tajikistan. 1924-1934* (Moscow, 1934) and *Sovetskii Tadzhikistan* (Moscow, 1936). Rodchenko and Stepanova later created another album on this theme in 1947, *25 let Kazakhstana SSR* (Moscow, 1947).

[3] '[Здесь] действовал факт, документ.' Osip Brik, 'Fotomontazh', *Zaria Vostoka,* 683 (September 21, 1924), 4.

painting, in a photo we always know that the human subject is 'not invented or imagined, he exists, he has a name'.[4] The authorised stock images of *10 let Uzbekistana* fulfil this precise function, they exist primarily to validate and verify identities. Such straightforwardly documentary photographs filled a pressing visual vacuum, as Adeeb Khalid notes: 'Central Asia had produced barely a ripple in the Russian cultural imagination even after fifty years of Imperial rule. This did not change after the revolution.'[5] The newly Sovietized Uzbek subject did not yet have an established place in the currency of public consciousness, and *10 let Uzbekistana* sought to correct this. Particularly pressing was the need to impress upon the population the image of its political leaders. As Robert Conquest notes, the need for widely recognised portraits of politicians was demonstrated in the absurdist incident of 1919, when Lenin was assailed by street robbers and 'failed to convince them that he was the head of the Soviet government.'[6]

Soviet politicians thus all had official headshots used as their authorised portraits. These were standardised shots with the subject set against a neutral background, turned three-quarters to face the viewer with a tilted head and neutral expression. All executive headshots from *10 let Uzbekistana* were outsourced from OGIZ-Izogiz's portraiture department, wherein a limited selection of approved political photographs were archived and disseminated for reproduction.[7] The standardised headshot may not seem the most creative mode of photography. Indeed, it is precisely the type that Rodchenko railed against in his article 'Protiv summirovannogo portreta za momental'nyi snimok' ('Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot').[8] Despite their straightforwardness and simplicity, they were nonetheless embedded with a multitude of social signifiers. The undeviating format and familiar repetition of political photographic portraits enabled public figures to become 'fixed' amidst a series of standardised social codes. The headshots invoked Russia's oldest photographic institution, the portrait studio, indicating a prestigious socially-demarcated existence and emanating an aura of exclusivity. The headshots are thus understood in relation to a larger, and definitive classification, a social hierarchy validated by an established schema. Symbolic values are embodied in both the studio set up of the photograph itself, as well as its arrangements on the page. The layout of the pictures, in tabular rows, was reminiscent of the gridded group portraits used in displays of public propaganda in the early years of Soviet power. The 'Red Board' (*krasnaia doska)* was a public display board of exemplary citizens, in contrast to its antithesis, the 'Black Board' (*chernaia doska)* on which

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[4] '[Он] не выдумка, не фантазия, он существует, он имеет имя.' Ibid., 4.

[5] Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, 2015), 209. For more on history of Soviet power in Uzbekistan, see Grigol Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building in Central Asia: The Making of the Kazakh and Uzbek Nations* (London, 2016).

[6] Conquest, *Terror: A Reassessment*, 262.

[7] Several IGOZ-Izogiz archival documents discuss the dissemination of such images, see RGALI (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 143) and (f. 652, op. 8, ed. khr. 147).

[8] Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Protiv summirovannogo portreta za momental'nyi snimok', *Novyi LEF,* 4 (1928), 12-16.

disgraced individuals were displayed.[9] An index of exemplary citizenry was thus established, and each headshot is ascribed a social status, one fixed by the specificities of their photographic portrayal.

And yet, the reason the *10 let Uzbekistana* photographs have captured public imagination is not for their success in fixing such identities, but precisely the opposite - removing them. The publication history of this album paralleled *Pervaia konnaia*; it, too, was extensively censored following the purges. Many of the politicians who had featured on its pages fell victims to these. Their photographs accordingly had to be removed from the currency of public images. Thus, a second version of the album was reissued in 1935, with hastily rearranged pages and heavily airbrushed photographs. Meanwhile, the two original copies held in Rodchenko and Stepanova's personal collections were defaced. The resulting photographs are scarred with black emulsion, creating a roster of vanishing Commissars and faceless figures.

The previous chapter showed that these acts of defacement were more than a simple 'political stamping out', but signified a more complex social phenomenon. In what follows, I will prise into this in more length, considering how the practice could function to indicate exclusion from a social collective and ascription to an 'untouchable' class. As was the case with *Pervaia konnaia,* the case studies here also consist of two new versions of *10 let Uzbekistana,* recently unearthed from archives, which contain a wealth of unpublished images. In what follows, I will extend the analysis of the previous chapter by integrating these case studies into the avant-garde repertoire. The censored photographs will firstly be described and contextualised within their historic context, before applying them towards an exploration of the functions of defacenry as a social ritual. Next, the defaced photographs will be situated against the stated aims of Rodchenko's photographic practice, exploring the ways he used photography not to 'fix' facts, but to alter, remove and falsify them, creating a category of imagery which I term 'counterfactual photography.'

Defacement in 10 let Uzbekistana

Uzbekistan's ruling elite suffered catastrophically under Stalin's purges. Nearly the entire upper echelon of Uzbek leaders promoted to senior positions in the early phases of Soviet power were persecuted. Ninety-eight of the original 139 members and candidates of the All-Union Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (TsK KPSSU) were arrested and executed, mostly in the late 1930s.[10] Amongst these were many statesmen who had had their photographs featured in

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[9] Also known as 'Board of Honour' (*doska pocheta*). See Serguei Oushakine, 'Presence Without Identification: Vicarious Photography and Postcolonial Figuration in Belarus', *October*, 164 (2018), 49-88, 57-58.

[10] Donald S. Carlisle 'Modernization, Generations, and the Uzbek Soviet Intelligentsia' in *The Dynamics of Soviet Politics*, ed. by Paul Cocks, Robert V. Daniels and Nancy Whittier Heer (Cambridge, 1976), 239 - 264, 246.

10 let Uzbekistana. The photobook has become well known because King reproduced nine of its defaced photographs in 1997.[11] These are striking images, their dramatic backstory and attribution to a famous artist like Rodchenko making for a captivating story which captured public interest and propelled the album to a cultish status.[12] However, first-hand access to the original album enables the correction of certain misapprehensions which have prevailed since King's publication. Firstly, there is not one defaced version of *10 let Uzbekistana* from Rodchenko and Stepanova's personal collection, but two. As with *Pervaia konnaia,* these are now held in the collections of the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts and the Moscow Multimedia Art Museum (henceforth the Pushkin version and MAM version). Secondly, the images which King reproduced are not from either of these albums, or indeed any album; they are loose sheets of enlarged contact prints, the originals of which are now held in the Tate Gallery Archives (figs. 63).[13] Unlike the thumbnails reproduced in the album itself, here each print is large, approximately 21 x 27cm, an individual portrait outlined with a narrow black frame, with the black plastic of emulsified sheet film visible beyond the borders of the print itself. King's mislabelling of the contact sheets as album pages is, in a sense, inconsequential. They were, after all, still obtained by him from Rodchenko and Stepanova's personal collection (the artists stored their negatives in envelopes with a control print such as these attached to the front).[14] However, the contact prints were physically distinct from the album and entirely decontextualised from its design. Furthermore, the discovery of the Pushkin and MAM versions of the album produces fourteen new examples of photographic defacement never seen before. Comparing all the available versions of defaced images together offers much fuller insight into the album's legacy than has previously been possible, enabling us for the first time to fully apprehend the range and variety of visual codes found within them.

The targets of the attacks in the Pushkin and MAM albums include six Uzbek statesmen, the most senior of whom were Faizulla Khodzhaev and Akral Ikramov (figs. 64-65). The Chairman and First Secretary of the Uzbek Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) respectively, Khodzhaev and Ikramov both appeared as defendants in the last of the three public Moscow Trials, the 'Case of the Anti-Soviet 'Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites' in 1938. The two politicians who replaced them, Abdulla Karimov and Aron Tsekher (fig. 66) would also both be arrested in 1937 and 1938 respectively. M. Tursunkhodzhaev (the album's editor-in-chief), has his image attacked and his name removed from the editorial credits along with that of the album's technical director, M. Khridenkov (fig. 69, 70). Their political crimes and fates are unknown. Alongside these native Uzbeks were two Latvians,

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[11] King, *Commissar*, 170-182.
[12] This is evidenced by its incorporation into popular culture, for instance Ken Campbell's 1994 artwork, *Ten Years of Uzbekistan: A Commemoration* (London, Tate Gallery).
[13] TGA (20172, Box 2, items 3-9).
[14] Lavrentev, *Revolution in Photography*, 8.

Jānis Rudzutaks and Jēkabs Peters (figs. 67-68), both of whom fell victim to the xenophobic drive of the purges which led to the expulsion of virtually all Latvians from the party. Additionally, two 'Old Bolsheviks' who were involved in the expansion of Soviet power in Central Asia, Isaak Zelenskii and Avel Enukidze, were affected (figs. 70). The album also contains what appears to be a case of mistaken identity in the defacement of an image of agricultural expert Iuldash Akhunbabaev, who was one of few senior Uzbek statesmen to survive the purges (fig. 70).

In general, the aesthetic trends in this album are similar to *Pervaia konnaia.* Most of the photographs are defaced with Indian ink, targeted at the faces and names of the individual. The authorship of these marks also appears to have been shared between Rodchenko and Stepanova (the album's provenance to their collection again almost certainly precludes the possibility of third-party involvement in the defacement). Indeed, these albums provide particularly compelling evidence for this, given that when we compare them to one another, two distinctive 'handwritings' are discernible. The images from the MAM version of the album (of politicians Janis Rudzutaks, Iakov, A. Karimov) form an aesthetically coherent group, consisting of systematic and symmetrical shapes,

Top row, left to right:
Fig. 64b.
Photograph of Faizulla Khodzhaev, MAM version.

Fig. 65b
Photograph of Akral Ikramov, MAM version.

Bottom row, left to right:
Fig. 64c
Photograph of Faizulla Khodzhaev, Pushkin version.

Fig. 65b
Photograph of Akral Ikramov, Pushkin version.

circles, ovals and ellipses which are carefully drawn with a controlled hand and almost Euclidian precision. The Pushkin version, by contrast, is defaced with brush strokes which are looser and less orderly. Rather than being contained within a prescribed perimeter, the paint is applied in lopsided, spasmodic strokes. There is a revealing comparison to be made by situating the two different versions of Akmal Ikramov's portrait alongside one another (figs. 65b-c). In the Pushkin version, Ikramov's portrait is loosely washed over with a translucent veil of pellucid ink, applied with a free hand, and uncurbed brushstrokes. In stark contrast to this slapdash scribbling is the MAM version; here, visible care and control are invested into the handling of the ink and the painterly perimeter is a clearly defined line, an evenly-shaped ring encasing a black disc. Thus the two photographs demonstrate highly idiosyncratic and easily identifiable handwritings; one precise, neat, geometric and executed carefully, the other the opposite; hurried, lopsided and slapdash. It may be possible to explain these different strokes and flourishes as mere whim, or as indicative of different timestamps. Yet, the most plausible explanation is the simplest; that the two distinctive signatures correspond to two different artists.

The discovery of these new versions provides a wealth of image which can be productively integrated into an analysis of art and censorship. Before doing so, however, it is first necessary to probe deeper into an exploration of the meaning of such widely-caricatured yet often-misunderstood images. In what follows, I will consider various explanations for why images were defaced, including their function in the construction of a profanophany, the circulation of social deterrents and their participation in the ritual of symbolic violence.

Defacement as Social Ritual

The connection between defacement and social exclusion may strike us as automatic and unlearned. It is neither. It is informed by a legacy of historic practices, which continue to be culturally relevant. Attacks on images of the disgraced can be traced back to the emperors of Imperial Rome and found parallels with twentieth-century mass media.[1] Charles Hedrick cites a 1996 case involving Armand Hammer, the owner of Occidental Petroleum, reported in the *New Yorker*: 'After Hammer's death, Occidental Petroleum moved immediately to disassociate itself from his image. "The photography and statues of Hammer were removed from company headquarters. No photographs [...] of him appeared in the annual report."'[15] But whilst we can trace a certain commonality of purpose between *10 let Uzbekistana, Pervaia konnaia* and their antecedents or successors, their forms and trappings were specifically Soviet. Their genesis is explained by the political exigencies of Stalinism in

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[15] *New Yorker*, 23 September 1996, 44, cited in Charles Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin, 2000), 274.

combination with the peculiarly unstable status of history during this period. And yet, there remains a lack of serious, critical consideration of their function as images.

The most extensive book on the topic remains King's *The Commissar Vanishes*, though there are numerous inaccuracies in this account. This is unsurprising; King was not a historian and the book, rather than making claims to robust academic research, was intended as a presentation of his personal collection. Many of these inaccuracies, however, have not been corrected in subsequent literature.[16] Many books cite King as a reliable authority on photographic defacement, though his account over-estimates how widespread the practice was, claiming, 'there is hardly [...] a publication from the Stalinist period that does not bear the scars of this political vandalism'.[17] In fact, as the Stalinist period spanned almost a quarter of a century and produced a correspondingly vast quantity of publications, only a tiny minority of these have been visibly vandalised. Furthermore, King asserts that:

> The physical eradication of Stalin's political opponents at the hands of the secret police was swiftly followed by their obliteration from all forms of pictorial existence [...] a quiet word in an editor's ear was all it took to erase all traces of a public enemy, past or future.[18]

In reality, the state was incapable of ferreting out and eradicating 'all forms' of an image, and certainly could not do so 'swiftly'. King's conjuring of an Orwellian dystopia makes for compelling reading, but glosses over the countless practical problems of implementation and enforcement. The means and apparatus of the state were simply not wide-reaching enough to obliterate all photographic reproductions of a public enemy. The failure to correct many of King's misconceptions stems partly from the deficit of available sources pertaining to this topic. In particular, the 'unofficial' branch of Soviet censorship was, by its very definition, off the record. It was an almost entirely solitary, individual practice, targeted at one's personal possessions. Furthermore, the secrecy and social taboos surrounding the mention of public enemies during the Great Terror means that the only extant textual documentation framing the practice are occasional entries in personal diaries or biographical writings, and even these are written retrospectively, often several decades after the event. Writing in the 1960s, Evgeniia Ginzburg describes how in the year 1936:

> We started a purge of our books. Nanny carried out pail after pailful of ashes. We burnt Radek's *Portraits and Pamphlets,* Friedland and Slutsk's *History of Western Europe,* Bukharin's *Political Economy,* My mother implored me so anxiously to get rid of Kausky's *History of Modern Socialism* as well, that I gave in. Day by day the 'Index' grew longer, and the scale of our *auto da fé* grander. In the end, we even had to burn

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[16] See Fineman, *Faking It,* 89 and Dickerman, *Camera Obscura.*
[17] King, *Commissar,* 10.
[18] Ibid., 10.

Stalin's *On the Opposition.* Under the new dispensation, this too had become illegal.[19]

In this case, entire books were destroyed, but other accounts describe targeted defacement. Esfir Shub's grandson, Aleksandr Konoplev, recounts that at the end of the 1950s whilst 'digging through old books' he came across a copy of *Konstruktivizm,* which was 'opened at the centrefold with a portrait of L. Trotsky.' He recalls that upon being presented with this, his mother immediately 'tore the thin booklet, barely a notepad, from my hands and [...] ran to the desk and quickly painted over the ill-fated portrait with ink and a large brush. Afterwards, she made me promise not to show this publication to anyone and threatened to throw it out.'[20] Like many comparable accounts, this one is based on a profound fear of being caught with counter-revolutionary materials in one's possession. The primal basis of this fear is exemplified by the fact that, over a decade after Trotsky's death, in a different political climate, the intrinsic anxiety aroused by these materials had not abated. A different emotional register is recalled by Sylvia Darel, who describes the experience of living in exile in Siberia in 1941. In a macabre development, the defacement of textbooks was, during this time, a classroom activity for schoolchildren. Darel recounts her guileless enjoyment of what she encountered as a game:

> When the teacher told us to ink out the pictures and names of certain men in our history text [...] like Blücher, Iakir, and Tukhachevsky, I assumed they had been exiled for something or other, too. We loved dipping our fingers in the inkwell filled with diluted soot and were sometimes overzealous. I once inked out Comrade Kaganovich himself because his name sounded like an 'exiled' one to me. I was lucky that I was only eleven years old.[21]

Despite filtering this experience through the innocent lens of childhood, the inherent fear and risk driving the process is captured by the adult Darel, who in retrospect recognises that she was 'lucky' she was just a child, referencing the repressions which would have awaited her had she been an adult. All the above accounts converge on the essential motivation of the defacement or destruction of counter-revolutionary material - fear of the consequence of being caught with it in one's possession. In his biographical account of the artists' lives, Lavrentev emphasised that both Stepanova and Rodchenko were also fearful of repercussions were they to be found with prohibited materials in their possession. Formerly prolific diary keepers, they largely abandoned the practice during this decade, fully cognisant that the practice 'was no longer safe'.[22]

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[19] Evgeniia Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind,* trans. by Paul Stevenson and Manya Harari (Harmondsworth, 1968), 39.
[20] 'Роясь в старых книгах [...] открыв на разбороте с портретом Л. Троцкого. Тоненькая книжечка, почти тетрадка, была вырвана у меня из рук и [...] подбежав к моему рабочему столу мама бистро тушью и большой кистью замазала злосчастный портрет. После чего взяла с меня слово никому не показывать это издание, пригрозив выбросить его'. Anna Konopleva, 'Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski,* 49 (2000), 212- 221, 212.
[21] Sylvia Darel, *A Sparrow in the Snow,* trans. by Barbara Norman, (New York, 1973), 64.
[22] 'было ухе и небезопасно'. Lavrentev, 'Vremena i Liudi' in Stepanova, *Chelovek,* 265-266, 265.

These biographical accounts illuminate the question of why so many photographs were defaced during this period: self-preservation. This would have been the main motivating factor behind the decision to attack *10 let Uzbekistana;* it was simply too dangerous for the artists to risk being found with the unaltered editions in their possession. Rodchenko expressed this explicitly in his diary, 'I am not guaranteed against someone writing a false denunciation and everything collapsing […] My family will be sent into exile and that'll be the end.'[23] Rodchenko and Stepanova would have known whose image needed to be erased, if not from their contacts on the album's editorial board, then from the updated lists of those denounced as traitors, which were public knowledge. State security organs provided lists of the 'dangerous' and 'alien' categories of the population, which were broadcast on the radio and published in newspapers.[24] Ginzburg recalls waking 'up to hear the latest news about who else had "turned out" to be an enemy of the people […] There was something wildly exaggerated and unreal about the monstrous accusations against enemies of the people published in the newspapers.'[25] These explanations, however, still do not explain many of the peculiarities of Soviet photographic defacement. They do not, for instance, explain its most paradoxical quality: why so much remains?

One may reasonably ask why, if *10 let Uzbekistana* was so dangerous, Rodchenko and Stepanova did not simply dispose of it in its entirety, rather than opting for the more painstaking and risky strategy of selectively removing problematic references? This is likely explained, at least in part, by the sheer cost of the album. *10 let Uzbekistana* was printed using the expensive techniques of lithography, relief printing and gravure, as well as embellishment including bronzing and lacquering for its half-titles, endpapers and posters. At a total cost of 180 roubles, it was worth more than an average fortnight's salary in Russia at the time.[26] This expense clarifies why the album was not discarded completely, but it does not account for the seeming inefficiency of much of its defacement. Many of the images in *10 let Uzbekistana* have been attacked, but few have been extirpated.[27] The interventions are only ever partial, and often minimal; in several, the black ink covers only a small portion of the facial features. Contrary to King's claim, the intention here cannot have been to 'obliterate', indeed, if anything, one could argue that the primary incentive of defacement was to preserve. The defacement neutralises the ideological danger posed by the image sufficiently enough

[23] 'я тоже не гарантирован от того что кто-нибудь напишет ложный донос т все рухнет […] Семью высылают и делу конец.' Diary entry from 10 September 1938. Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 306.

[24] See R. Podkur and V. Chentsov, *Dokumenty organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti USSR, 1920–1930–kh godov: Isotchnikovedcheskii analiz* (Ternopol', 2010), 142–151; Vladimir N. Khaustov, 'Razvitie sovetskikh organov gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti, 1917–1953' in *Cahiers du monde russe* 42:2–4 (2001), 370; Marc Junge and Bend Bonwetsch (eds.), *Stalinizm v sovetskoi provintsii, 1937 - 1938 gg.: massovaia operatsiia na osnove prikaza no. 00447* (Moscow, 2009), 393–394.

[25] Ginzburg, *Whirlwind*, 31-40.

[26] Data collected from January 1936 shows that the average salary was 450 roubles. Erich Wollenberg, 'Wages and Prices in the Soviet Union', *New International,* 3:3 (June 1936), 70-72.

[27] This is with the the exception of the three pages featuring images of Egorov which have been removed from the MAM version entirely by being cut away at the spine.

to allow its preservation.

Given that the target of the attack is, in each case, the face and the name, one might intuit that the purpose of the censorship was to render the subject unrecognisable. However, many of the attacked photographs have subjects who remain identifiable. In several images, such as fig. 65c, the ink is so translucent as to let Ikramov's photograph remain easily discernible. *Pervaia konnaia* is even more striking in this regard, as several of its photographs (such as fig. 61c) use the ineffective tool of an eraser to rub out photograph, rendering the portrait translucent rather than effaced. Other images, such as fig. 46c, of Iakir, have the face effaced, but the name still legible in the image credit. This is true both of this particular album, and Soviet photographic defacement more widely. Indeed, these examples from Rodchenko and Stepanova's oeuvre are valuable precisely because they are *not* unique, but indicative of wider practice. Archival research has yielded a substantial number of other examples of defaced photographs and publications from various collections and archives in different locations around Russia, selected details of which are presented in figures 73-82.[28] These images are often anonymous and have unknown or unverified provenance. This lack of descriptive metadata limits their usefulness as individual case studies, yet they are unified by the fact that they are only partially-altered, and share the consistent quality of visible intervention with Rodchenko and Stepanova's photobooks. In each case, this is iconoclasm which prizes its very visibility, indeed which flaunts itself, and it is this very quality of Soviet photographic defacement - its *obviousness* - which must be unpacked and understood to appreciate its social function.

Defacement as Profanophany

To explore the underlying intentions behind Stalinist photographic defacement more fully, it is first necessary to establish how it distinguished itself from other types of Soviet iconoclasm. It was, after all, not a phenomenon unique to the mid-1930s. Iconoclasm, of varying types and targets, was widely practised and well-documented from the Party's first days in power. Photographs showing the aftermath of the Bolshevik invasion of the Winter Palace on 26 October 1917 show portraits torn from frames, their canvases ripped to shreds, and Imperial portraits stabbed with bayonets. Substantial research has already been devoted to the widespread attacks on images during the immediate post-revolutionary period, such as the destruction of churches, religious images, Tsarist monuments and Imperial emblems.[29] There are certain conceptual parities here to be found between this campaign of 'deromanovization' and the defaced photographs of the purges. As Richard Stites notes, the attacking of images 'can

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[28] Significant collections of such material include the David King Collection from the Tate Gallery Archives, London, the Memorial Society Archive, Moscow and NeBoltai! Collection in Prague.

[29] See Richard Stites, 'Iconoclastic Currents in the Russian Revolution: Destroying and Preserving the Past' in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution,* ed. by Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez and Richard Stites (Bloomington, 1985), 1-24.

serve as a surrogate for, as well as a stimulus to, angry violence against human representatives of the old order.'[30] The clear symbolic value of smashed, scratched or disfigured images speaks to a symbolic counterpart to physical violence and indicates an estrangement and expulsion from a social collective.

Acts of iconoclasm can thus be understood as one of the currents which contributed to the much wider phenomena of Soviet social cataloguing. This was always, to some degree, part of the Soviet mentality; the polarising logic of Marxist militancy divided society into classes of bourgeois and proletariat, allowing for no shades of grey in between. These combative categories were further developed by Lenin's 1918 constitution, which identified various additional sub-classes of bourgeois aliens who posed a threat to socialism, including the merchants, capitalists, imperialists, clergy.[31] Over the years, different strata of society were ascribed to either enemy or ally categories, which were used as justification for state-sanctified violence. David L. Hoffman notes that during the Civil War, 'the Soviet government categorized several million peasants as kulaks and, according to assigned sub-categories, dispossessed, deported, or executed them'.[32] In time, this created what Sheila Fitzpatrick has termed an 'untouchable class'.[33] There were, however, significant differences between early, post-revolutionary 'deromanovization' and the photographic defacement of the purges. The defamatory canon of Stalinism was built on this same Manicheaean mentality but developed it in a different direction. After Kirov's assignation in 1934, the attacks turned inwards, directed not at external but internal enemies who were widely believed to have infiltrated the party rank and file. This was a particularly insidious category because it included those who posed the threat of being difficult to identify.

Scholars of iconoclasm from various historic periods have consistently identified this need to visualise expulsion from a defined social collective as one of the motivating trends behind attacks on images. In this function, defacement is useful in creating what Bruce Lincoln has termed a 'profanophany', defined as a 'revelation of the profanity, temporality and corruption inherent to someone or something'.[34] Although he develops this concept in the context of the Spanish Civil War, the principle can also be applied to the Stalinist purges which, as Hoffman has observed, were justified in part by the 'conception[s] of society as an artefact to be catalogued and refashioned.'[35] The need for a defined and articulated 'profanophany' can go

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[30] Ibid., 2.
[31] 'Deklaratsiia prav trudiashchegosia i ekspluartiruemogo naroda - Konstitutsiia RSFSR 1918 goda.' Article 4, Chapter 13, Section 65. First published *Pravda,* 3 January 1918, 1.
[32] Hoffmann, 'State Violence', 91.
[33] Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia', *The Journal of Modern History*, 65:4 (December, 1993), 745-770, 745.
[34] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (Oxford, 1989), 126.
[35] Hoffman, 'State Violence', 91. For a more general discussion of Soviet social intervention, see Hoffmann, *Masses.*

some way to explaining why photographs were targeted only incompletely, in a way which maintained the presence and evidence of their own erasure. In the albums, as in Lincoln's case studies, institutional power is disseminated through everyday images – specifically, the dematerialised, silhouetted image of an absent figure – which obligates a certain correctional behaviour. In order to fulfil their intended social function then, the photographs could not be destroyed in their entirety. Something had to remain, such that the artefact retained its communicative capacity. The message which was sent could vary from an exteriorisation of anger, an ominous warning, or a deterrent against dissent, but in each case, in order to vilify, it was necessary to exhibit.

The hypothesis that practices of defacement emerged in response to a concept of the Soviet body politic in regular need of purging and purification through the excision of its undesirable 'elements' is supported by the terminology surrounding the purges which specifically referred to its victims as contaminates parts of a collective whole: 'anti-Soviet elements', (*antisovetskie elementy*); 'socially alien elements', (*sotsial'no chuzhdye elementy*); and 'hostile elements', (*vrazhdebnye elementy*). But perhaps the most infamous term used to classify purge victims was, as Evgeniia Ginzburg recalls 'the dreadful term "enemies of the people."'[36] Ginzburg cites this as having come into use in 1937, but the term had actually first been used by Lenin two decades earlier - *vragy naroda* (a translation of the Latin *hostis publicus*) appeared in a decree of 1917 in reference to traitors to the revolution.[37] However, it was only during the Great Terror that the phrase became ubiquitous, when it was Sovietized into 'enemy of the workers' (*vrag trudyashchikhsya*) and formalised in Article 58 of the 1936 RSFSR Criminal Code as the most serious class of criminal.[38] There is a well established historic link between the term *hostis publics,* political denunciation and iconoclasm. The tradition of *damnatio memoriae* (posthumous attacks on images of public enemies, including the defacement of coins and statues), which was practised in Imperial Roman from the fifth century BC to the sixth AD, was directed at those classified 'enemies of the people'. This overlapping nomenclature has led several scholars to parallel practices of Soviet photographic defacement with *damnatio memoriae.*[39] Whilst one can sense an analogy between the two as the politically-motivated destruction of images of adversaries, I believe this approach is somewhat misleading, as any meaningful comparison is obviated by the prolonged difference in epochs. There is only the slimmest of shared ground

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[36] Ginzburg, *Whirlwind,* 26.

[37] 'Декрет об аресте врагов народа вождей гражданской войны против революции', 28 November 1917. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti,* vol. I (Moscow, 1957), 161-162, 161.

[38] 'врагом трудящихся'. *Ugolovnyi Kodeks RSFSR, 1 Oktiabria 1936* (Moscow, 1936), 102.

[39] See V. Rudich *Political Dissidence under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation* (New York, 1993) and *Dissidence and Literature under Nero: The Price of Rhetoricization* (New York, 1997); McClanan, 'Introduction', 4; and Mia Fineman, *Faking It,* 91.

between a stone carving of an ancient emperor and the mass reproduction of photographs in the twentieth century. Perhaps more illuminating is the use of the term 'Trotskyite'.[40] This term gained currency during the show trials, which often featured this term in their titles ('The Case of the Trotskyist Anti-Soviet Military Organisation'). Explicit references to the need to eradicate the 'semi-Trotskyites, quarter-Trotskyites, one-eight-Trotskyites' who remained at large were documented in show trial court proceedings.[41] Trotskyites, like their eponymous leader, were unmentionable. Trotsky's expulsion from the Party in 1927 was followed by several directives ordering the destruction of his image. The first recorded example of such an order was delivered on 7 November 1927, following the premiere of Sergei Eisenstein's film *Oktiabr'* (*Desiat' dnei, kotorye potriasli mir*) at the Bolshoi Theatre. The director was informed that all of the scenes in the film featuring Trotsky were to be cut.[42] In the ensuing decade, countless such orders would be directed, aimed both at the enduring references to Trotsky (such as the decree of 7 March 1935, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which ordered the removal of all Trotsky's works from libraries throughout the Soviet Union) and others, referring to countless lower-ranking Party members who perished in the purges.[43]

The systematic eradication of all visual records of Trotsky, and, latterly, Trotskyites, can be seen as a combination of two practices which had a long and intertwined history in Russia: denunciation and iconoclasm. Soviet iconoclasm shared a commonality of concept and practice with its antecedents in Imperial Russia.[44] Perhaps most analogous was the formalised annihilation of images of Ivan VI (the deposed and imprisoned infant Tsar), during the reign of Elizabeth I. In 1741, a government decree was issued directing the public to turn in any coins bearing the profile of Ivan VI, with the added stipulation that anyone found with these still in their possession after June 1745 would be subject to punishment.[45] The collected coins were systematically confiscated and destroyed. Thus, whilst Trotskyites may have been a uniquely Soviet category of enemy, the destruction of their visual representation can be seen as a continuation of a historic practice, wherein Russian rulers seeking to use symbolic violence to compel compliance and level and expel outcasts and enemies.

Defacement as Symbolic Violence

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[40] 'Якир […] троцкисты должны иметь блок с немецкими фашистами'. RGASPI (f. 558, op. 11, d. 1120, doc. 4, p. 1. 135-136).

[41] 'полутроцкисты, четвертьтроцкисты, одна восьмая-троцкисты.' 'Poslednee slovo podsudimogo Radeka' in Starikov, *Protsess,* 322-333, 332.

[42] James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Urbana, 1993), 81.

[43] Decree of 7 March 1935, see *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti,* vol. *2, 73.*

[44] For more on Bolshevik iconoclasm see James Rann, 'Maiakovskii and the Mobile Monument: Alternatives to Iconoclasm in Russian Culture', *Slavic Review,* 71:4 (Winter, 2012), 766-791.

[45] See Evgeny V. Anisimov, *Empress Elizabeth: Her Reign and Her Russia 1741-1761,* trans. by John T. Alexander (Gulf Breeze, 1995), 162-163.

Whilst the need to construct a 'profanophany of the purges' may go some way to explaining why *Pervaia konnaia*'s photographs remain so often recognisable, it doesn't fully explain the reach and significance of the phenomenon. Other social forces also had a stake in the manipulation of the images. For instance, Stites argues that revolutionary iconoclasm operates as a form of displacement for physical violence: 'Revolutionary iconoclasm was a catharsis, a cleansing of the system, and a way to focus intense rage'.[46] This notion of an image as a surrogate, or extension, for the human targets of political violence, recalls what Pierre Bourdieu called 'symbolic violence'. Bourdieu developed the notion that if political violence is exerted by a dominant power for a sufficiently long period, it will become accepted by adherents in an automatic, unreflective way. Following this, it becomes transformed and sublimated and subsequently manifest as 'symbolic violence', a counterpart to physical force, which is exerted on a micro level, reproduced in everyday interactions and social practices by becoming embodied in language and communication.[47] The material manifestations of a 'profanophany' can be understood as a site for precisely his process.[48]

Indeed, additional credence is given to this view if we consider some of the particular characteristics of violence during this period. As Hoffman notes, 'Soviet state violence of the 1930s took a particular form, which I term excisionary violence: the forcible removal of specific segments from the population and their isolation or elimination.'[49] The sociology of violence under Stalin is a burgeoning area of research, within which much of the emphasis has focused on the repercussions of state-sanctioned violence as it filtered down to affect everyday life.[50] The attacked images in *Pervaia konnaia* offer a prime example of this. Hoffman's characterisation is illuminating; his terminology of 'excision', with its connotations of removing a part from a whole, of cutting off and extracting, evokes the physical action of defacement. Taken in conjunction with Bourdieu, therefore, this 'exclusionary violence' can be seen to have a material manifestation in iconoclastic attacks of photographs. Art, its creation and destruction, was a way of participation, as much a means of collective survival and collective advancement.

The Aesthetics of Defacement

I have so far outlined some of the operational issues surrounding photographic defacement, but in what follows, I wish to demonstrate how these were closely embedded with its aesthetic qualities. These two new versions of *10 let Uzbekistana* are particularly relevant for a study on the aesthetics of

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46 Stites, *Iconoclastic,* 2
47 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations,* trans. by Richard Nice (Oxford, 2000), 170-71.
48 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination,* trans. by Richard Nice (Stanford, 2001), 34.
49 Hoffman, *State Violence,* 91.
50 See, for instance: Melanie Ilič (ed.) *Stalin's Terror Revisited* (New York, 2006) and B. McLoughlin and K. McDermott (eds.), *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (Basingstoke, 2003).

censorship because their visual qualities closely resemble images produced by the artists' wider output. There are multiple parallels to be drawn, for instance, between the Pushkin version of the album and Stepanova's painterly output. Political censorship was not the first time that the motif of the 'faceless figure' appeared in her work; as early as 1919, Stepanova had been producing paintings of schematic human figures, their heads reduced to featureless planes (figs. 100-112).

When we pair this figure series with the defaced album, suddenly what seemed like a time-specific response to particular political exigencies appears to be part of something broader, a unified iconographic field within which acts of autonomous creativity and political coercion belong to the same symbolic system. The MAM version of the album, moreover, is a particularly illuminating find because it contains a subset of photographs quite unlike anything ever discovered in the known repertoire of Soviet photographic defacement; namely, a group revealing the re-emergence of the type of precise geometric forms closely associated with the Constructivist canon. The portraits of Khodzhaev and Ikramov, for example, each have their faces covered with a neatly-painted, opaque black disc. The shape is drawn freehand, the gestural trace of the brushwork enables us to 'read' the hand of the iconoclast, as they first traced the outline of the form, then filled it in with black ink. The symmetry and geometricity of the form is telling, especially when contrasted with standard modes of photographic defacement, which usually involved scrawling or hasty cover-up. The circle seems an oddly gratuitous form for defacement, and an almost surrealist one, transforming the photo into a cartoonishly schematic human face. This same stylistic trope features in the group photograph including Enukidze (fig. 72a), where three matte black circles are superimposed over the photographed figures. Here, the monochrome palette, perimetrical precision and even application of ink on a levelled plane all resonate strongly with the language of Constructivism. The choice to use black ink may seem a default decision, a neutral non-colour devoid of chromatic significance, but the same cannot be said about its contours; a freehand circle is notoriously hard to draw. Furthermore, it seems oddly ill-fitting for its function; it does not cover the human face as well as an oval or ellipsis would. Such Pythagorean precision is therefore inconsistent with the known canon of Soviet defacement, yet it aligns with the internal logic of Rodchenko's oeuvre, which was distinguished by geometricity, and particularly famously reliant on the compass as an artistic tool (fig. 82-94).

The black circle is a powerful symbol with a distinguished iconological pedigree in the history of the Russian avant-garde. What is one to make of its reappearance in *10 let Uzbekistana*? One could claim that the visual parallels at stake here are contrived by the viewer not the artist, that they are examples of what Erwin Panofsky called 'pseudomorphosis', morphologically analogous but

genetically unrelated forms.[51] Without finding an explicit statement to the contrary, this possibility can never entirely be disproved. However, there are several contextual factors which cast doubt on its likelihood, namely the aberrance of the geometrical precision in the known body of Soviet photographic defacement, and its centrality to Rodchenko's work. Could a form with such a loaded ideology re-appear at the hands of its key practitioners and be considered completely accidental? Furthermore, as previous chapters have demonstrated, the iconography of Constructivism was not historically distinct from the aesthetics of censorship. Instead, we saw how a classic image of Rodchenko's typography – the brusok bar – was used to erase editors' names on the mastheads of *SSSR na stroike*. Once again, in *10 let Uzbekistana* the visual language of minimalist geometry reappears to erase the problematic presence of politicians. These examples lend particular support to the claim stated at the outset of this chapter; that the motifs of modernism – abstraction, non-objectivity and minimalism – functioned as a symbolic language through which censorship was enacted and expressed. The following section will explore this line of enquiry length, considering how the problems of presence and absence were representing in painting. But first, this section will conclude by assessing how defacement can be situated within photographic theory. If, until now, the analysis has been initiated from the standpoint of 'why?', we now approach it by asking 'how?' That is, how, from the standpoint of photographic techniques, did artists endeavour not to fix facts in public consciousness so much as dislodge them from it, and what do these techniques tell us about the relationship between photography and Soviet reality?

The Photograph Versus the Painting

In a series of articles published in various artistic journals of the mid-twenties Brik, attempted to define the relationship between the media of photography and painting.[52] A word which repeatedly returns to characterise this relationship is *bor'ba* – battle. With a hyperbolic phrasing uncharacteristic of Brik, his 1926 article 'The Photograph versus the Painting' claims that the 'battle' between painting and photography 'started a hundred years ago when the camera was invented and [...] will only end when photography has finally forced painting out of the place it held in daily life.'[53] The article describes actions of ousting and unseating, using the language of physical combat and verbs which evoke violence, force and deposition, such as *vybit'* (beat out, kick out, drive out) and *vytesnit'* (force out, oust, replace). The clash between two battling media is categorised as 'photography forces out

[51] Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini,* ed. by H. W. Janson (New York, 1964), 26-27.

[52] These included 'Ot kartiny k foto', *Novyi LEF*, 3 (1928), 29-33; 'Blizhe k faktu', *Novyi LEF*, 2 (1927), 32-34; 'Fiksatsiia fakta', *Novyi LEF,* 11-12 (1927), 49-50.

[53] 'Борьба котора началась сто лет назад с моменту изобретения фотоаппарата и которая кончится когда фотография выбьет живопись с последних бытовых позиций.' Osip Brik, 'Foto-kadr protiv kartiny', *Sovetskoe foto*, 2 (1926), 40-42.

painting [...] photography beats out painting.'[54] Photography is, according to Brik, waging a war on several fronts. There is the 'battle against aesthetic deformation', the 'fight against painterly aesthetics', the 'battle of fact against creative fabrication' and the 'battle of reality against an artistic scheme that distorts and deforms this reality.'[55] Rodchenko is explicitly cited someone who takes up this fight.[56] Indeed, Rodchenko's own writings also use this language of armed conflict, describing 'the battle for a photographic language to show Soviet themes', and claiming that he is fighting against easel painting.[57] Rodchenko's own accounts of his move into photography present it as a watershed moment following the defeat in his lifelong painterly endeavours: '1921. I abandoned painting'.[58] Having given up on the canvas, the artist recounts how he found himself 'propelled into photography' following the death of painting.[59]

Death, war, violence: these are not metaphors which allow for any compromise or co-existence between painting and photography. And yet, one gains a very different interpretation of the 'battle' between painting and photography when we take in account Rodchenko's techniques rather than just his final products. A photograph of Rodchenko at work in 1934 – the same year *10 let Uzbekistana* was produced – shows him holding a fine-tipped brush, painting over a large-format photographic print of his daughter (fig. 81). Elsewhere on the desk, retouching tools are visible: ink pots, stylus, magnifying lenses. The mechanical procedures of photography and manual procedures of painting here are combined to create a unified final product. Even as Rodchenko transitioned to the camera as his primary mode of image production, the paintbrush never disappeared from his practice, it just became hidden within it. Airbrushing, editing, defacing: all of these processes saw painterly processes altering the photographic print. Thus, there is good reason to question whether statements such as Rodchenko's triumphant declaration that 'photography has broken free [from] the subsidiary and imitative [functions] of painting' should be taken at face value.[60] And yet, scholarship on the subject has been reluctant to do so. Rodchenko's transition from painting into photography is habitually presented as a volte-face between two fundamentally incompatible media. This was perhaps best encapsulated by Benjamin H. Buchloch in his influential 1984 article 'From Faktura to Factography', in which he presented a chronology of Rodchenko's career as a series of displacements between different media, 'faktura' here referring to his early abstract canvases, whereas 'factography'

[54] 'Фотография вытесняет живопись [...] фотография выбьет живопись.' Ibid., 40.
[55] 'борьба факта против творческой выдумки', 'борьба реальной действительности против художественной схемы, искажающей и деформирующей эту реальную действительность.' Brik, 'Fiksatsiia', 49.
[56] 'бороться за фото-кадр. Один из таких людей - А. М. Родченко'. Brik, 'Foto-kadr', 42.
[57] 'Борьба за фотографический язык для показа советской темы.' Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Perestroike khudozhnika', *Sovetskoe foto*, 5-6 (1936), 19-21, 19.
[58] '1921 год. Бросил живопись.' Ibid., 19.
[59] 'натолкнул заняться фотографией.' Ibid., 19.
[60] 'Из подсобной и подражательной [...] то живописи [...] фотография вырвавшись'. Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Fotografiia-Iskusstvo', *Sovetskoe Foto*, 12 (1971), 27.

covers to his move into photojournalism.[61] This abrupt turning point provides a compelling narrative, which unsurprisingly has been echoed and embellished by subsequent scholars. Describing Rodchenko's career trajectory in 1927, Alfred Barr noted 'he has done no painting since 1922, devoting himself to the photographic arts'.[62] Reiterating the artist's version of events, Christina Lodder describes 'Rodchenko's move into photography' as a chronological leap impelled by his decision to 'abandon easel painting'.[63] In what follows, I aim to disrupt this linear trajectory by exploring the various painterly tools and techniques which Rodchenko incorporated into his photographic practice, of which defacement was merely one manifestation of a broad spectrum of trends, and use these to reassess the material status of the Soviet 'photographic fact'.

Unfixing Facts

Brik attempted numerous times to define the inherent character of photography as opposed to painting. A term which he draws on regularly to do this was a curiously anglicised neologism, *fiksirovat'* to describe photography's ability to 'fix' facts, to anchor an image, an event, a moment, in a particular narrative.[64] This mechanical capacity to fasten permanently in place was reinforced by its opposition to the unstable manual movement guiding brushwork. 'Each has its own work', he argues, 'the photographer fixes life, the painter makes pictures'.[65] For Brik, photography's worth and painting's corresponding worthlessness both rested on the fact that they were 'indexical' mediums. An index is a sign that has a physical relationship to the thing it represents, such as a footprint. Painting is indexical because the textured surface of its brushstrokes retain physical imprints of the artist's gestures. Photography is indexical because its film negative has been physically transformed by the light which falls on it, embalming an image onto its emulsified surface. The editors of OGIZ-Izogiz themselves asserted a similar premise in justifying their rationale for prioritising photography: 'you do not accuse the sun of distortion, the sun illuminates what exists as it exists'.[66] Underlying this statement is the same assertion of photography as a practice which records a direct imprint of reality itself, as rays of light fall on the film negative with no outside interference.

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[61] Benjamin H. Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography,' *October*, 30 (Fall, 1984), 83-118, 84. The title, with its two disaffiliated categories which could only co-exist as sequential displacement, is adapted from Brik's 1928 article 'Ot kartiny k foto' ('From the Picture to the Photo'). Buchloh does, however, identify photomontage as an intermediary category which existed 'between faktura and factography'. Buchloh, *Faktura*, 95.

[62] Alfred H. Barr Jr., 'Russian Diary 1927-28', *October*, 7 (Winter, 1978), 10-51, 21.

[63] Christina Lodder, 'Promoting Constructivism: Kino-fot and Rodchenko's move into photography', *History of Photography*, 24:4 (2000), 292-299, 292.

[64] See Brik, 'Fiksatsiia'.

[65] 'Каждая делает свое дело. Фотограф - фиксирует жизнь, живописец - делает картины.' Brik, '*Foto-kadr*', 41.

[66] 'Солнце не обвинишь в искажениях, солнце освещает то что есть так как оно есть'. Maksim Gorkii, *SSSR na Stroike*, 1, (1930), 1.

The problem with painting, as articulated by Brik, was that it was a profoundly unreliable narrator, with a regrettable tendency to 'change the appearance of reality'.[67] Photography, by contrast, was unwaveringly trustworthy as a means of representation: 'we need reality as it is. We need a document, not an artistic image'.[68] In Brik's assessment, the mechanical index of the camera and manual index of the brush have fundamentally different interactions with regards to reflecting reality, whilst photography 'fixes', painting 'falsifies'.[69] Painting, he argues, offers a 'false artistic reflection of reality', whereas whatever photography's drawbacks, 'at least it doesn't distort the subject with falsifying colouring'.[70] This framework of 'fixing facts' has become the dominant interpretive sphere through which scholarship on Rodchenko's photojournalism has been focused.[71] *10 let Uzbekistana,* however, demonstrates the need for a complementary emphasis on an inverse process 'unfixing facts', of photography harnessed towards the cultivation of the counterfactual.

The need for this is illustrated by one of the most Kafkaesque pages in *10 let Uzbekistana*, the group photograph featuring Avel Enukidze (fig. 70). In the original photograph (fig. 70e), Enukidze is seated amongst five other party members, not long after the album's release in December, however, Enukidze was implicated in the 'Kremlin affair', the series of NKVD security checks in the wake of Sergei Kirov's assassination which would lead to his expulsion from the Central Committee and ultimate downfall. Enukidze's image is accordingly removed from the 1935 album, but to preserve the record of the rest of the group, he is simply airbrushed from the picture plane (fig. 70d). He is over-painted with an opaque coverage of paint, which camouflages him against the backdrop, covered with a clumsily painted extension of Tursunkhodzhaev's blazer jacket and Molotov's left shoulder. The photo-editing is far from seamless. The final image features anatomical inaccuracies (Molotov's left shoulder is substantially narrower and lower than his right) and the line of Tursunkhodzhaev's blazer falls with an unnatural rigidity, a straight line which doesn't reflect the folds of the material.

Brik's insistent hierarchies of the social values of photography and painting in Soviet visual culture are here upended. It may have been the mechanical index of the camera which ratified subjects, but it was the manual brushstroke which removed them: the paintbrush dipped with Indian

[67] 'отображая действительность, ее видоизменяет'. Brik, 'Fotomontazh', 4.

[68] 'нам нужна реальность такая, какая она есть. Нам нужен документ, а не художественный образ.' Brik, 'Fotomontazh', 4.

[69] 'фиксирует', Brik, 'Foto-kadr', 41.

[70] 'по крайней мере, и не искажает предметы с ложной окраской'. Osip Brik, 'Foto-kadr', 40.

[71] Factography was originally and primarily a literary phenomena, designating a type of journalistic writing, most closely associated with Sergei Tretiakov. Studies on the topic have focused primarily on its textual manifestation. See, for instance, Elizabeth Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (Illinois, 2009); N. F. Chuzak (ed.) *Literatura fakta. Pervyi sbornik materialov rabotnikov Lefa* (Moscow, 2000); Vahan Barooshian, 'Russian Futurism in the Late 1920s: Literature of Fact,' *Slavic and East European Journal* 15: 1 (1971), 38–46; and Natasha Kolchevska, 'Toward a "Hybrid" Literature: Theory and Praxis of the Faktoviki', *Slavic and East European Journal* 27:4 (1983), 452–62. For studies on the photographic dimensions of factography, see Devin Fore and Leah Dickerman's contributions to the special issue of *October,* 118 (Fall, 2006); 'The Operative Word in Soviet Factography', 95-131 and 'The Fact and the Photograph', 132-152 respectively.

ink, the airbrush expelling a fine mist of corrective colour, the minutiae of brushwork in the photo-editing suite. After so much celebration of photography's privileged social role, it is here painting that returns to oust it. In an inversion of Buchloch's paradigmatic narrative, here the mechanical image is deposed by manual alteration. How is one to reconcile this image with Brik's repeated assertions that it was the unmediated accuracy of the photograph which provided its most vital social use? The camera's capacity to reduplicate reality has underpinned twentieth-century photographic theory. Indeed, Brik's argument foreshadows the famous one made by Roland Barthes almost half a century later, asserting that whilst 'painting can feign reality [...] in photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*'.[72] Such faith in the evidentiary capacity of the photograph found a particular intensity of application in Rodchenko's work. He repeatedly refers to photography as a medium which can reduplicate reality. However, as we have seen, the most prised quality of photography in 1924 became its most problematic one in 1936, where the camera's irrefutable corroboration that certain subjects 'exist and have a name' became a dilemma in immediate need of correction.

One may be tempted to dismiss the Enukidze photograph as an exception, one which arose from extreme and unpredicted political turbulence and does not fully reflect Rodchenko's photographic ambitions. The fact nonetheless remains that, whilst the Enukidze image may be a particularly egregious example, the underlying practice of altering and adjusting the photographic print with paint was an enduring constant in Rodchenko's photographic praxis. The artist retained a broad spectrum of painterly techniques in his camerawork. These ranged from relatively minor interventions, such as cosmetic retouching, to the wholesale removal of an individual from the picture plane. The effects and intentions may differ, but the procedure was the same and used the same tools and techniques. These could be applied to the negative or print itself and involved reductive processes, such as scratching into the image with a scalpel or airbrushing, using a compressed cylinder air gun through which a fine mist of paint was sprayed. The most common use of the airgun was to retouch imperfections, often to a portrait's complexion. Stalin's pockmarked complexion was memorably described by King as having been 'positively pancaked', so excessive was its retouching. But if applied to an expanded surface area, with greater opacity of coverage, such techniques could also be utilised towards a more extreme form of political expediency, and be recruited to strike politicians from the official record.

It has always been known that some level of retouching was included in Rodchenko's work, but the sheer extent to which his photographic prints and negatives were physically painted over has only recently been revealed by research by conservators at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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[72] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York, 2010), 76.

Stereomicroscopes were used to create photomicrographs of Rodchenko's photographic prints, enabling analysis at a substantially higher magnification than had previously been possible. Polynomial texture maps (a digital imaging technique which reveals minute variation in surface phenomenon) enabled conservators 'to detect and evaluate the presence of retouching' which had otherwise been imperceptible.[73] As Lee Ann Daffner notes:

> This work is invisible to the naked eye, but when a retouched print is viewed through a microscope, hundreds of tiny, careful strokes appear, which painstakingly correct spots when dust and debris settle on the negative during the enlarging process. The degree of finish work is staggering.[74]

When viewed under such high magnification, even his seemingly 'straight' photographs, such as *Pionerka* (*Pioneer Girl*) (1930), *Sportivnyi parad na Krasnoi ploshchadi* (*Sport Parade on Red Square*) (1936) and *Sobranie dlia demonstratsii* (*Assembling for a Demonstration*) (1936) were found to have been finished with extensive retouching.[75] The techniques used to enhance these images were mostly all modes of painting, that is, the application of a fluid medium with a brush to a supporting surface:

> Retouching materials marketed for photographic finishing in the early twentieth century included watercolours, ink washes [...] In addition, special retouching fluids were formulated to facilitate the adhesion of aqueous washes to stubborn emulsions, and opaquing liquid, similar to gouache, was painted on negatives to block light and thus create areas of highlight in the final print.[76]

Daffner notes that, far from 'breaking free' of painting, Rodchenko was choosing the materials for his photography based on those which would offer him the most flexibility for combing it with painterly techniques, specifically selecting 'papers with matte surfaces' because they could withstand 'extensive modifications.'[77] This material evidence is important because it contradicts, quite directly, the artist's own assertions about his work, which, as we have seen, sought to present photography as a mode of image-production with minimal if any interference from an outside agent.

There are several reasons why retouching has not been the subject of significant scholarly interest, including its presumed lack of free, creative agency and its requisite specialist equipment. Technical examination which requires high magnification and laboratory apparatus has been associated more with the realm of connoisseurial specificities than with the prominent theoretical models of modern art. And yet, two very different stories emerge depending on whether we listen to

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[73] Daffner, 'Retouching', 3.
[74] Daffner, 'Dive', 64.
[75] Ibid., 64.
[76] Ibid., 64.
[77] Ibid., 64.

what texts say about photographs or what the photographs say themselves. An object-orientated approach to Rodchenko's photography reveals many details which contradict much about his alleged core values of realigning of art's relationship to reality. They show that whilst the camera was used for 'fixing facts', it was the paintbrush which was used for aligning them, for recruiting them in the service of the counterfactual. Dickerman has noted that defacement therefore 'reveals a central paradox at the heart of the Soviet representational enterprise' because it vividly illumines 'the simultaneity of opposed views about the photograph.'[78] Rather than taking the artists' claims at face value, one has to take into account the defaced and damaged outliers of their oeuvre, and prise deeper into their editing techniques in order to appreciate the complexity of the Soviet photographic index:

> On the one hand, the reworking of the document rather than its suppression testifies to the perceived need to offer visual proof of a particular (but false) historical narrative with the strength of photography's power of authentication. It grows out of the documentary demand of a photographic age, and acknowledges the testimonial force of the index, that is, an imprint of the real. On the other hand, these manipulations expose a simultaneous apprehension about the kind of evidence that the photograph provided. The photograph, valued as a permanent impress of a past moment in time, is perpetually revised to accommodate the political exigencies of the present. This desire for an ideologically "true" image is resolved into another paradox: the false document.[79]

Whilst the vast majority of the discourse surrounding factography emphasises its exigencies of documentary realism, there is one article, 'Fotomontazh' of 1928, in which Stepanova praises the manipulative potential of the photographic print to alter reality rather than replicate it.[80] The article was circulated in typescript form immediately after writing but was not published until 1973, when it appeared in Czech translation.[81] As a result of this delayed publication, Stepanova's article remains conspicuously absent from research into Soviet photographic theory, an unfortunate omission because the essay offers a unique perspective on the value of the 'false historic document.' She begins the article by repeating the familiar premise that artists have been 'compelled to turn to photography as an exceptional method for reproducing reality.'[82] Unlike Brik and Rodchenko, however, she emphasises that the photograph provides an 'independent recording of reality' not by reflecting it as it is, but by enhancing it through alteration.[83] Stepanova praises state-of-the-art

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[78] Dickerman, *Camera Obscura*, 113.
[79] Ibid., 113.
[80] Varvara Stepanova, 'Fotomontazh' in *Formal'nyi Metod: Antologiia Russkogo Modernizma,* vol. 2, ed. by Serguei Oushakine (Moscow, 2016), 885-888.
[81] Varvara Stepanova, 'Fotomontazh', *Fotografie*, 3 (1971), 18-19.
[82] 'Это заставило обратиться к использованию фотографии как исключительного способа передачи действительности.' Stepanova, '*Fotomontazh*', 885.
[83] 'самостоятельной засъемке действительности.' Ibid., 886.

techniques which montage different images together so seamlessly that the final 'acquires all the characteristics of an original document'.[84] Her essay notes that the capacity to dissimulate, to mimic an 'original', unedited document, 'further increases the documentary importance of the photograph.'[85] She therefore implies that falsified photographs were not only capable of corroborating true events, but that they do so *more effectively* than unedited ones. This explicit praise of the manipulated image, the admission that photography is a mediated art form, not a neutral observer of an objective reality, but a curated and recomposed version of that reality is rarely found in writing of this period. Nonetheless, appreciating this is, it seems that key to understanding photobooks such as *10 let Uzbekistana* and *Pervaia konnaia.* With their vanishing commissars, their carefully choreographed collective farms and battlefields, their airbrushed portraits and false statistics, the albums are illuminating examples of Soviet photojournalism as characterised by Christopher Stolarski: 'photojournalism [...] was capable of drawing millions of spectators into an artificial reality'.[86] The impulse towards artifice, and the insistence that the use of photography in albums is not just real, but *realer,* demands a way of seeing which recalls those which Valerie Kivelson and Joan Neuberger have cited as unique to Russian history:

> [Russian subjects would] turn to the visual in order to summon a new reality into being, for them to use the experience of viewing as an engine of historical or eschatological transformation. This visual practice, which we call *seeing into being,* is most pronounced in the transcendent viewing experience associated with medieval and early modern religious imagery and in the transformative quality ascribed to Soviet socialist realism.[87]

10 let Uzbekistana and *Pervaia konnaia* require more than a willing suspension of disbelief. Their visual logic is founded in the belief in the possibility of transforming reality to match an ideal form: *yes, there were clouds in the sky that day. no, Enukidze was not there, he was never there.* 'Fixing' facts was therefore only half of the challenge. The photographic representation of Soviet reality was served not solely by illumining what *should* exist, but by the corresponding task of obscuring what should not. Neither could be entirely created by the camera, they needed the assistance of its supposed opponent: the paintbrush.

This section has shown how *faktura* returned to eclipse the photographic fact numerous times throughout Rodchenko and Stepanova's work of the 1930s. This is particularly significant because it suggests a line of continuity between what are often deemed as two distinct poles in their careers: their abstract painting of the 1920s and their propagandistic photography of the 1930s. And yet, as we

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[84] 'приобретая все черты подлинного документа.' Ibid., 886.
[85] 'еще повышает документальное значение фотографии.' Ibid., 886.
[86] Christopher Stolarski, 'Another Way of Telling the News: The Rise of Photojournalism in Russia, 1900–1914', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History,* 12:3 (Summer, 2011), 561-590, 561.
[87] Valerie Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (eds.), *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (London, 2010), 6.

have seen, the trope of embodied absence runs like a leitmotif throughout their practice of both of these decades. Understood as such, one could argue the defacement was not an entirely isolated, time-specific response to the political exigencies of the mid-1930s, but had its origins in the easel painting practice which preceded it. This section has so far considered certain technical and practical parallels between abstraction in photography and painting, the following section will consider its conceptual parities. After all, painterly exploration into absence and non-existence were not new concepts to the artists, as they had long been invested in such ideas in their abstract paintings, several of which bear a striking formal echo to the defaced photographs uncovered here.

SECTION THREE

Painting

There was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears.
Neither did he have any hair, so he was called red-haired theoretically.

He couldn't speak, since he didn't have a mouth. Neither did he have a nose.
He didn't even have any arms or legs. He had no stomach and he had no back and he had no spine and
he had no innards whatsoever. He had nothing at all!

Therefore there's no knowing whom we are even talking about.
In fact it's better that we don't say any more about him.

Daniil Kharms, *The Red-Haired Man,* 1937[1]

Daniil Kharms's poem, 'Rizhnii chelovek' ('The Red-Haired Man'), about a human being with no identifiably human characteristics, was written in 1937. The poem's protagonist is symbolically resonant with several of the portraits found in *Pervaia Konnaia* and *10 let Uzbekistana.* These effaced images also undergo a dismantling of their identity, a reversion of representation which, as in the poem, begins with the loss of facial features, and culminates in a summons towards silence. Like the red-haired man, these subjects are guided by the artist's hand back into nothingness, rather than being coaxed from it as one conventionally expects of artistic creations. Such parallels are not coincidental. Kharms, Rodchenko and Stepanova were all working concurrently in Moscow, and associating with overlapping avant-garde circles. All were influenced by Malevich and invested in artistic explorations of content-negation.[2] By 1937 their enduring interest in absence as an aesthetic category intersected with a political period in which human existence had become easy to erase.[3]

The motif of the anonymised, faceless figure appears in the works of Kharms, Rodchenko, Stepanova and beyond; it is a unifying trope between art and literature, censorship and creativity in

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[1] 'Жил один рыжий человек, у которого не было глаз и ушей. / У него не было и волос, так что рыжим его называли условно. / Говорить он не мог, так как у него не было рта. / Носа тоже у него не было. / у него не было даже рук и ног. / и живота и у него не было, и спины у него не было, и хребта / у него не было, и никаких внутренностей у него не было. / не ничего не ничего было! / Так что непонятно, о ком идёт речь./ Ух лучше мы о нём не будем больше говорить.' 'Rizhni Chelovek' in *Daniil Kharms: Polet v nebesa: Stikhi. Proza. Dramy. Pis'ma,* ed. by Anatolii Aleksandrov (Leningrad, 1988), 353.

[2] Kharms was closely acquainted with Malevich and dedicated two poems to him: 'Iskushenie' and 'Na smert' Kazimira Malevicha.' These are published alongside the written correspondence between the artist and poet in Vakar, *Malevich,* vol. II, 358-365.

[3] On Kharms's work as a response to political denouncement see: Anthony Anemone, 'The Anti-World of Daniil Kharms: On the Significance of the Absurd', in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials* ed. by Neil Cornwall (New York, 1991), 71- 93, 81; and Neil Carrick, 'Daniil Kharms and the Art of Negation', *Slavonic and East European Review,* 72:4 (October, 1994), 622-643.

this period. The loss of facial features was a recurring theme in Russian literature: Nikolai Gogol's absurdist tale about a detached nose was revived for the Soviet stage by Dmitrii Shostakovich*;* Maiakovskii's surrealist plays included characters without eyes, ears or heads*,* or with grotesquely stretched and deformed faces; Andrei Platonov's prose was populated by an 'almost totally featureless' *dramatis personae* of whom it was 'difficult for the reader to create a mental portrait.'[4] In the visual arts, Malevich spent almost a decade painting images of peasants with featureless, slab-like faces, inspiring his legions of students and followers to take up this theme and explore it further in the artistic groups they formed after his death. *Bezlikost',* 'facelessness', was thus a rich and enduring motif throughout Russian culture. Acknowledging this offers us new ways to frame and understand the aesthetics of defacement. Far from isolated aesthetic outliers, photographs without faces existed alongside (and arguably drew on) a rich artistic tradition, which had proved to be a source of great imaginary power in literature, opera and art. This section is structured into three short chapters, each taking a case study of a different artist: Rodchenko, Stepanova and Malevich. Each chapter shall explore the motif of facelessness in the artists' work, considering how they used inversions of portraiture into faceless tropes as an arena for exploring absence, negation and the loss of identity.

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[4] Nikolai Gogol, *Nos* (Moscow, 1836); 'Человек без глаза и ноги, Человек без уха, Человек без головы. Человек с растянутым лицом.' Vladimir Maiakovsii, *Vladimir Maiakovsii: Tragediia v dvukh deistviiakh s prologom i epilogom* (Moscow, 1914), 4; Andrew Wachtel, 'Meaningful voids: facelessness in Platonov and Malevich' in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell (Cambridge, 2000), 250-77, 260, 262.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO

Fig. 64b. (Left) Detail from 10 let Uzbekistana, 1934
Fig. 82. (Right) Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Bespredmetnaia kompozitsiia*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 71 x 62.5 cm.
Makhachkala: Dagestan Museum of the Arts

The Black Circle

Almost twenty years separate figures 64b and 82, one showing a figureless canvas, the other a faceless figure. A shared, central symbol unifies both – a black circle. In both cases, a hand-drawn outline is filled in with opaque paint, applied in an even, unmodulated layer, resulting in a shape rendered without depth or dimension. These parallels in form reflect those in function. In the photograph, the superimposed circle is there to negate the underlying portrait, to transform an image of a human subject into an indicator of absence. A similar task is fulfilled by the circular symbol in the painting. The title describes it as '*bespredmetnyi*', subjectless, thereby indicating that it is not intended to be encountered as a substantive form, but as a placeholder of voided content. Both, therefore, operate as images of omission.[5]

This unity of form and function suggests a shared genealogy between the two images. Some context can be invoked to lend strength to the hypothesis that the two are explorations of the same essential idea, initially explored in 1918 and revived in 1937. The painting seen in figure 82 was not a one-off, individual work, but part of a series entitled *Bespredmetnye kompozitsii* (*Subjectless Compositions*) which Rodchenko worked on from 1916 to 1921. Repetition and replication were at the

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[5] The complexities at stake in translating the term *bespredmetnost'* will be explored presently.

heart of these paintings, which consisted of the formulaic rearrangements of geometric, mostly discoidal forms. The artist himself referred to these works as part of his 'circle period'.[6] Rodchenko's reliance on the compass as an artistic tool began in 1915, when he created a sequence of untitled, black and white, pen and ink drawings of intersecting arcs (fig. 83). When he broke onto the Moscow art scene the following year, in the exhibition *Magazin* (*The Store*)*,* the trope of the black circle constantly reappeared in his work. His early canvases were overlaid with repeating variations of this same simple form, intertwining arrangements of hoops and halos, seen either suspended in space or mid-collision, fragmenting and dissolving into scattered arcs (figs. 83-95). For the next five years, he would return to this essential form, characterising his work as a process of 'building projections in ovals, circles, ellipses.'[7]

According to Rodchenko, his circle period ended, abruptly, in 1921, when he 'abandoned painting.'[8] On 18 March 1921 his name appeared as a signatory of the 'Programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov INKhUKa' ('Programme of the Working Group of the Constructivists of INKhUK'), a manifesto which formally rejected easel painting by declaring an 'uncompromising war on art', and 'determines that the continuity of past artistic culture' is unacceptable.[9] This volte-face on the part of the artist may seem to contest the hypothesis considered here: that Rodchenko's defaced photograph and abstract paintings are iconographically united. However, the true chronology of his career contradicts his declamations about abandoning easel art. His renunciation of painting would prove to be premature; it signalled only a temporary suspension, as in the mid-1930s Rodchenko returned to painting almost full-time, reviving the abstract compositions, circular forms and the rubric '*bespredmetnyi*' (figs. 89-90). The timing of his second subjectless series thus coincides both with the commission to create the photobooks, and also the ensuing imperative to censor them. While the artist had no choice but to deface the photographs, he retained a certain amount of autonomy over how he did so. The choice to paint a circular form over Khodzhaev's face was just that: a choice, a personal one. Its anomaly in the pantheon of photographic defacement proves this was not a default, automatic action but an intentional one. What can we learn, then, about the motivating factors underlying this choice by looking at Rodchenko's painterly output? The account that follows will explore the extent to which censorship can be understood as a resumption, or revival, of concepts which the artist had been revisiting throughout his career.

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[6] 'Периода […] кругов'. Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Korabel'nyi dnevnik' (14 June 1920), Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 81-90, 81.

[7] 'Строя проекции в овалах, кругах, эллипсах.' Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Dinamizm Ploskosti', *Anarkhiia*, 49 (28 April 1918), 4.

[8] '1921 год. Бросил живопись.' Rodchenko, 'Perestroika', 19.

[9] 'Группв объявляет непримиримую войну искусству', 'утверждает непреемственность художественной культуры прошлого.' 'Programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov INKhUKa', *Ermitazh*, 13 (August 1922), 3-4. The draft programme was originally written on 1 April 1921, but not published until the following year. It is reprinted in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm: kontseptsiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow) 2003, 118-119, 118.

Key here is how we understand Rodchenko's use of the term *bespredmetnost'*. The Russian word is problematic both in terms of translation and definition. Often conflated with its supposed synonym, *abstraktsiia* (abstraction), *bespredmetnost'* was actually a distinct concept, a contested but crucial one within the lexicon of the early avant-garde. Familiar and accepted usage renders it in English as 'non-objective'; however, this slightly reduces the semantic range of the original Russian term. The root of *bespredmetnost'* is the noun '*predmet*', which has no exact equivalent in English. Whilst Russian has cognates for the terms 'subject' (*sub"ekt*), and 'object' (*ob"ekt*), *predmet* can mean either 'object' or 'subject' and does not distinguish between the two. This is problematic in translation, given the appreciable differences between subjectivity and objectivity. Strictly speaking, the most accurate translation of *bespredmetnost'* would be 'without a [sub/ob]ject', a phrase so convoluted that it is scarcely intelligible. Connotational precision therefore in this instance comes at the cost of clarity of prose. In what follows, I prioritise the latter and use what seems to be the simplest translation: 'subjectless'.

This complexity of translation mirrors the complexity of the concept. Despite the frequency with which it appears in Rodchenko's work, the precise limits of its use, value and application remain a source of debate. What, after all, does it mean for a painting to be subjectless? Art without a subject is not the same as art without content, but what is the nature of this content? If not a subject, what then are we looking at? All of these questions produced lively discussion amongst the early avant-garde, and continue to prompt keen debate.[10] Indeed, the notion of subjectlessness is undergoing something of a resurgence in contemporary scholarship. A considerable amount of mostly Russian-language research has been produced in the past decade, probing the connotational complexities of the term.[11] The guiding questions of these debates include the question of how precisely *bespredmetnost'* differed from *abstaktsiia*. Was it an apolitical or politicised category? And where did it go? When and why did *bespredmetnost'* fall out of favour? This chapter will extend these debates by approaching the material from a new angle and asking whether censorship can be situated on the continuum of subjectlessness.

In order to explore this idea, it is necessary to delve a little deeper into the artist's understanding of the term *bespredmetnost'*. Rodchenko's first published use of the word appeared on 15 June 1918, in

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[10] For a detailed discussion of the distinctions between Rodchenko's use of the term and that of other artists, see Natasha Kurchanova 'Rodchenko i Malevich: bespredmetnost' protiv suprematizma' and Aleksandr Lavrentev 'Rodchenko i Mokhoi-Nad. Rakurs i bespredmetnost' v fotografii', both in *Bespredmetnost' i abstraktsiia,* ed. by Georgii Kovalenko (Moscow, 2011), 341-362, 363-385.

[11] See, for instance, Mariia Baliaeva, *Morfologiia russkoi bespredmetnosti* (Moscow, 2003); Georgii Kovalenko (ed.) *Bespredmetnost' i abstraktsiia* (Moscow, 2011); Evgenii Kovtun, *Bespredmetnost' v real'nom prostranstve* (St. Petersburg, 1998); and Elena Sidorina 'Predmetnoe/Bespredmetnoe...' in Elena Sidorina, *Konstruktivizm bez beregov, issledovaniia i etiudy o russkom avangarde* (Moscow, 2012), 157-182.

the newspaper *Anarkhiia* (*Anarchy*).[12] In an article responding to critics who mocked his work, Rodchenko announced 'Russia has given birth to its own art and its name is subjectlessness.'[13] Two things are significant about this statement. The first is the emphasis that subjectlessness is a uniquely Russian phenomenon: Rodchenko here distinguishes it from the Western artistic tradition and in doing so, evokes a certain nationalism which would come to be a key connotation of the term. Secondly, the place of publication is in itself significant. *Anarkhiia* was published by *Moskovskaia federatsiia anarkhicheskikh grupp* (the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups), and, as the name suggests, was a publication ideologically imbued with its eponymous philosophy.[14] The 'arts' section which Rodchenko contributed to was heavily partisan, interpreting all strands of creative practice as informed by the philosophy of anarchism. Rodchenko was invested in this ideology. He published rallying cries in *Anarkhiia,* where he had explicitly embraced the anarchic worldview, exhorting his readers 'to be rid of and destroy everything', claiming that 'the destructive spirit is the creative spirit' and instructing would-be artists, 'I am telling all of you who are still capable of demolishing, to destroy everything.'[15] This early phase of this career, therefore, was heavily influenced by the same Bakunian concepts of 'creative destruction' which were explored in the Futurist books and poetry discussed in the first chapter.[16]

Anarchism and Marxism were richly intertwined in the history of Russian political groups. The heyday of Russian anarchism (1905-1918) overlapped chronologically with the early Bolshevik party. Both groups shared many principles and values, as Paul Avrich notes: 'a common hostility to centralised government [...] a deep hatred of the capitalist system', the call for 'a clean sweep of 'bourgeois civilisation' and 'for a social revolution that would abolish all political and economic authority and usher in a decentralized society.'[17] For a time in 1918, these shared platforms were enough to launch a collaborative organisation called 'the All-Russian Federation of Anarchist-Communists.'[18] In this context, Rodchenko's contributions to an anarchist publication were not unusual: such political leanings were fashionable for artists and intellectuals in Russia at this time. Chapter one has already explored the influence of Bakunin on Futurist poetry, and there is a certain stylistic element of Bakunin's influence in Rodchenko's prose style, with its distinctive, emphatic, short, epigram-like statements punctured by exclamation marks and its heavy use of capitalisation

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[12] This is the first appearance in publication. Prior to this, the term had appeared in the titles of his paintings.

[13] 'Россия родила свое творчество, и имя ему - беспредметность'. Aleksandr Rodchenko, '"Samobytnym" kritikam i gazete "Ponedel'nik"', *Anarkhiia*, 85 (15 June 1918).

[14] For more on this group see Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, 1967).

[15] 'Выбросьте, уничтожьте все', 'Дух разрушающий есть дух созидающий', 'Я говорю вам всем, еще способным разрушить, уничтожите все' Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Bud'te tvortsami!', *Anarkhiia*, 61 (17 May, 1918).

[16] For more on Rodchenko's contributions to this paper, see Allan Antliff, *Anarchy and Art: from Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Vancouver, 2007), 71.

[17] Avrich, *Anarchists*, 3.

[18] Ibid., 201.

recalling the prose style used in the political sections of *Anarkhiia.* But above all, it is the lexicon which overlaps, including the repeated calls for destruction. 'Uneducated ones! Destroy that loathsome culture' read the front page of the anarchist newspaper *Burevestnik* (*Thunderbird*) early in 1918.[19] 'Destroy the parasites who torment you! Destroy all who oppress you!' read an article in the paper *Vestnik anarkhii* (*Anarchic Herald*) in July 1918, the same month that Rodchenko's byline first appeared in the paper.[20]

Rodchenko's creative 'subjectlessness' was thus launched from a politically-charged platform, the inherent anarchism of which informs the shades of meaning implicit in his usage of the term. This was more than merely the art of abstract geometry art, it was something fundamentally more nihilistic and destructive, seeking not simply to negate or non-represent, but actively to *destroy*. The vocalised violence of his articles can be hard to reconcile with his paintings. With their subdued tones, softly blended shading, stripped-back simplicity and symmetrical geometry, they can seem to emanate a sense of serenity. One may reasonably ask how the artist's extortion to 'destroy everything!' is manifest in *Bespredmetnaia kompozitsiia* (fig. 82)? The image shows two stacked, partially overlapping black circles suspended against a primed white canvas, textured with shades of ochre and umber. One is tempted to conclude that he perhaps over-estimates his audience if this canvas of calming colours, muted textures and non-signifying shapes is to be understood as a function of anarchic ideology. And yet, context and close reading of his accompanying articles prove that he did indeed intend 'subjectlessness' to be recognised as a state of effacement and eradication, of symbolic violence prompted by an anarchist world view.

Rodchenko's articles describe his artistic practice as a process of elimination, proceeding along the axis of abstract geometry to the essential annulment of all visual referents. The first step was an acute reduction of painterly components into abstract, non-signifying forms which he termed 'planes'.[21] The second step was to 'destroy the real existence of the surface plane'.[22] If one looks at the *subjectless composition* series with these words in mind, we find visual clues which alert us to these subtractive operations. In *Bespredmetnaia kompozitsiia no. 80,* for instance, the central circle is composed of helical, concentric segments of alternating colours (fig. 91). Context is crucial to how this arrangement is apprehended. When detached from its original exhibition environment, it could be seen as a simple surface design. However, when it first appeared in 1918, bolstered by Bakunian discourse and anarchic allegiances, the patterning seems more likely an indicator of internal fracture, of a shape seen in the process of splitting and severing into two interlocking spirals. *Bespredmetnaia*

[19] 'Необразованные! Уничтожь эту отвратительную культуру'. *Burevestnik* (27 January 1918), 1.

[20] 'Уничтожь паразитов, которые тебя мучают! Уничтожь всех, кто тебя угнетает'. *Vestnik anarkhii,* 10 (14 July 1918), 1.

[21] 'Плоскости'. Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Dinamizm Ploskosti', *Anarkhiia,* 41 (11 April 1918).

[22] 'уничтожив реальное существование плоскостей', Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 81.

kompozitsiia no. 56 also appears to be in the process of disappearing before our eyes; the arced shadows which encroach upon the two central circles resemble the penumbra of partial eclipse, suggesting the image will imminently recede from view (fig. 92). Similarly, in *Bespredmetnaia kompozitsiia no. 86,* the rays of light which cut diagonally through the canvas can either be encountered as surface effects dappling the canvas, or lances bisecting its forms into semi-circles (fig. 93). In each case, the paintings seem on the cusp of falling out of focus or fading into shadow. The circles serve not to emphasise the unity of the whole, but to signal their states of dissolution, as edges diffuse and circles recede back into empty imprints of themselves. The vocabulary Rodchenko used when describing these works enhances and underscores their obliterative procedures. He characterises his creative actions as ones of reduction and disassembly, using verbs such as 'splitting' and 'receding', 'cutting' ('cut surface-planes'), 'removing' ('colour was removed') and 'destroying' ('destroying form', 'destroy their material [...] existence').[23] The black circles which appear in this series are the visual residue remaining after forms are 'cut', 'split' and 'destroyed', not intended to be apprehended as substantives, but as imprints of their own absent form.[24]

Rodchenko's creative mechanisms, almost exclusively tasks of *de*composition and gradual deletion, are key to understanding the difference between *abstraktsiia* and *bespredmetnost'*. Abstraction is non-representational art, whilst subjectlessness is the destruction of representation, of shapes seen in the process of their disintegration. Indeed, all the works from his 'circle period' can be situated on this continuum, as the artist hastens pure form towards its purest manifestation: formlessness. We can trace an evolution, or more accurately, a devolution, as Rodchenko, battling with remnants of representation, embarked upon a steady advance of ever more omission. After 'destroying planes', Rodchenko eclipsed all colour from his canvases. His *Chernoe nad chernom* (*Black on black*) series features circles almost imperceptible from their grey ground, only a slight intensification of the pigment towards the circumference distinguishing them (fig. 94). Having freed painting of planes and colours, Rodchenko became concerned with freeing it from contours. In 1919, outlines were abrogated in favour of different textural surfaces. Soon thereafter, he resolved that even the presence of brushstrokes were too much of an imposition on pure form, and abandoned them in favour of paint applied mechanically with rollers.[25] In pursuit of further pictorial depletion, Rodchenko finally resolved that even the surface, the ground of canvas itself, was too tangible, too material, too much of an imposition on the purity of the circular form it supported. He reimagined

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[23] 'Рассекания и ухождения их', 'Разрезанных плоскостей', 'цвет был удален' 'Беспредметники уничтожили форму'. 'разрушить их материальное [...] существование.' Rodchenko, *Opyty*, 68, 81, 70.

[24] K. V. Bezmenova has argued for such an interpretation, see 'Dekonstruktsiia - istok bespredmetnosti' in Kovalenko, *Bespredmetnost'*, 565-574.

[25] For a detailed analysis of this period of his work, see Maria Gough, 'Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics,* 36 (Autumn, 1999), 32-59.

his drawings as aerial compositions, hanging mobiles of concentric circles, ungrounded, suspended in air (fig. 95).

But at what point did these experiments, these advances towards absence, end? The standard chronology of Rodchenko's career, which claims his painterly practice ended in 1921, has already been challenged. *Bespredmetnost'* would prove to be a transferable concept whose essential iconography was adapted to product and textile design, before oscillating back to reappear, after a long lapse, as paintings. Can this continuum extend to encompass censorship? In some ways, the defaced photographs can be seen as 'subjectless' taken to its logical limit. Rodchenko, after all, defined the 'core idea' of *bespredmetnost'* as: 'to destroy the [subject's] material, obvious existence.'[26] Returning to censorship, the black circle as seen painted over Khodzhaev does not embody the 'destruction of the subject' in an abstract, metaphorical sense, but in a more literal way, leading us to ask, if this was art which sought to enact annihilation, did it perhaps find its fullest expression on the pages of *10 let Uzbekistana*?

Censorship as Subjectlessness

In 1920, Rodchenko painted an unusual self-portrait in which he depicts himself facing the viewer with his head slightly bowed (fig. 96). The artist opts for a non-naturalistic rendering; his skin tones are exaggerated into highly saturated hues of lemon yellow and salmon pink, heightened further by their contrast against the sapphire blue backdrop. The face is outlined with thick black impasto contours which extend into distinctive geometric lines intersecting the facial features. The most striking detail, however, is the black circle which is suspended over the artist's forehead, which appears to be either ascending or descending, on the cusp of revealing or concealing the artist's identity.

This image is unusual for the way it combines what are conventionally understood to be two incompatible poles in the artist's oeuvre: the *predmetnyi* and *bespredmetnyi*. The human face harks back to the long tradition of mimetic art, the black circle, to the modernist endeavour to disrupt tradition. Why, then, does the artist opt to depict both on the same visual register? The self-portrait was painted immediately following a significant exhibition in Rodchenko's career, the 'Tenth State Exhibition: Subjectless Creativity and Suprematism'.[27] In the catalogue which accompanied the show, Rodchenko printed a short manifesto-like statement entitled 'Rodchenko's System' in which he elaborated his artistic procedures and intentions.[28] The essay is structured by introducing

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[26] 'Коренная же мысль была - разрушить их материальное ясное существование.' Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 92.
[27] *X gosudarstvennaia vystava. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i Suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919).
[28] Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Sistema Rodchenko', *Katalog X gosudarsvennaia vystava. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i Suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919), 114.

Rodchenko's 'system' with six aphorisms by poets and philosophers whom he found influential. These include a quote by Max Stirner, the German philosopher whose ideas anticipated, amongst others, many of the concerns of existentialism. Rodchenko chooses a quote from Stirner's 1844 book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (*The Ego and its Own*) to frame his art: 'at the foundation of my work I have placed nothing'.[29]

The 'nothingness' foundational to Stirner's worldview is adopted in the exhibition by Rodchenko into concrete aesthetic practice. Allan Antliff has written at length about the significance of Stirner's statement to Rodchenko's art, noting that the citation is a nod of allegiance to the Moscow Federation of Anarchists.[30] Lev Chernyi, the federation's secretary, championed Stirner's school of 'egoist anarchism', a radical anti-authoritarianism which advocates for a stateless society.[31] Stirner articulates this philosophy in the *Ego and its Own*, structuring his argument (as the book's title suggests) around the linchpin of extreme individualism, and it is here, in his description of the ego, that his rhetoric resonates with Rodchenko's writing about the subject. Stirner expounds an abyssal notion of 'the self' as a nihilistic category. For him, the human ego is an inherently annihilating force which can only be apprehended through negative definitions: it is 'a creative nothing', an 'endpoint in language', constitutive of 'no word, no thought, no concept.'[32] The notion of a subject which can only be defined *in absentia* from its own definition mirrors the paradox which Rodchenko finds at the heart of 'subjectlessness.' The reference point of the Stirnerian ego is important in understanding the symbolism in Rodchenko's *Self-Portrait*. In binding the human subject with the symbol of subjectlessness, the artist is visually enacting Stirner's axiom that '"being" is an abstraction'[33] In this image, the ego, the I, is combined with the symbolic form of its own simultaneous creativity and destruction: the black circle. The anarchic form here functions to conceal the portrait, obfuscating the portrait subject, which is soon to be subsumed in a field of pure abstraction. This illustrates Stirner's understanding of the subject as the conflation of two seemingly self-contradictory categories: 'I am all and nothing.'[34]

These endeavours to illustrate the 'nothingness' of the 'non-self' by uniting the discrete artistic idioms of abstraction and figuration were an ongoing concern of Rodchenko's work. One may be surprised to learn that the first time the black circle appeared in Rodchenko's painting was not as

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[29] 'В основание своего деля я положил ничто.' Ibid., 114. There is a slight mistranslation in Rodchenko's text. The original German reads 'Ich hab' Mein Sach' auf Nichts gesiellt', literally, 'I have set my affair on nothing.' Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844). David Leopold notes that Stirner quotes this line from the Goethe's poem 'Vanitas! Vanitatum vanitas!', David Leopold, *Max Stirner: The Ego and its Own* (Cambridge, 1995), 326.

[30] Antliff, *Anarchy,* 77-86.

[31] Avrich, *Anarchists*, 117.

[32] Max Stirner, 'Stirner's Critics', *Philosophical Forum* 8:2-4 (1977), 66-80, 67, 70.

[33] Stirner, *Ego,* 300.

[34] Ibid., 300.

part of an abstract painting, but as a figure study. In 1914, he created costume designs for an Oscar Wilde play, in which the naturalistic rendering of the elaborate quasi-period costume is contrasted to the lack of detailing on the face, which is reduced to an opaque black disc (fig. 97). This was not an outlier in his output: from 1915-1916, over half the paintings Rodchenko produced were portrait or figure studies.[35] Even at the height of his subjectless period, 1920, his diary records that he was constantly, concurrently working on figurative work. In January he is working on 'five human figures', in July he' completed four drawings [...] of representational figures', later that month 'a drawing of a woman in coloured India ink'.[36] Throughout 1917 and 1918, he worked on canvas series which drew on repetitive tropes of certain human types, such as circus acts and his ballet dancers. In 1919 the artist appropriated the compass and ruler technique which he had developed for his first series of subjectless drawings, annexing the curved lines and semicircular arcs to build up into schematic human figures (figs. 98).

This body of work is not often exhibited. It offers a problematic counterpoint to the established chronology of the artist's career, which is conventionally structured according to the dialectics of figuration and abstraction. Yet, these hybrid, half-abstract humanoid forms do not constitute a retreat from the highpoint of subjectlessness, but its advancement. Whilst originally Rodchenko had limited his definition of subjectlessness to aesthetic confines, to the 'space of the canvas', by 1919 his focus began to expand beyond the confines of the art world: 'subjectless painting has left the museum, it is on the streets, the squares, the city, and all the world...'.[37] The artist thus initiated an extension of the concept's spatial orientation, reinventing subjectlessness as an expanding pubic presence occupying 'all the world'. Alongside this is a symbolic expansion, Rodchenko gradually expanded the spectrum of subjectlessness to engage with existential themes. He increasingly began to integrate his explorations of painterly non-presence with themes of self-effacement. In the 'Nineteenth State Exhibition' held in 1920, he presented his images of openings and apertures with a note in the catalogue essay which warned his viewers in a prophesying tone: 'all of you will exist this way, as these subjectless forms, tone, weight and compositions now exist.'[38] Rodchenko thus developed an interpretation of subjectlessness which extended beyond the material dimensions of the canvas, beyond the collapse of art's conventional signifying function, towards the dispersal of a certain subjectivity as well, or rather subjectivity itself.

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[35] This figure is taken from the most complete catalogue raisonné of the artist's works, found in Varvara A. Rodchenko, *A. M. Rodchenko, stat'i, vospominaniia, avtobiograficheskie zapiski, pis'ma* (Moscow, 1982), 162-221.
[36] '5 челов. фигур.' 'Сделано 4 рисунка [...] предметные фигуры [...] Сделан рисунок «женщины» цветной тушью' Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 76, 71-72.
[37] 'пространство холста.' 'Беспредметное живопись ушла из музеев это, - улица, площадь, город, и весь мир...'. Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 92, 93.
[38] '*19-ia gosudarstvennaia vystavka*' (Moscow, 1920). 'Все вы так будете существовать как существуют сейчас эти беспредметные формы.' Rodchenko, Opyty, 91.

Ultimately, Rodchenko acknowledged that his experiments with subjectlessness failed, or at least did not go far enough. The received and established chronology of the artist's career states that his experiments with abstraction ended here, that disheartened by the perceived 'uselessness of painting', he turned towards product design and ultimately abandoned painting as he transitioned into photography.[39] It is certainly true that the artist increasingly began to lament the metaphysical failings of his paintings, acknowledging that his aspired state of total absence could not be reached. Painting, however pure its form, can never truly embody formlessness, 'it is not separated from life'.[40] Even when stripped of a subject, the works themselves, he lamented 'still exist'.[41] This - art's inexorable actuality - was in contradiction with what he, in his increasingly nihilistic ambitions, cited as his creative ambition: 'striving to prove that nothing exists'.[42] This statement was another aphorism which Rodchenko printed in the 'Tenth State Exhibition' catalogue, quoting the German psychologist Otto Weininger. The artist's stated ambition here, a path of creation which belies its own ontology, is often perceived as a rhetorical provocation, and yet, it is a consistent continuation of Rodchenko's subtractive artistic steps, and indeed, their logical endpoint.

While it is true that Rodchenko's artistic priorities transitioned at some point in 1921 away from abstract composition towards utilitarian construction, he was not in fact finished with his subjectless series. His engagement with the concept did not end, but was merely interrupted; he would return to it in a series of paintings in the 1940s. Indeed, the argument presented in this chapter suggests that he returned to it (albeit without crediting, or even perhaps acknowledging the fact) several years earlier, in *10 let Uzbekistana*. It is hard to think where else in the artist's oeuvre one could cite him as fulfilling what was perhaps the most extreme manifestation of his nascent nihilism rather than these acts of defacement, which give his metaphorical articulations of 'destruction' a real and actual manifestation.

This chapter opened by posting a conceptual correlation between Khodzhaev's censored photo and Rodchenko's subjectless painting. By way of conclusion, I will summarise the evidence substantiating this analogy by look back at the early avant-garde, as it were, from the vantage point of high-Stalinism. The initial juxtaposition between figures 64 and 82 was based on their similarity of form (both feature a black circle) and function (both images erase their own content). The detailed analysis of Rodchenko's writing on subjectlessness has led to three further points of unity to consider: the symbolic enactment of non-existence, the violent political rhetoric and the intentioned

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[39] 'бесполезность живописи', Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 83.
[40] 'от жизни она не оторвана'. Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 95.
[41] 'еще существуют.' Rodchenko, *Opyty,* 92.
[42] 'стремится доказать, что существует ничто.' Rodchenko, *Sistema*, 114. The quote is taken from Weininger's book *Über die letzten Dinge* (Leipzig, 1904).

political expediency. These three features offer a useful framework to organise and evaluate this conclusion.

Firstly, the exegesis of Rodchenko's interpretation of subjectlessness has revealed the extent to which he conceived of it as an opportunity to embody a supremely nihilistic worldview, a 'nullifying' of the individual. This symbolic erasure of the subject is also manifest in the defaced photograph. As someone convicted of counter-revolutionary activities, Khodzhaev was included amongst the highest class of criminal, an 'enemy of the state' of whom all material and mnemonic traces were removed. Rodchenko's description of his circle period as an endeavour to 'destroy [the subject's] material, obvious existence', therefore raises, as Neil Carrick writes:

> A suggestion of another process simultaneously at work here: the creation of a 'non-person', or what is termed in the 'Newspeak' of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, an 'unperson'. To create a 'non-person' the abduction and physical repression of that person are followed by the removal of all materials that might confirm his or her existence at any time. Records are thus cleansed of all references to that person and his or her achievements. Becoming a non-person, an apparent oxymoron made (paradoxically) incontrovertible reality under totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, is thus a significant expansion of the concept of *persona non grata*. [... and] was to be a prominent feature of Soviet historiography from the I930s.[43]

Carrick makes the above commentary with reference to Russian absurdist art of the 1930s, but the same parallel applies to Rodchenko's artwork. This comparison is strengthened by the third point I have emphasised about subjectlessness: that it emerged from and repeatedly employed a rhetoric of political violence. Rodchenko describes his paintings using an explicitly violent lexicon, choosing verbs of physical force to report his artistic procedures: split, break, destroy. His early contributions to the newspaper *Anarkhiia* attest that his abstract art was launched from a platform which advocated political violence as a necessary means to an end. The glossaries of Stalin's political denunciation and Rodchenko's manifesto of subjectlessness are therefore both aligned along an overlapping semantic range, expressed through a limited range of verbs: *unichtozhit', razbit', razlozhit'*. The political rhetoric which sustained and validated the purge period was explicitly and graphically violent. A recurrent term used with regards to victims of the purges was *unichtozhit',* which became a standard refrain with regards to counter-revolutionaries. In a speech of November 1937, Stalin gave a toast 'to the complex destruction of all enemies' ('*za polnoe unichtozhenie vsekh vragov*') in which he vowed 'we will destroy every such enemy'.[44] Variations of this crusade-like zealotry would crop up constantly throughout the written documentation of the purges. Khodzhaev is included in a criminal

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[43] Carrick, *Negation,* 629.
[44] 'За полное уничтожение всех врагов.' 'мы уничтожим каждого такого врага.' Stalin's speech from 7 November 1937, recorded by Georgii Dmitriov, *The Diary of Georgii Dimitrov 1933-1949*, ed. by Ivo Banac, trans. by Jane T. Hedges, Timothy D. Sergay, and Irina Faion (New Haven, 2003), 65.

category which is, at various different times, reported to have to be 'crushed' (*razbit*'), 'broken down' (*razlozhit*'), 'liquidated' (*likvidovat*').[45]

There is no definitive explanation for these lexical parallels. They could be entirely coincidental, could be a conscious emulation of political rhetoric, its subconscious sublation, or could indicate an example of the wider and complicated relationship between what sociologists have identified as structural and symbolic violence, in so far as their rhetorics are embedded and articulated in everyday culture. One could argue that the comparison is misleading because Rodchenko, after all, used violent terminology only in a metaphorical manner to hyperbolic effect. His 'battle against the subject' was waged purely against the presence of coloured pigments on canvas. Yet, it seems naive to dissociate the two entirely. As Bourdieu has demonstrated, symbolic violence and physical violence were integrated, overlapping categories in totalitarian structures. The essence of symbolic violence is complicity without agency. It is violence which has become so totally internalised and accepted that it part of the order of things. Its victims, rather than resisting it, act in a way that reproduce it, rather than eliminating it from society.[46]

Furthermore there was no clear-cut distinction between the fields of cultural production and politics in Rodchenko's work. Indeed, the very ethos of the Soviet avant-garde, their *raison d'etre* was the goal of merging these fields, of bringing 'art into life'. This brings us to the final parallel between subjectlessness and censorship: both sought to serve specific political expediencies. Rodchenko repeatedly voiced this overarching ambition in his writing. Sometimes it was used as a catchphrase or rallying cry and sometimes developed into a cogent creative research proposal, such as in the Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists manifesto.[47] This programme repeatedly emphasises that the only way for the artist to justify their continued existence in Soviet society is to become useful by dissolving the boundaries of 'art' as a discrete aesthetic field, instead of merging itself with other areas of socio-political life. It describes the need of art to 'synthesise its ideological aspects with formal' to play an active role in 'the creation of communist culture,' and find 'the communistic expression of material structures.'[48] The ways by which artists went about realising these ambitions have been the source of extensive scholarly interest. However, studies have generally restricted this to exploring the utopian aspects of the post-revolutionary period: education, architecture and the imaginatively utilitarian product design of costumes and workers clubs.

[45] 'Все враги […] разложившимися', 'Враг был разбит.' E. M. Iaroslavskii and P. N. Pospelova, *Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs* (Moscow, 1938). 'ликвидации троцкистских'. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 190.

[46] Bourdieu, *Pascalian,* 170-71 and *Masculine,* 34.

[47] Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivism,* 118-119.

[48] 'Синтезировать идеологическую часть с часть с частью формальной.' 'Создании коммунистической культуры.''Коммунистическое выражение материальных сооружений'. Ibid., 118, 119.

However, there was, of course, no absolute division between the utopian and dystopian facets of this ideology. Repression, violence, and censorship were also characteristic of this time, and the art it produced did not emerge divorced from these dystopian facets. Art which served the Soviet state did not just serve a single strand. Therefore, the avant-garde aim to integrate 'art into life' adopt a very different timbre once it is contextualised against art's evolution under Stalin. There starts to sound something literal rather than metaphorical about its calls to violence and creative destruction.

The proposition that avant-garde aesthetic endeavours did not end with the advent of Socialist Realism, but evolved alongside it as cultural production was subsumed under the unified purpose and institutions of the state was posed by Boris Groys in 1998. Groys argued that the ambitions of the avant-garde were too extensive to be achieved on the canvas alone, they demanded the 'scope', 'means' and 'resources' of the state and its total aesthetic-political project.[49] The fact that the demiurgic ambitions of art could only be fully realised when it was buttressed by totalitarian possibility is cited by Groys in relation to the utopian project of life-building, but its logic is equally applicable to the destructive, negating instinct which had been present in the avant-garde from its outset. This assessment of the aesthetics of defacement in Rodchenko's oeuvre suggests several alternate interpretative possibilities regarding the reprisal of the 'circle period'. One is the more romanticised view, in which we can read the artist as smuggling in an encrypted homage to his past period of free creativity, as a coded act of resistance, a refusal to have his artistic autonomy entirely oppressed. A bleaker view may see the same image as sheer capitulation, wherein the artist watches helplessly as his life work is subsumed to political ends, as the metaphor unwillingly combines with an unwelcome reality. But there is also a third view, expounded in this chapter, of a narrative of art finding its fulfilment through censorship. Ultimately, Rodchenko's existential rhetoric, and aspirations towards 'destroying the subject's existence' lay far beyond what the artist could ever achieve by his own means. It depended on the existence of a biopower which could complicate the relationship between an artist and his acts of iconoclasm, and achieve quasi-metaphysical feats such as the erasure of human existence and one's 'excision from official history'. Thus, one could argue that it was only in the 1930s that artists were able to take the reductive logic of minimalism to its vanishing point and beyond, into a realm of pure illogicality where for the first time it was empirically feasible to '*prove that nothing exists.*'

[49] Groys, *Stalinism,* 38.

Chapter Six

Varvara Stepanova

The Faceless Figure

A photograph taken of Stepanova's studio wall in 1921 shows a range of the works she had been producing since 1919 (fig. 99). Their lack of variety is notable, as each of the thirty-three drawings and paintings adhere to the same essential schema: the human form, reduced to a rudimentary stick figure with the head simplified to a two-dimensional disc. Stepanova recreated this formulaic image in a variety of media and compositions, but whether rendered in oil or gouache, as a painting or a print, an individual or group study, all shared the consistent feature of the human face, stripped of its features, anonymised and expressionless (figs. 100-112). This three-year period was the longest Stepanova would ever spend working independently on one particular theme. Nonetheless, it has not received significant scholarly attention, attracting little more than cursory references in the historiography of the avant-garde.

The significance of this long-overlooked series is cast into new light following the discovery of the new versions of *10 let Uzbekistana* and *Pervaia konnaia,* and the postulation that Stepanova could well have been involved in their censorship. Almost every act of extirpation found within these albums echoes tropes found within her figure series: the impasto daubs of black where a human face should be, the dark circles standing in for depersonalised portraits, the deliberate obstruction of the image's embodied gaze, all of these motifs appeared first in her canvases of 1919-1921. The series deploys a range of mark-making which mirrors the diversity of the defaced albums: some images are painted with free, loose brushstrokes, while others are careful and controlled; some are made with richly textured paint, others with washes of watered down, translucent ink (figs. 109-110).

Stepanova's 1919 drawing *Stoiashchaia figura* (*Standing Figure*), for instance, is painted with sweeps of black Indian ink, its facial features dissolved in a wash of dark pigment, whilst in *Muzhskaia figura* (*Male Figure*), she used a dry brush to scratch rather than paint the ink onto the image, resulting in unkempt, raspy brushwork similar to that seen in the photograph of Zelenskii (figs. 100-101). In *Figura* (*Figure*), the human face is obscured with a circular pool of ink, its uneven dilution leaving areas of contrasting light and dark tone which resemble the ghostly effect of Ikramov's image, whilst in *Dve figury* (*Two Figures*), the subject is enmasked with an opaque block of

precisely-printed linocut (figs. 102, 104-105). All have the same ultimate effect, a disorientating anonymisation of the human countenance, a blocking of the portrait's anticipated gaze, which has an alienating effect on the viewer, forcing a reappraisal of our role and situation as an observer.

This painterly series is significant because of its strong symbolic resonance with the acts of defacement found within *Pervaia konnaia* and *10 let Uzbekistana*. It proves that the aesthetics of erasure found in these albums were not outliers in Stepanova's artistic system. Indeed, it speaks to a continuity, a genealogical succession between them and her earlier work. This progression is not linear; its trajectory is stop-start, it was stalled and suspended for almost a decade – but it is a progression nonetheless. Because of this, these paintings offer important material for decoding the symbolism at stake in defacement. Stepanova's figural works, however, sit awkwardly within a history of the avant-garde which is so often structured around the polemics of representation and abstraction. It has suffered critical oversight because her return to figurative painting seems so regressive when compared to the radical experiments ongoing in the Russian visual arts around 1919-1921. It is telling that the only entirely positive assessments of these paintings are those authored by the artist's immediate family.[1] Christina Kiaer and Maria Gough, both of whom have championed Stepanova's legacy, remain unconvinced by the value of the figure series. Kiaer claims it is 'with good reason' that 'these paintings were not as well-received' as the 'innovations' of her peers, while Gough concludes that Stepanova 'ultimately fails' when she attempts to use figure painting to define the avant-garde's trajectory.[2] Yet, despite this scholarly sidelining, there is evidence to suggest that the contemporaneous reception of Stepanova's works was quite different, indeed, that it was mostly positive.

Stepanova's exhibition history and involvement with Soviet arts organisations has been well-documented. This material provides little, if any, evidence that Stepanova's peers dismissed her figural paintings as rearguard. Between 1918-1920, public exposure to avant-garde art in Russia was facilitated primarily by the programme of 'Free State exhibitions' organised by the Soviet government department devoted to the arts, IZO Narkompros (*Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv Nakromprosa*).[3] Stepanova was a prolific contributor to these exhibitions.[4] She displayed seventy-four works at the 'Nineteenth State Exhibition' (1920), more than any of the fourteen participants other than Rodchenko.[5] Documentary photographs highlight her dominance, showing how her figure paintings

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[1] See Lavrentev *Constructivist Life, Complete Works* and 'Stepanova'.

[2] Kiaer, *Flapper Dress,* 198; Gough, *Producer*, 46.

[3] IZO Narkompros organised twenty-eight exhibitions from 1918-1920. (Lodder, *Constructivism*, 49).

[4] Stepanova participated in: 'Pervaia vystavka kartin professional'nogo soiuza khudozhnikov' (1918); 'Piataia gosdarstvennaia vystavka: "ot impressionizm do bespredmetnosti"' (1919) and '19-i Gosudarstvennoi vystavka: "bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm"' (1919). In the latter, she exhibited under the pseudonym 'V. Agarykh'.

[5] Lavrentev, *Constructivist life,* 44.

occupied an elongated exhibition hall to themselves (fig. 106). Her majority share of wall-space continued in other exhibitions, such as the 'Exhibition of the Four' (1920), where she displayed sixty figure studies, notably more than the other three exhibitors.[6] Prolificacy alone, of course, does not automatically speak to the artistic value of the works (especially given that, as the title 'Free State' suggests, these shows were held without any selection board restricting entry). However, the visitor accounts do just that. Exhibition attendees are recorded to have praised Stepanova's figurative canvases 'to the point of embarrassment', to have 'congratulated [her] as if it were her namesday'.[7] Tellingly, several of these reviews came from established artists; Robert Falk and Wasily Kandinsky are said to have been 'overwhelmed by the abundance of the drawings, by their richness and freshness.'[8] Stepanova noted that, upon seeing the works '[Aleksandr] Osmerkin acknowledged that I was a real painter and that he never thought I could paint like this'.[9] This positive critical reception, it must be noted, still did not equal the unreserved enthusiasm heaped on Rodchenko. As Kiaer has rightly observed, the reception of Stepanova's works was tempered by a palpably gendered response, which assessed her work within the category of 'women's art'.[10] Nonetheless, the positive comments show that her contemporaneous audience did not dismiss them as a regressive return to an outdated tradition in the same way that subsequent historians have.

Indeed, these exhibition accounts are just one facet of a larger body of evidence which suggests that it is misleading to categorise avant-garde art according to the binary division of abstraction/figuration. Such hermetic classifications are useful for providing clarity when constructing narratives in retrospect, but they obsure the fact that a substantial body of avant-garde output belonged to an intermediary style of imagery which blended these two poles. The previous chapter demonstrated that Rodchenko was also invested in creating these semi-abstract, faceless figures. There are many further examples to be found amongst their colleagues and collaborators, for instance Lissitzky's work of this period included drawings which rearranged the component forms of his abstract *Proun* paintings into standardised human types. Stepanova and her circle were demonstrably intrigued by the creative possibilities of synthesising recognisably human signifiers with abstract shapes, and it is significant that these experiments most often resulted in the motif of the faceless figure. This, I believe, is central to understanding the symbolic value of photographic defacement. The deliberateness of Stepanova's designs is further emphasised in her writing, which bear witness to a conscious and analytical approach to art, and make explicit that she conceived her figural works as

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[6] Ibid., 44.

[7] 'Все поздравляли меня именинницей.' Diary entry, 23 October 1920, Stepanova, *Chelovek*, 139.

[8] Cited in Noever, *Future,* 43.

[9] 'Осьмеркин признался, что я настоящий живописец и что он не думал никогда, что я так могу писать.' Diary entry, 23 October 1920, Stepanova, *Chelovek*, 139.

[10] See Kiaer, *Flapper Dress*, 198.

part of the same genre of Rodchenko's circle series: subjectlessness.

Stepanova's name is not one which is strongly associated with the discourse of subjectlessness. It appears only once in Georgii Kovalenko's *Bespredmetnost' i abstraktsiia* and not once in Maria Baliaeva's *Morfoligiia russkoi bespredmetnosti,* two recent publications on the topic, which between them comprise over twelve-hundred pages of rigorous analysis on the concept.[11] Stepanova did, however, create art under this rubric, as well as writing two essays on the topic: 'Subjectless Art' (written in 1918 and published the following year in the catalogue for the 'Tenth State Exhibition'); and 'On Subjectless Art in Painting' (written in 1919 but not published until 1994).[12] Indeed, her figural studies draws on the same basic formal vocabulary of nonobjective art; she takes geometric shapes and arranges them into humanoid forms, with torsos rendered as inverted triangles, and heads reduced to flat, featureless discs. Her 1921 painting *Dve figury* (*Two Figures*) is made up of an arrangement of diffuse circles and rings, drawn in a primary palette of yellows and blues accented with blacks, which bear witness to a strong dialogue with Rodchenko's circle paintings (figs. 109, 84). Many of Stepanova's works rest on the cusp of representability, ricocheting between purely abstract arrangements and anthropomorphic ones. Her 1919 linoleum print *Figura* (*Figure*) depicts a seated figure rendered as a series of elementary Euclidean shapes (fig. 107). A vertical line indicates the spinal axis, from which extends a symmetrical assortment of simplified limbs, topped with a cross-hatched circle. By merging the analytical strain of abstraction with a rudimentary outline of the human figure, Stepanova did not intend to diminish the discourse of subjectlessness, but to develop it further. She writes that for her, these images presented 'some new type of abstraction, which offers an understanding of the subject.'[13] Her emphasis on furthering new ways to apprehend the painterly *predmet* implies that she sought to capitalise on its incipient conceptual potential, extending it in new directions.

Reading Stepanova's figure series in this way illuminates how we can understand the strong formal echo between images such as the defaced image of Enukidze from *10 let Uzbekistana* and her linocuts. Her 1920 linocut *Sem'ia khudozhnika* (*The Artist's Family*), for instance, features a frieze-like arrangement of figures with suspended, schematic heads hovering in mid-air, curiously disconnected from the neckless bodies to which they belong (fig. 108). This is congruent with the precise placement and punctilious perimeter of the three black circles superimposed over Enukidze's photograph. I would posit that this aesthetic unity reflects (or perhaps results from) a more profound,

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[11] Baliaeva, *Morfoligiia* and Kovalenko, *Bespredmenost'.* Stepanova's name appears in reference to her textile design on page 434 of the latter.

[12] Varvara Stepanova, '*Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo*' and '*O bespredmetnom tvorchestve (v zhivopisi)*' in Stepanova, *Chelovek,* 48-50, 50-53.

[13] 'какой то новый, абстрактный, дающий понятие о предмете' Stepanova, *Chelovek,* 103.

operational unity, found here in the shared symbolic function of the black circle. Here, we return to a central point which all the case studies in this thesis have accentuated: crossing-out is not as simple as it seems. Indeed, within the currency of visual communication, the strike-out is a semantically complex mark. Reams of critical theory attest to its Gordian twists. A rich strain of aesthetic theory explores this particular category of representational absence, a philosophical trail leading from Aristotelian metaphysics through to postmodern art. Amongst the array of interpretative models, one which aptly encapsulates the status of the censored photograph, and their relation to Russian vanguard art is the symbolic category of *sous rature,* 'under erasure'. First devised by Martin Heidegger then developed further by Jacques Derrida's deconstructive literary analysis, it denotes a word within a text which has been crossed out, but allowed to remain legible and in situ.[14] Defaced photographs quite clearly exist in a state of *sous rature,* indeed their power and impact is contingent on this. But the faceless figure paintings can also be understood within this framework. I would argue that underlying Stepanova's series is an effort to depict the human subject in the process of its own erasure, and in this capacity it both anticipated, and then was utilised in the task of photographic defacement. In what follows, I will explore the extent to which some of the nascent ideas of her formalism can be seen to have reached their fulfilment in the service of censorship.

Stepanova's Subjectlessness

The previous chapter explored the significance of subjectlessness in Rodchenko's work, arguing that it can be understood as the art of negation. These same coordinates can apply to Stepanova, whose writing on the topic similarly emphasised it as a subtractive force. She aspired to align her painterly practice with a 'Revolutionary-destructive action which strips art down to its foundational elements'.[15] Stepanova here situates the art of negation which 'strips art down' along the axis of political force ('Revolutionary action'). Such iconoclastic invocations inform how we should view her figure series. These paintings and drawings show the schematic human outline in various states of decomposition. Her ink studies show a figure merging back into stippled, mottled brush marks, as if falling to parts before our eyes (or perhaps coming together from some scattered primordial essence?) (fig. 110). This pictorial strategy of visualising an atomisation is seen repeatedly across the series; her gestural, dry brush-marks do not create a solid, cohesive line, but rather a series of inked abrasions, as if representing the splintered shards of a crumbling whole. A characteristic trait of Stepanova's oil paintings is the way that the figures are blended, camouflaged almost, from the background. The dividing line between foreground figure and background ornament is not only blurred but often imperceptible, a fluctuating division which fades in and out of focus (figs. 111-112).

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[14] Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, 1976), 19.
[15] 'Революцтонно-разрушительная деятельность обнажившая искусство до основных его элементов.' Stepanova, 'Konstruktivizm' in Stepanova, *Chelovek,* 163-169, 164.

This pictorial disintegration did not arise by accident, but was developed alongside a series of articles, amongst which she cited her artistic ambition as the 'negation of the subject'.[16] This is precisely what we see in her work, the painterly subject, falling to pieces before our eyes, as if illustrating the disruption of cohesive of the classical, Cartesian self into the fragmentation of modernism. Stepanova's interest in 'negation' was an exclusively aesthetic enquiry, however. Her use of the Russian noun *otritsanie*, 'negation' integrates artistic and political discourse; she draws on the anarchic terminology of Futurism, melded with Marxist dialectic materialism, the 'negation of the negation'.[17] Stepanova, like Rodchenko, was a Soviet functionary, working in various roles of arts administration, and therefore contractually obliged to incorporate Soviet rhetoric into both her creative and administrative work. This interplay between the rhetorics of arts, anarchy and administrative function is a rich field of connections in Stepanova's career.

Studying her essays gives us some insights into the other ways that she imbued her work with politicised rhetoric, which assist us in appreciating its revival in the act of defacement. For instance, her essays and diary entries all demonstrate that, as was the case with Rodchenko, she articulated her understanding of subjectless through metaphors of physical force. Stepanova described her artistic endeavours using the language of combat (a 'battle against the subject') and frames the fate of the painterly *predmet* using verbs of violence and conflict, advocating for 'taking the subject breaking it', delighting that 'the subject has been ousted', and aspiring towards the ultimate artistic goal of the 'negation of the subject.'[18] Furthermore, there are areas in Stepanova's writing where she echoes Rodchenko's increasingly existentialist interpretation of the term subjectlessness. In her contributions to the influential debates of the INKhUK (*Institut khudozhestvennoi kultury*), she observes that the ultimate expression of her art would be to reach a state of total reduction, wherein the *predmet* is raised as 'a new form that does not exist in nature'.[19] This refrain, of art achieving an ontologically impossible state of non-existence, evokes Rodchenko's rhetoric on this topic. It harks towards an understanding of subjectlessness which it was structurally impossible to achieve: a transcendental nothingness harnessed in the service of Soviet life. It also evokes the parameters of the unperson, its internal logic can be seen to present a nascent state, which only developed to its fullest realisation in images such as those in *10 let Uzbekistana*.

Stepanova's writing on subjectlessness therefore used the same politicised terminology, conscious nihilistic rhetoric and spectacle of aesthetic self-destruction which are very much in line

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[16] 'к отрицанию предмета.' Stepanova, 'Bespredmetnom tvorchestve', 50.

[17] 'The negation of negation.' Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1933), 837.

[18] 'Борьба предмету […] берет предмет, разобьет его […] предмет был выкинуть.' Stepanova, *Bespredmetnom tvorchestve,* 50, 52.

[19] 'новую форму которой в природе нет'. Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, 'Diskussiia v INKhUKe o sootnoshenii konstruktsii i kompozitsii (ianvar' - aprel' 1921 goda).' *Tekhnicheskaia estetik (Trudy VNIITE),* 20 (1979), 40-78, 60.

with Rodchenko's writing on the topic. But there are also unique aspects of her contribution to the discourse which suggest other ways by which her early painting is imbued with incipient political rhetoric. There is another way to interpret the motif of her faceless figures, not as subjects with their features effaced, but masked. This is significant, because it offers yet another point at which Stepanova's writing on subjectlessness becomes resonant with the Soviet discourse of denunciation: *razoblachenie*, unmasking.[20] In Stepanova's writing, the term first appeared in her essay 'On the Possibilities of Perceiving art' (1920). Here, Stepanova describes encounters with art, of both the audience and the artist, as a process of '*razoblachenie*'.[21] This verb is invoked as an extension of the process of 'cognising' art, meaning apprehending and interpreting it, to attain some higher sense of understanding. The action is included within her arsenal of artistic strategies; she describes the taste of art as a twin process of 'demolishing or unmasking.'[22] For the viewer engaging with art is a 'process of uncovering [...] unmasking'.[23] In invoking this metaphor, Stepanova is drawing on an opposition of appearance and essence which was common amongst her contemporaries. The model of the 'mask' is invoked as an interface between the two. Her usage of the term alludes to the ability to penetrate through a facade, to attain a higher plane of reality that lays behind it, hence, for her, works of art are only fully understandable once 'we are able to [...] unmask [them]'.[24]

Stepanova's use of the terminology of 'masking' and 'unmasking' to describe her artistic process draws on a wider rhetorical device common to the avant-garde. It was a recurrent motif in the writing of Malevich, who regularly returned to and reiterated the thesis of dual realities: one apparent, one actual. In 1927, the year that he began painting his first peasant series, the terminology of masking appeared regularly in his treatise *Mir kak bespredmetnost'* (*The World as Subjectless*).[25] He uses the metaphor to reference an underlying authenticity, a primary reality, which is concealed by the function of mimetic art: 'pure art has been covered with the face-mask of life'.[26] He criticises representational art for depicting not 'the human' but 'only the mask'.[27] In doing so he distinguishes 'pure art' (Suprematism) from the pastiche surrounding it. Art struggles to reveal itself through the mimetic facade which masks it, 'the hope of all mankind' is to be 'only able to take off the mask and show the true face of a person.'[28]

[20] Sheila Fitzpatrick has written the most extensive work on this topic, see *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005).

[21] Varvara Stepanova 'O vozmozhnostiakh poznaniia iskusstva' in Stepanova, *Chelovek*, 56-57. This article originally circulated in an untitled, typewritten manuscript in the catalogue for the exhibition '4-x khudozhnikov'.

[22] 'разбирать или разоблачать.' Stepanova, 'Vozmozhnostiakh', 56.

[23] Процесс открывания [...] разоблачения'. Stepanova, Ibid.

[24] 'мы в состоянии будем [...] разоблачать'. Ibid. 56.

[25] Kazimir Malevich, 'Mir Kak bespredmetnost'. Chast' II: Suprematism', in Shatskikh, *Sochinenii,* vol. 2, 105-123.

[26] 'Искусство еще закрыто ликом-маской хизни.' Ibid., 113-114.

[27] 'не изображает человека, оно изображает только маску' Ibid., 118.

[28] 'Надежда всего человечества [...] что только она способна снять маску и показать лицо подлинное человека'. Kazimir Malevich, 'Chast' II. Suprematizm kak bespredmetnost'. Glava 1' in Shatskikh, *Sochinenii,* vol. 3, 219- 324, 263.

Meaning 'to expose' or 'lay bare', the term *razoblachat'* had a long association with denunciation in Russian history, which predated the Soviet period. It can be traced back to the Orthodox church, in which the rites of ex-communication used a synonymous verb with a different prefix, *izoblachat'*, to refer to the identification and expulsion of traitors. Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted that the term gained particular prominence in Stalinist politics when the metaphors of masking and unmasking ran through the construction of Soviet subjectivity and became integral to sustaining a conception of a 'true' class identity, one which could be concealed or revealed. This became a powerful social rhetoric, gaining particular currency during the mass political panic of the purges. By 1937, Fitzpatrick notes that the metaphor 'crops up everywhere.'[29] The paranoia surrounding duplicitous 'masked' counter-revolutionaries, and the imperative for them to be exposed by the supervising state underpinned the dark logic of the terror. Stalin's speeches of this year record him describing the state's need 'to discern the real face of the enemies of the people [...] to tear the masks off them.'[30] A 1938 history of the Bolshevik party describes the task of congress as the 'need for [...] unmasking skilfully disguised enemies.'[31] The thespian metaphor of the masked figure reached its full, dramaturgical potential in the show trials.[32] The court proceedings of the first Moscow show trial, that of the 'Trotskyite-Zinovite Centre', records the state attorney, Andrzej Wyszyński, using the term *razoblachene* seven times in relation to the defendants. The case is described as 'perhaps one of the most striking examples in history the word mask acquired its real meaning'.[33] The defenders are signalled out as people who seek 'to mask their truly criminal faces', and amongst the 'principle aims' of the Trotskyite bloc is an effort to 'mask its counter-revolutionary activities'.[34] The trial is described as an endeavour to remove these masks, using verbs which emphasise violence and force: 'the masks are torn off', 'uncover once and for all your real faces'.[35]

This had a wide reach in reference to counter-revolutionary convictions, including those of victims featured in *10 let Uzbekistana*. On 1 November 1937, four months after the arrests of Khodzhaev and Ikramov, and just as the repercussions of having been acquainted with them were spreading throughout the Uzbek party, a former colleague, Konstantin Gei, wrote a personal letter to Stalin, pleading his innocence despite his personal acquaintance with Ikramov and Khodzhaev.[36] He praises the 'unmasking' of Khodzhaev's brother, and argues for his innocence on the basis that he

[29] Fitzpatrick, *Masks,* 104, footnote 3.
[30] 'разглядеть настоящее лицо врагов народа [...] сорвать них маску.' I. V. Stalin 'O nedostatkakh partiinoi raboty i merakh likvidatsii trotskistskikh i inykh dvurushnikov', in Iozef Stalin, *Sochineniia,* vol. 14, ed. by Robert H. McNeal (Stanford, 1967), 190.
[31] 'необходимости [...] разоблачения искусно замаскировавшихся врагов.' Iaroslavskii, *Istoriia VKP(b),* 318.
[32] See Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (DeKalb, 2000).
[33]'Этот, может быть, один из самых ярких примеров в истории, когда действительно слово маскировка приобретает подлинное значение' *Protsess Trotskistsko-Zinov'evskogo terroristicheskogo tsentra, 19-24 avgusta 1936 g. Moskva* (Moscow, 2018), 187.
[34] 'Маскировка всеми средствами их преступного лица'; 'Один из важнейших задач [...] замаскировать свою контрреволюционную деятельность'. Ibid., 187, 63.
[35] 'Маска собрана', 207. 'Откройте наконец и до конца свои настоящие лица.' 192.
[36] RGASPI (f. 558, op. 11, d. 725, doc. 4).

was duped by this very mask, unable to identify the 'true' counter-revolutionary identity: 'my greatest mistake was not looking closely enough, and allowing into my house an enemy whom I regarded as a harmless youth'.[37] Gei's lexical choices demonstrate a calculated effort to verify his communist credentials by adopting the terminology of official discourse. His hand-written, personal correspondence draws on the same phraseology used by official machinations of state power. Stalin, in 1938, annotated his personal copy of the history book *History of the VKP(b), Short Course* indicating that Khodzhaev should be included in a group which are to be 'unmasked'.[38] One encounters this term constantly when tracing the post-conviction fate of Ikramov and Khodzhaev. In a telegram to Stalin and Voroshilov, sent on 3 October 1937, the same noun is used to describe the 'anti-Soviet organisation' which Khodzaehv and Ikramov are accused of belonging to, it has become 'unmasked', *razoblacheno*.[39]

Given the wide reach of this phrase, it seems significant that avant-garde artists who lived within this emergent discourse began using the same rhetoric of 'masking' to describe their art, just as the term's political prominence was peaking. The use of this politicised terminology can be understood within the framework of the phenomenon of 'speaking Bolshevik', the practice of Soviet subjects seeking to comply as obviously and vocally as possibly with authorities to safeguard their position and work.[40] The fact that the rise in use of the terminology of 'masking' amongst artists coincided with a period of increasing political repression suggests it may also have a political resonance, based on its shared lexicon with the discourse of denunciation. Indeed, Stepanova was not alone in engaging with this metaphor; it had a growing currency with artists around the late 1920s. In 1928 it appeared in the manifesto of the group *Oktriabr'* (*October*) of which both Rodchenko and Stepanova were cosignatories.[41] The document declares that the participating artists reject 'speculative' work 'which occurs beneath the mask of a revolutionary theme.'[42] Here, the artists, cognisant of the need to assert the social value of their art, draw on the politicised terminology which was increasingly becoming associated with the rhetoric of purging and purifying the body politic. Malevich also endeavoured to exploit the political connotations of this particular metaphor. As early as 1919, he used the verb 'to unmask' in a distinctly Soviet sense, in reference to dividing the world into true believers of 'proletariat' versus bourgeois: 'it has unmasked [...] the bourgeois

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[37] 'Величайшей моей ошибкой было то, что я не досмотрел и позволил приблизить к своему дому врага, которого принял за безобидного юнца.' RGASPI (f.558, op.11, d.725, doc. 4, p. 3).

[38] RGASPI (f. 558, op. 3, d. 77, p. 271).

[39] 'участников антисоветских организаций, видно, что Файзулла Ходжаев, Икрамов, Рахимбаев и др. [...] разоблачено'. Telegram, 3 October 1937, RGASPI (f. 558, op. 11, d. 65, doc. 78).

[40] Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain,* 221.

[41] 'Deklaratsiia Oktriabr' (vserossiiskoe ob'edinenie rabotnikov novykh vidov khudozhestvennnogo truda)', *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 3 (March, 1928), 73-4.

[42] 'спекуляцию [...] происходящую под маской революционного сюжета' Ibid., 74.

intelligentsia's desire to attack all left-wing creativity.'[43] Malevich's follower, Boris Arvatov, also used this term when arguing for the social value of Suprematism. He claims that the representation painting tradition is a potentially subversive one: 'the mask of realism concealed the blackest reactionary desires.'[44] Arvatov enhances his critique of mimetic realism by imbuing it with political connotations of a concealed, deceptive criminality. For Malevich, Stepanova and Rodchenko, then, originally the metaphor of 'unmasking' appeared in their writing to illustrate the duality of one's interior life and the exterior 'face' presented to the world. The terminology was then catalysed by its relevance to political discourse. The acts of defacement in *Pervaia konnaia* are a mark of allegiance with the widespread ritual of unmasking at the time. This is yet another example of why it is more accurate to consider defacement as an image's semiosis rather than spoilage. It was part of a changing ritual of signs, enacted by artists who were 'competent semiotic coders and decoders', and sought to neutralise the photograph's ideological danger by Sovietizing it.[45] Stepanova used her paintbrush to invoke 'unmasking' in both her figural canvases and her photographic censorship; in each case it functioned to conceptualise the interface of art and reality, albeit in the latter, this was a highly politicised reality within which it was becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to separate statements of artistic intention from political self-identification.

Form, Function, Failure

By 1921, both Rodchenko and Stepanova were forced to confront a growing obstacle to their creative trajectory. The existential crisis which art, and by extension, artists, faced in the early years of the Bolshevik regime was complex, but it doesn't seem too extreme a simplification to say that it came down to the accusation that abstract art was fundamentally useless. Function, utility, clear and practical purpose: these were the objectives which increasingly dominated artistic discourse during the NEP (*novaia ekonomichesakia* politika) period. The subjectless canvas failed to meet these expected requirements. It had no practical function, and worse still, what was commonly stereotyped as one of its primary functions, provoking esoteric, aesthetic rumination in an art gallery, was not only now dismissed as unproductive, but decried as an individualistic indulgence. The efforts to rebrand art as a utilitarian entity is perhaps what has most captured public imagination about the Russian avant-garde. The various means by which artists' re-channelled their creativity into product design have been well documented. Stepanova was amongst this band of painters taking up the gauntlet to reinvent her painterly output as practical solutions for everyday life. In 1923 she

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[43] 'разоблачено […] стремление Интеллигенции буржуазной сделать нападение на все левое творчество.' Kazimir Malevich 'V tsarekoe vremia…', in Shatskikh, *Sochinenii*, vol. 5, 129-140, 134.

[44] 'Под маской реализма скрылись черносотенные вожделения вожделения.' Boris Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo* (Moscow, 1926), 81.

[45] Richard Clay uses this term to describe artists involved in iconoclasm. Richard Clay, 'Bouchardon's statue of Louis XV: iconoclasm and the transformation of signs' in Boldrick, *Iconoclasm,* 93-122, 118.

responded to an advert in the newspaper *Pravda* and began working as a textile designer at the First State Textile Factory.[46] The collaboration would prove to be prolific; during the first year she produced 100 drawings, twenty of which were realised as rolls of printed fabric at the factory (figs. 114).[47] If Stepanova and Rodchenko had, until this point, focused on reinventing art as a distillation of pure form, the next step was to combine it with function. Stepanova' transition into textile manufacture interpreted this brief in a straightforward sense. Her factory designs did not deviate far from the basic tenant of her artistic language; she replicated the same forms, structures and colour palettes of her paintings, albeit adapted to suit technocratic parameters, writing that the guiding force of her designs was 'technical necessity' and 'experimental laboratory work.'[48] She retained her well-established array of simplified, symmetrical shapes – black circles, intersecting lines, equilateral triangles – but instead of creating them with oil on canvas, they were stencilled onto calico prints with textile dye. The basic vocabulary of subjectless art was now, quite literally, woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Stepanova's Constructivist cloth designs have been widely celebrated, but nonetheless, the historiography of this phase of her career (and Russian Productivism more generally) is often structured around a narrative of failure. Part of the story's appeal is its pathos; the avant-garde's ambitious plans of industrial-scale production were never achieved, could never have been achieved, given the inescapable fact of Russia's industrial incapacity in the early 1920s. Alongside the unsuccessful, unrealised manufacturing quotas, one can also consider the conceptual failure of these designs, which comes down to an inexorable misalignment of form and function. There is a distinct symbolic dissonance to Stepanova's sportswear for young athletes, emblazoned with the nihilistic symbols of anarchic destruction (fig. 115). Given the violently existentialist rhetoric from which it arose, there seems something deeply disingenuous about rebranding this visual language as a wholesome, educational endeavour. Perhaps this is the crux of Constructivism's crisis: the sphere of subjectlessness did not adapt itself easily to social function.

The Russian term which perhaps best encapsulates the avant-garde endeavours to reinvent art as utilitarian is one which has no exact equivalent in English: *tselesoobraznost'*. Literally meaning 'formed in relation to a goal', it is, as Romberg notes, 'usually translated as "expediency" or "purposiveness"'.[49] There is an argument to be made that the point in Stepanova's career when her subjectless art most fulfilled its latent aspirations of *tselesoobraznost'* was in the service of censorship. The symbols of subjectlessness, after all, emerged as a negating force, imbued with an

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[46] Tulovsky, *Tekstil'*, 33.

[47] Ibid., 40.

[48] 'технической необходимости', 'опытную лабораторную работу.' Stepanova, 'Konstruktivizm', in *Chelovek*, 164.

[49] Romberg, *Gan* (2010), 140. For a detailed discussion of this term see Kiaer, *Possessions*, 8.

annihilating impulse. It was the art of deliberate erasure on a trajectory towards total nihilism. When the abyssal void symbolised by the black circle reappeared on textiles and sportswear uniforms, it was in a neutralised by context which discontinued and denied its original significance. When it reappeared in *10 let Uzbekistana,* however, its original power is reactivated. Stepanova here reframes and refocuses her visual language for a purpose which it was adept at performing: erasing subjectivity, evacuating identity and effacing an imprint of lived experience.

We can test the hypothesis of defacement fulfilling the desiderata of *tselesoobrasnost'* by examining the symbolism ingrained in *10 let Uzbekistana.* Here, textile design and defacement co-exist, united in seeming symbolic unity, and both exhibiting a strong debt to Stepanova's earlier work. Accounts of Stepanova's textile period are usually restricted to the years she spent collaborating with the First State Textile Factory, however her interest in fabric design did not end here. It was to be a continued presence in her work, manifest in her design for the layout of *10 let Uzbekistana.* Images of tapestries, rugs and weaving, laid flat, printed against a colour block background, are prevalent throughout the album, integrated into decorative double-page spreads placed between the album's chapters (fig. 115). These images of indigenous handicraft may initially seem an unusually quaint counterpoint to the album's other, technocratic images of surging hydraulic dams, mass factory production and oil rigs, but they serve multiple functions in enhancing the album's impact. Firstly, they add to the album's sumptuous tactile and visual sensory effect; the rich photogravure printing not only creates luminous colours, but its velvety finish also simulates the haptic qualities of woven cloth. Secondly, they contribute to the 'meta-portrait' of the country, providing a snapshot of its craft traditions and distinctive grammar of ornament. These combined effects enhance the album's narrative arc. *10 let Uzbekistana* was conceived as a testament to the success of Central Asia's Sovietization. Within this overarching storyline, the cotton industry was a major sub-plot. The crop was one of Uzbekistan's most lucrative natural resources, accordingly the album features panoramic photographs of fields bursting with plentiful harvest, and close-ups of cotton plants. Alongside this raw material, it also documents the success of collectivised farming, with cheerful labourers gathering armfuls of freshly-picked cotton and efficient factory production lines, hard at work transforming the raw plant into pliable material. Every page of *10 let Uzbekistana* reinforces the essential message of the Soviet party extracting the country's untapped potential into translating it into industrial efficiency and economic impact. Even the seemingly trivial details, the marginalia, the text placement, and the framing, are carefully designed into a cogent symbolic system, which aligns with the overarching propagandistic intent.

Argued throughout this thesis has been the claim that the symbolic logic of censorship is consistent with the wider sphere of avant-garde output. The arrangement and layout of *10 let Uzbekistana* offers opportunities to explore this premise in many ways, several of which have been discussed at length in the previous section. Yet, there are more insights to be gleaned into the significance of design choices in this album. Seeing as Stepanova was its co-creator, and responsible for much of its overall composition, many of the album's embedded and seemingly insignificant visual details exist in dialogue with the visual logic of her painterly practice. This is true of even pages which we might not instantly associate with her, such as the headshots of Khodzhaev and Ikramov (figs 64-65). The portraits are integrated into a complex and colourful double-page spread, which includes fluorescent acetate inlays, fold-out segments and lift-up flaps which extend the page in four directions (fig. 116). All of this affects how we engage and interact with the images. The folded 'frame' overlaying the portraits, for instance, changes the viewer into a participant, actively constructing narrative through the kinaesthetic action of opening and closing the screen. The passive reader becomes an active contributor to the story unfolding before them, a story of Uzbekistan's boundless potential and exponential growth, embodied in images which metaphorically and physically burst beyond the page boundaries.

Multiple levels of implied advocacy are embodied in the unusual framing of the photographs. Not only does the layout replicate the gridded group portraits of the 'Red Board', promoting exemplary individuals, but this implicit endorsement is accentuated by the fact that Khodzhaev and Ikramov are strategically situated in a row which, when reading from left to right, begins with an image of Kliment Voroshilov, thus setting them up in a visual continuum with Stalin's de facto deputy. The 'folding-screen' format is also reminiscent of the portable folding iconostasis, where rows of saints were arranged on hinged concertina boards. This sacral aura is further enhanced by the acetate inlays overlaying the photographs, which are printed with Stalin and Lenin quotes, symbolically rubber-stamping their approval onto the officials. These quotes add an additional, immaterial 'frame' to the portraits, their opaque text casting shadows through the plastic as it is lifted by the reader, meaning the lingering after-image of Lenin's words remain hovering over Uzbek Commissars. Cumulatively, this emphasises that there is no such thing as a purely decorative detail on this page; each design element operates as an index of social standing and artistic iconography. This is also true, it shall be argued, of the defacement of these two photographs.

As was noted in the previous section, the MAM version of *10 let Uzbekistana* is distinctive for the quasi-Constructivist aesthetics of its defacement. It is striking just how closely its censorial cuts are choreographed with the underlying artistic system. Two painted black circles are overlaid atop of

Khodzhaev and Ikramov's portraits, replicating a motif which the reader already encountered; the outside of the 'closed' screens framing these headshots is printed with a grid of dark circles (fig. 116). The size, shape and colour of the textile print's leitmotif is replicated in the defaced painting. which therefore operates as a continuation of the abstract pattern framing the photographs. Thus, when we open up the folded tabs, we find that their outer motif continues, that the dark circles now encroach upon the photo. The Commissars do not vanish so much as become coordinated with and almost camouflaged into the background design. Far from arbitrary, the defacement here blends in with the abstract ornament surrounding it. This defacement-as-design suggests a certain double logic, the very act of removing the offending image from the album's narrative arc at the same time blends it into the backdrop. The portrait is simultaneously removed from its foreground place in the narrative, and given a new role in its background, as facial features are transformed into a repeatable formula of abstract ornament.

This effect of neutralising an image's ideological danger by integrating it into abstract patterning is resonant with the history of iconoclasm. Christopher P. Heuer, in his study of Protestant iconoclasm, argues that the logic of attacking images can be understood by distinguishing between an image's *ergon* (the work itself) and *parerga* (its framing). He notes that the reason the human face was the focal point of historic iconoclasm was because it was 'the most "figuring" part of the image', the part which, unlike auxiliary, ornamental parts of images, 'portended animation and potential idolatry and hence [was] most in need of neutralisation', concluding that 'northern iconophobes distinguished between *ergon* and *parerga*, or between more or less potent aspects of an image.'[50] This notion of iconoclasm as enacting a symbolic shift from *ergon* into *parerga* is a useful framework to understand the changes in *10 let Uzbekistana*, where the face becomes pattern, and in doing so dissipates its ideological threat by taking on the properties of auxiliary ornament.

This was not the first time that this camouflaging strategy appeared in Stepanova's work. As we have seen, it was a common trope in her subjectless canvases, which also featured recognisably human characteristics blurring and blending into geometric abstraction. This is seen in her 1920 painting *Igroki v shashki* (*The Draughts Players*) (fig. 111), which features five figures huddled around a checkers board in a quasi-Cubist composition. Conventional distinctions between foreground and background collapse in a canvas which unites all its elements on a single plane and each figure is stripped of identifying attributes and rendered as an amalgam of rhomboids and rectangles. The textural and chromatic parities are further emphasised by the parallels between the figures' heads and the black draught discs, both of which are rendered as black ovals painted with thick black

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[50] Christopher P. Heuer, 'Ornamental Defacement and Protestant Iconoclasm' in *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, ed. by Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne (Princeton, 2016), 156-165, 156.

impasto brush strokes. Animate and inanimate are recorded with a single visual system as the human form dissolves into the iconography of abstraction. Stepanova therefore maintained a long-standing interest in exploring the boundaries at which the recognisably human becomes undetectably so. Whilst this began in her 1919-1920 'faceless figure' series as an aesthetic exploration, it evolved into a concrete social function in censorship. In this sense, the defacement in *10 let Uzbekistana* can be interpreted as the fulfilment of two strands in Stepanova's career, which were central to her artistic endeavours, but which always remained elusively misaligned: *bespredmetnost'* and *tselesoobraznost'*. The first is the negating, supremely existential art of subjectlessness, the second the demand for social expedience in the service of the Soviet state.

In developing the concept of subjectlessness, Stepanova repeatedly emphasised that it was on a forward path of progression: 'subjectless creativity in painting is approaching the first stage of its development.'[51] In the catalogue for the 'Tenth State Exhibition', she presents a timeline of art's sequential and systematic evolution within which subjectlessness is situated as 'the next stage [...] in the movement of world art' and the 'logical process of its [painting's] development.'[52] Her chronology of the concept therefore mirrors that of Rodchenko and Malevich, both of whom also describe subjectless painting as on a logical forward movement, propelling itself towards every further realisation. Like them, Stepanova emphasises the burgeoning potential of a painterly practice which 'contains a thousand possibilities for a wide range of new and newer achievements'.[53] She emphasises that subjectlessness should not be understood as an exclusively artistic phenomenon, 'not just a painterly trend' but as 'a new worldview', one capable of extending to encompass a much wider range of human experience, which could and should impact 'every sphere of art and life itself'.[54] Were one to search for a point in Stepanova's career where this process was taken to its furthest limit, there is a strong argument to be made that it is within *10 let Uzbekistana,* where the visual signifiers of human subjects are fully integrated with the effacing potential of subjectless signifiers, implying not just the erasure of a human presence but revoking any originary presence. Groys famous arguably for this altered timeline, suggests that avant-garde ambitions reached a delayed fulfilment only in the 1930s:

> The avant-garde's dream of placing all art under direct party control to implement its program of life-building (that is, 'socialism in one country' as the true and consummate work

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[51] 'Беспредметное творчество в живописи находится в первой стадии своего развития.' Stepanova, 'Bespredmetnom tvorchestve', 53.

[52] 'Следующий этап [...] в мировом движении искусства.' Stepanova, 'Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo', 48. 'В логическом процессе своего развития.' Stepanova, 'Bespredmetnom tvorchestve', 50.

[53] 'вместив себе тысячу возможностей к широкий простор для новых и новых достижений'. Stepanova, 'Bespredmetnoe', 50

[54] 'не только живописное течение [...] новое миросозерцание [...] все виды искусства и самую жизнь.' Stepanova, 'Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo', 48.

of collective art) had now come true. The author of this program, however, was not Rodchenko or Maiakovskii, but Stalin, whose political power made him the heir to their artistic project.[55]

Gough has claimed that, 'formalism, functionality and failure' are the defining tenants of Constructivism, claiming that the latter resulted from the inability to meld the two former categories.[56] The evidence examined in this chapter suggests that this conclusion may have been drawn prematurely. Perhaps one of the purest syntheses of form and function in Stepanova's output can be found in the acts of defacing the photographic subject. Here, she re-inscribed the elemental forces of her early art work, now activated by political context, to fulfil the instinct of radical negation which had always underlined them.

[55] Groys, *Stalinism*, 34.
[56] Gough, *Producer,* 9.

Kazimir Malevich

The Sovietization of Suprematism

Amongst the most prominent and prolific explorations of 'facelessness' in Russian art are Malevich's late works. For the last eight years of his life, the artist devoted himself primarily to the theme of the Russian peasant, rendered in portraits stripped of physiognomy, with slab-like shields standing in for human faces (figs. 117-123). Scholars have historically struggled to reconcile this series into the trajectory of Malevich's career. Until 1927, one could trace a linear course in his work, a steady advance towards absolute abstraction. In March of that year, however, Malevich travelled to Berlin and returned three months later, embarking upon what appeared to be an abrupt artistic U-turn: he returned to representational painting. Precisely what prompted this change of path remains a source of debate: why would an artist who so vocally criticised the mimetic painting tradition return to it? Early scholarship concluded that this must have been a grudging concession, that Malevich's hand had been forced by the increasingly repressive cultural climate. Evgenii Kovtun, in one of the earlier extended analyses of this period, described Malevich's peasant series as emblematic of the avant-garde being 'stopped in their tracks.'[1] His view was to be reinforced by subsequent scholarship, as Lodder notes:

> These late works, in which Malevich returned to a figurative content, used to be regarded as an ideological and aesthetic retreat from the high point of Suprematism. They were seen in an entirely negative light as being symptomatic of Malevich's comprise with (and ultimately defeat by) the Soviet regime, as well as epitomising his betrayal of modernism.[2]

Although Charlotte Douglas challenged this assumption as early as 1978, it continued to prevail in Malevich scholarship for decades afterwards.[3] Benjamin Buchloh characterised his late works as 'ciphers of regression', while Matthew Drutt attributes their unique qualities to Malevich being 'increasingly ostracised by a cultural bureaucracy now dominated by Realist academicians.'[4] Perhaps most dramatically, Andrew Wachtel attributes 'the depression and deep sadness produced [...] by these faceless portraits' to their embodiment of 'what was perhaps the greatest tragedy of our

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[1] 'Остановленный на бегу.' Evgenii Kovtun, *Avangard, ostanovlennyi na begu* (Leningrad, 1989), 21.

[2] Christina Lodder, 'Introduction' in *Rethinking Malevich,* x-xxii, xix.

[3] Charlotte Douglas, 'Malevich's Paintings - Some Problems of Chronology', *Soviet Union*, 5: 2 (1978), 301-326.

[4] Benjamin Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return in European Painting', in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London, 1992), 222-238; *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, ed. by Matthew Drutt (New York, 2003), 21.

century – the blindness of [...] people who "stepped on the throat of their own song" and who in so doing helped to bring unheard misery to themselves and to millions of others.'[5]

This 'martyrdom' model, however, has been widely discredited by recent studies. There is little evidence that Malevich's return to representation was unwilling. Indeed, Malevich's published writings and personal correspondence from 1927-1935 strongly indicate that he conceived of these late works as a continuation of Suprematism, rather than its curtailment.[6] Reassessing the 'peasant series' from this point of view has proved to be a fruitful line of enquiry in recent scholarship, one which this chapter will build on, by illuminating new facets of a broader process which we may characterise as the 'Sovietization of Suprematism'. Indeed, the late paintings are particularly pertinent for this thesis because they present a striking example of the intersecting aesthetics of art and censorship. Several scholars, including Mikhail Karasik, have already remarked upon the strong formal echo between the effaced features of these late works and practices of photographic defacement.[7] The newly uncovered versions of *Pervaia konnaia* provide more corresponding case studies: the shield-like slabs of black paint and their skewed placement over the portrait of Rakitin, for instance, recall Malevich's distorted, abstracted pencil sketches, whilst the smooth, levelled paint over Gorbachev's image, its contours sharply defined against the white background, create an aesthetic effect analogous to Malevich's *Tri zhenskie figury* canvas (fig. 123).

A persistent strain in scholarship on Malevich's peasant series has been to read his faceless figures as reactions to (or forewarnings of) the erased subjectivity of the purge period. This interpretation offers a dramatic coda to Malevich's career where one can cite these works as a fulfilment of this symptom, perhaps the ultimate expression of art expropriated, involuntarily, to devastating political ends. However, this claim is speculative and unsubstantiated: Malevich was not involved in photography, photobooks or defacement in any way. Moreover, he died in May 1935, over a year before the first Moscow show trial and the most intense phase of Stalinist repression. Yet, it is significant that the peasant series did not end with Malevich's death. It continued, just as Suprematism continued, perpetuated and practised by his legions of students, collaborators and followers.[8] Within this oeuvre of 'second-generation Suprematism', the motif of the rural worker and faceless figure prevailed, its presence expanding and multiplying across canvases numbering into the hundreds, painted and repainted by a wide range of artists spanning the entire 1930s and continuing

[5] Andrew Wachtel, 'Meaningful Voids: Facelessness in Platonov and Malevich,' in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts,* ed. by Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell (New York, 2000), 250-272, 272. For other exponents of this view, see Dmitry Sarabianov, 'Malevich at the Time of the "Great Break"', in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician,* ed. by Evegeniia A. Petrova, trans. by Sharon McKee (Paris, 1991), 142-147.
[6] See Barr, *Vozbuzhdenie* for an extended analysis.
[7] Karasik, *Photobook,* 272.
[8] See Evgeniia Petrova and Elena V. Basner, *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia 1920s - 1950s* (St. Petersburg, 2000).

into the 40s (figs. 124-168). These artists were therefore active and exhibiting throughout the two years spanning the height of the purges, known as the *Ezhovshchina*, the 'time of Ezhov', and had first-hand experience of its devastating effects; several were themselves subject themselves to NKVD investigation and arrest.[9] This chapter will investigates why facelessness proved to be such a generative motif for Malevich's followers throughout the 1930s, exploring to what extent the political
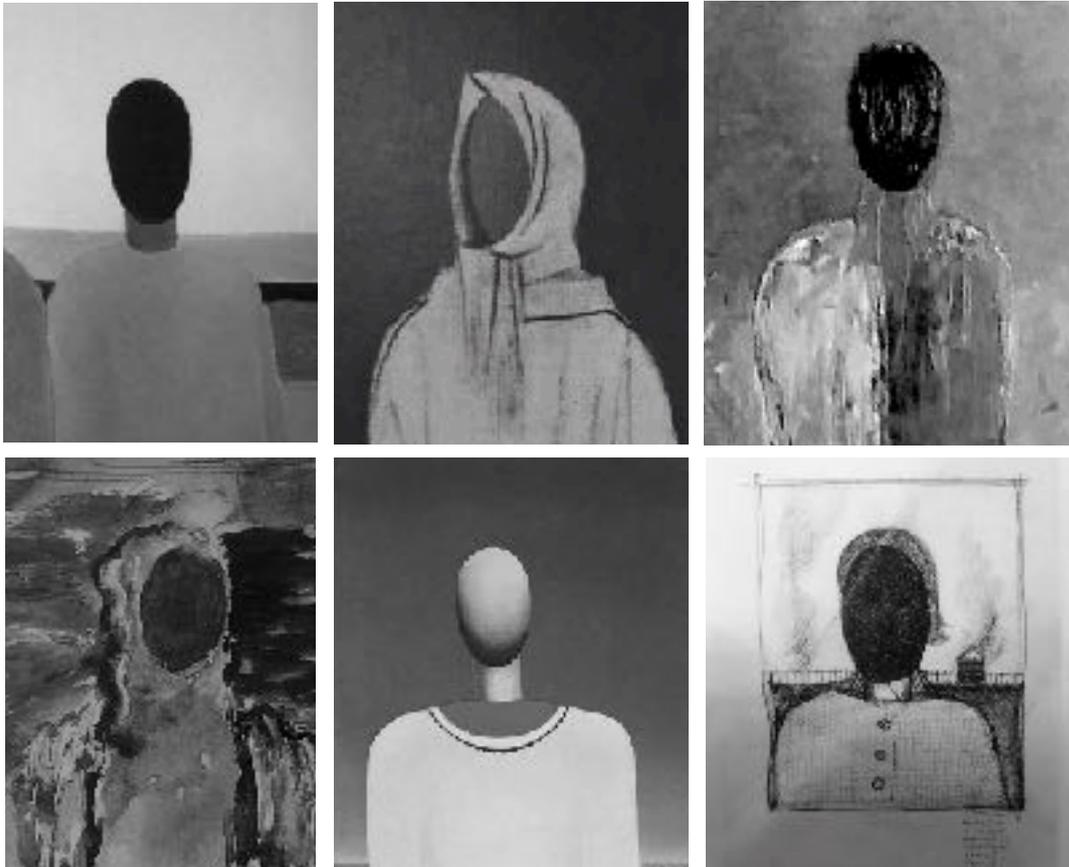
123.   Kazimir Malevich, *Tri zhenskie figury,* 1928-32. Oil on canvas, 46 x 63 cm. St. Petersburg: RMSP(detail).
124.   Konstantin Rozhdetvenskii. *Devushka v belom* (detail), 1935. Oil on wood. 23.5 x 17. Private collection: Artist's estate.
125.   Nikolai Suetin, *Zhenskie portret*, 1933. Paper, pencil, 22.2 x 17.4 cm. Moscow: Private Collection.
126.   Vera Ermolaeva, Zhenskaia figura (detail), 1928. Gouache and pencil on paper, 35.4 x 23.5cm. St. Petersburg: Private Collection.
127.   Anna Leporskaia, *Poiasnaia figura v zheltom* 1932-34. Oil on canvas. 63 x 51.5 cm. Moscow: TGM.
128.   Eduard Krimmer, *Zhenshchina s pshenichnym sponom* (detail), 1929-30. Oil on canvas, 66 x 45cm. Moscow: Y. M. Nosov Collection.

context was a contributing factor. It will be argued that, if not in the works of the teacher, then, is it in the output of Malevich's students that there is good reason to identify a dialogue between Suprematist painterly practice and social reactions to the exigencies of Stalinism.

The Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism

Figures 123-128 shows paintings created by six different artists from 1928-1935. Each one recreates a variation on the same motif: the human portrait with the face schematised into a two-dimensional ellipsis. This iconographic continuity is not accidental; the first image was made by Malevich, and the

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[9] This refers to Nikolai Ezhov's leadership of the NKVD from November 1936 to November 1938.

rest by students of his from the art school GINKhUK (*Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury*). Whilst it is common to identify influence from master to student, this level of derivation seems unusual: the works of Malevich and his students are here not merely similar, but almost indistinguishable. They are united by the signature characteristic of the erased human face. It is as if the students have been trained to recreate a replicable template, and indeed, this is not too far from the truth. Malevich's pedagogical practice deviated from conventional curricula, and at times resembled something more akin to a franchising of his artistic legacy. Malevich began teaching in 1919 and worked at various different institutions over the years, of which the two most influential were UNOVIS (*Utverditeli novogo iskusstva*), where he was employed from 1920-1923, and GINKhUK, where he worked from 1923-1926.[10] The ethos of both institutions demanded a deviation from the traditional model of the art academy. As the schools were sponsored by the Soviet state, staff working within them were encouraged to adopt a technocratic interpretation of art which would be more in line with communist cultural ideals. Accordingly, GINKhUK was rebranded from a school to a 'research institute', within which Malevich emphasised the mathematic principles underlying his art by naming his course 'painterly science' and structuring his teaching through quasi-algorithmic charts.[11] Formulaic and systematic, these charts demonstrated how Malevich's Suprematist language could be broken down into component elements, then recombined according to a set of pre-determined rules. Students trained in this artistic operating system were licensed to generate successive Suprematist output.

This atypical educational structure explains, to some degree, the omnipresence of the trope of facelessness amongst the GINKhUK alumni; the artists were trained in a pedagogical system which primed them to duplicate rather than deviate from Suprematist pictorial statements. These trends and connections were for a long time overlooked because, as Evgeniia Petrova notes, 'the names of Malevich's professional associates were seldom mentioned in Russia prior to the mid-1980s. Their works were hardly ever exhibited.'[12] The paintings were sequestered in private collections, with limited availability for researchers. This situation changed dramatically in the 2000s. Renewed interest in artists such as Anna Leporskaia, Vera Ermolaeva, Nikolai Suetin and Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii was ignited as they were absorbed into the orbit of expanding Malevich research, spurred by the macroeconomic trends of Russia's booming art market, which translated into a renewed museological interest in the works of these and other formerly-little known artists.[13] These

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[10] For a detailed history of this institution see Pamela Kachurin, 'Malevich as Soviet Bureaucrat: GINKhUK and the survival of the Avant-Garde, 1924-1926', in Lodder, *Rethinking Malevich*, 121-138.

[11] Petrova, *Circle*, 7.

[12] Petrova, *Circle*, 3.

[13] Monographs on these artists include: Tatiana Goriacheva(ed.), *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin* (Vaduz, 2012); Ann Leporskaia, *Zhivopis' Anna Leporskaia* (Moscow, 1996); Liudmila Vostretsova (ed.) *Vera Ermolaeva 1893-1937* (St. Petersburg, 2008); and Tatiana Mikhienko (ed.), *Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii, k 100-letiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow, 2006),

favourable conditions prompted the publication of monographs and organisation of several significant exhibitions on artistic groups working in the 1930s, bringing to light the works of an art collective known as the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism.[14] Formed two years after the closure of GINKhUK in 1926 by four of its former students, the group was conceived as a sequel to GINKhUK.[15] Members met weekly at Ermolaeva's apartment and hosted exhibitions, mostly in Leningrad. It is only now, with improved accessibility to the group's output as a whole, that their collective 'oeuvre' can be apprehended in something close to its entirety. This new viewpoint makes it possible to discern the dominant trends and symbols in the works, amongst which the most persistent of all was their propensity to 'deface' their own portraits.

The trope of facelessness arises hundreds of times throughout their paintings and drawings. Figures 124-168 demonstrate something of the sheer scope and singularity of these stylised portraits. Reams of paper and rolls of canvas were devoted to recreating these images of the human face rendered as a disconcertingly featureless plane, without expression or identity. A finite formal range unites these works which are all chromatically and compositionally limited, almost as if forming part of a collaborative project towards which all group members participated. The sitters are always anonymous. Even the image captions refuse to inform us of any measure of human identity, instead obfuscating them further with generalising tropes such as 'man', 'woman', 'peasant'. Malevich's input is writ clear on these paintings. In 1932-1934 for instance, Leporskaia painted a series of portrait busts which strip back the sitter to a white, negative space, set against stratified backgrounds of landscapes rendered as ribbons of contrasting colours (figs. 130-134). The replicative format of these paintings finds its origin in Malevich's *Slozhnoe predchuvstvie* (*Complex Foreboding*) (fig. 129), which also features precisely the same colour palette and iconography. The composition and colour palette align so closely with Leporskaia's work that it is only through the captions that we can distinguish them. Suetin, Krimmer, Ermolaeva and Rozhdestvenskii, meanwhile, all explored the theme of the Russian peasant in their work (figs. 135-146). Their choice of media reflects that favoured by their teacher, the images are either thumbnail pencil sketches of figures framed in hand-drawn boxes, or colourful canvases, painted with unmixed hues. The images are iconographically unified, with their agrarian theme signified through a limited array of bucolic backgrounds, sartorial details and agricultural attributes. Whether full-length figures or cropped busts, all are united in one trait: the site where we expect to see expression, individuality, is erased, and instead of meeting the reciprocated gaze of a portrait subject, the viewer finds themselves confronted with a black slab.

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[14] See the five-volume catalogue from the 2017 exhibition at Moscow Museum of Modern Art, *Modernizm bez manifesta. Russkoe iskusstvo 1920-1950*, ed. by Nadezhda Plungian and Aleksandra Strukova, vol. 1-5 (Moscow, 2017-2018)
[15] 'Gruppoi zhivopisno-plasticheskoro realizma'.

There is something inherently sinister about the overall compositions of these works. The faceless voids create a disturbing impact, a force which is enhanced by the cumulative effect of their repetition. The facial erasures are not complete; some images retain details such as strands of hair, surreally detached beards, or headscarves tied over negative space. These indices of human identity are all the more uncanny for their contrast with the total lack of interiority of the portrait subject. Instead of a human face, we find a painterly non-presence, a citation of Suprematist symbols, which seems to recall entry points into alternate dimensions, beyond the picture plane. Analysis of these paintings is complicated by the indeterminacy of their status as portraiture. Indeed, one could argue that it is inaccurate to even group these images under this term. The faceless figures who populated the canvases of the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism invert many of distinguishing characteristics which we associate with the genre. Richard Brilliant, for instance, has argued that portraiture distinguishes itself from other art forms because:

> A real, named person seems to exist somewhere within or behind the portrait; therefore, any portrait is essentially denotative, that is to say, it refers specifically to a human being, that human being has or had a name, and that name, a proper name, identifies the individual and distinguishes him or her from all others.[16]

If this framework is our working definition, then the images seen in figures 124-168, with their constituent anonymity do not meet the requirements. All individual traits and identifying characteristics are collapsed, leaving only the trace of their own erasure.

The sheer frequency with which these artists returned to this theme in itself proves that facelessness was far from a passing phase. It was a consistent source of interest and a coherent driving force uniting a network of artists, and its prolificacy is proportionate to its value. And yet the question still remains, why? What was the exact significance of this practice which caused it to be returned to so repeatedly, interrogated at such length? One answer lies simply in the legacy of Suprematist aesthetics. Whilst, unlike many Soviet art groups, the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism never released a manifesto or programme charter, the consistent aesthetic trends of their work speak to a cogent artistic plan, clearly invested in perpetuating the ideas of their paterfamilias, Malevich. In what follows, however, I shall argue that the ubiquity of the faceless trope cannot be fully explained merely by a loyal allegiance to the Suprematist system. In order to capture the significance of the trope, and to understand the fact of its omnipresence in the Soviet cultural milieu, we must explore the political exigencies which lent a certain urgency and relevance to this particular symbol, above others. Specifically, the contemporaneous practice of photographic defacement would have been a likely catalyst, as in both cases, the individual is effaced to a state of universal abstraction. In what

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[16] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London, 1991), 46.

follows, I will first explore the significance this motif had for Malevich, before considering how it was adapted by his followers.

'Suprematism has removed the human face'

Writing in 1927 Malevich declared that 'new art, such as Suprematism has removed the human face.'[17] This is one of few statements within with Malevich refers specifically to his action of painterly 'defacement'. Tellingly, it appeared in Malevich's treatise *Mir kak bespredmetnost'*. As the title indicates, in this text Malevich develops his notion of 'subjectlessness' from a concept restricted to art to one which characterises an entire worldview. Originally, Malevich had defined the sphere of subjectlessness as limited to works of abstract art, by 1927 however, his focus expanded to include a variety of artistic movements, including figurative ones.[18] In doing so, he situates subjectlessness on an alternate trajectory and extends its endpoint. Whilst *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* argued that subjectless was the final stop on art's ascension towards the absolute, in *Mir kak bespredmetnost',* his development of the concept underwent a further philosophical shift, towards an understanding of subjectlessness as an existential state, without boundaries and hence without an end, enabling him to ultimately extend its reach to the entire 'world'. When Malevich writes that Suprematism 'removes the human face' he describes an active process, an intentioned dismantling of human form, and by correlation, human identity. But this dismantling is not total, it leaves the presence of its own erasure; the object is not done away with so much as reduced down to its basic formal core. The fact that Malevich specifically situates facelessness within the parameters of subjectlessness is significant. Indeed, this validates the previous two chapters' exploration of this same hypothesis with reference to Rodchenko and Stepanova's work. In the case of Malevich, the connection is even more overt, however; he used the image of the human figure, stripped of its identity, to embody the full development of his concept of subjectlessness.

Adrian Barr argues that the semi-abstract iconography of Malevich's peasant series was developed as a way to give his theoretical ideas visual form.[19] The corporeality of the figure combined with the incorporeality of his pure form embodies the duality which was a constant theme in his writing. This is well illustrated in a series of thumbnail sketches Malevich made which recreated the schematic human head in pencil on paper (figs. 147-154). This series of sketches are an important visual stepping stone between the two phases of Malevich's career: the nonrepresentational and representational. When situated alongside his earlier, abstract Suprematist drawings, we see a line of

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[17] 'Новое Искусство, как и Супрематизм, выключило лицо человека'. Kazimir Malevich, 'Mir kak bespredmetnost'. Chast' II: Suprematism' in Shatskikh, *Sobranie Sochinenii,* vol. 2, 105-123, 118.

[18] Kazimir Malevich, 'Zhivopis v probleme arkhitektury', in Shatskikh, *Sobranie sochineii,* vol. 2, 129-140.

[19] Adrian Barr, 'From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*: Theoretical Shifts, Nova Generatsiia, and the Late Paintings' in *Rethinking Malevich*, 203-20.

dialogue between the early drawings, which consist of flat, dark, tapered ovals suspended against a blank background, and the post-1928 ones, which replicate this form, but incorporate it into humanoid forms. Malevich's 1916/1917 drawings shows thickset, blunted ellipses drawn with dense graphite pigment, loosely framed in a hand-drawn box. By 1930-1931, he revisited this essential schema, but gradually developed it to take on certain lifelike characteristics. The ovals are perched atop of a rudimentary sketch of a human frame, the suggestion of a neck and shoulders. Sometimes these develop into a fully-fledged figure study, a clothed character situated in a landscape. When viewed together, the drawings present a spectrum ranging from pure abstraction to life study. Along this gamut, it is the transitional phases in the centre which are particularly significant, as they show the nascent potential for Suprematist shape to adapt and evolve into mimetic drawing.

Images such as these and texts such as *Mir kak bespredmetnost'* demonstrate how Malevich's decision to 'deface' his portraits can be understood as an extension and development of the concept of subjectlessness. Granted, there is nothing in his writing to suggest that he was responding to social circumstances. His treatise is concerned with universal metaphysical rumination, not politics commentary or critique. However, whilst Malevich's own descriptions of the motif of facelessness describe it as an apolitical endeavour to represent his increasingly existentialist worldview, the same does not automatically apply to his followers. Indeed, the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism is an important case study for the rise of painterly defacement as a trope precisely because there are several cases in which its members' work references the repressive political climate of the 1930s. When we consider this output, it becomes more difficult to regard subjectlessness as a purely aesthetic concern. These works demonstrate the difficulty of determining when the spectrum of subjectless ended as a form of artistic exploration, and when it engaged political reality.

Rozhdestvenskii is an important artist to consider in this regard. From 1931-1934 he created scores of pencil drawings based around the simple composition of a single figure, stranded in depthless space, their face rounded off to an ellipse and densely filled in with opaque graphite (fig. 140- 146). Their source of origin in Malevich's pencil drawings is clear. These are high-contrast images; the majority of the picture plane is untouched, with the artist's light touch simply tracing a linear framework enhanced with some gentle pencil shading. Against this visual vacancy, the face obtrudes as a compact, solid mass of jet-black graphite. We can sense the weight and pressure of the hand needed to create this colour, a physical force of mark-marking which intensifies to the atmosphere of these images. By obscuring the facial features, the most communicative sign of human emotion, the drawings read as sparse and haunting images of alienation.

There are many ways by which these studies resemble the defacement found in Rodchenko and

Stepanova's albums: chronologically, visually and tonally. Moreover, a small body of works substantiates the hypothesis that these works were catalysed by political circumstance. These are a series of sketches Rozhdestvenskii (who originally hailed from Tomsk) made while travelling back to Siberia throughout the mid-1930s. Here he witnessed the tragic effects of collectivisation and political repression.[20] During this time, the climate of arrests, widespread executions and ongoing denunciations began to inform his work. His sketchpads recorded in an almost documentary manner the devastating repercussion of the campaign of arrests which swept through the countryside. Rozhdestvenskii created several paintings depicting public hangings, recording the fate of victims of politic violence in watercolour sketches or ink studies (fig. 155-158). The artist sought to cover up and disguise these images, presumably aware of the potential danger they posed. He concealed some of his watercolours on the reverse of canvases, and falsely backdated several others.[21] The artist annotated his sketches with the term 'Kolchakovshina', thereby implying that, rather than being made in 1931-32, they were records of the 'White Terror' during the Civil War, when the Imperial army was under the rule of Aleksandr Kolchak. This indicates that the images reference Tsarist political violence, which it was of course acceptable to criticise. These sketches are important to contextualise Rozhdestvenskii's peasant series as a whole, supporting the argument that the atmosphere of alienation and incipient danger in these images is not contrived on the part of the viewer, but part of a larger testimony to the human loss of the period.

Furthermore, there are other works from artists affiliated with the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism which are explicitly critical of political injustice under Stalin. Amongst the most famous examples of these is the 1936 painting *Sud naroda* (*People's Court*) made by a colleague of the group, Solomon Nikritin (fig. 159). The canvas shows a bare room whose contained space is closely packed with a large table around which are seated five male judges, symmetrically arranged around a stabilising central figure who stands out in black, and is positioned frontally to face and make eye contact with the viewer. The image's power comes from its intense, congested atmosphere; the muted colours are drained of their vitality, and the blurring outlines and unfocused lens lend a sense of a dreamscape, one which more closely resembles a nightmare when we take into account the cropped composition and its claustrophobic effect. The power of the image is further enhanced by the conceptual play involved in its composition. When we meet the sightline of the central judge, we realise that our spatial situation as a viewer is intentional, that in this fictional court we are playing the role of the defendant. Nikritin's painting has become so associated with Stalinist justice that it has been used to illustrate the front covers of history books about the terror.[22] Its painterly evolution

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[20] Irina Vakar, 'V orbite novogo iskusstva. pisets Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii', in Mikhienko, *Rozhdestvenskii,* 10-26, 17.
[21] Mikhienko, *Rozhdestvenskii,* 526.
[22] See Goldman, *Terror and Democracy.*

is significant for the topic of this chapter because the early studies Nikritin made show that in his original conception of the image, he intended to paint the five judges as faceless figures (fig. 160). In this sketch, a row of blank, unmodulated faces which could be lifted straight from Malevich's peasant series look out at the defendant. This is an artist drawing on the language of Suprematist form for explicitly politically critical ends.

If few in number (the political context of the time made it dangerous to risk such subversive content), such works are sufficient to shift the balance of the interpretive spectrum around which this chapter has been structured away from the possibility of the faceless figure as an apolitical, aesthetic exploration of abstract form. Works such as Nikritin's and Rozhdestvenskii's show that some of these artists harnessed the visual logic of Suprematism to function as a simulacrum of political reality, with its enforced anonymities and stripped identities. An artistic language which had originated as an esoteric, metaphysical quest evolved into something much more literal, as the surreal rapidly became all too real, and creative flights of imagination came to resemble almost straightforward reportage. A striking coda to this style of imagery is found in the work of Ermolaeva, the founding member of the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism. Ermolaeva also 'defaced' her works, creating a series of child studies, with blank, expressionless faces as well as a peasant series, drawing closely on Malevich's iconography (figs. 161-168). Her portraits which rendered human presence as an anonymised absence are particularly poignant given her eventual fate. Ermolaeva was amongst six members of the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism (also Lev Gal'perin, Vladimir Sterligov, Maria Kazanskaia, Nina Kogan and Aleksandr Baturin) who were arrested by the NKVD from 25-27 December 1934.[23] Rozhdestvenskii escaped arrest despite the fact that his name was mentioned in the NKVD indictment against Ermolaeva as a potential anti-Soviet collaborator.[24] Ermolaeva would be the only one to face prosecution, perhaps surprising given that none of her existing works are explicitly political in content. The archival records concerning Ermolaeva's arrest have been preserved, and show that an NKVD file was opened on her in 1932. It is unknown how or why suspicions were initially aroused: the writer Semen Laskin alleges the work of an informer, but there are no informant reports in the case files.[25] The files documenting and describing Ermolaeva's arrest accuse her of engaging in an 'anti-Soviet activity manifested in the propaganda of anti-Soviet ideas, and an attempt to draw anti-Soviet intelligentsia around herself'.[26] A note attached to the investigation file reads:

[23] Antonina Marochkina, 'Vera Ermolaeva, "Reineke-lis" i NKVD' in *OT'TISK Imprint Ezhegodnyi al'manakh pechatnoi grafiki* (St. Petersburg, 2003), 46-51, 47.

[24] 'Её квартиру посещали художник [...] Рождествкнскии К. И.' Investigation report. 27 March 1935, UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 34).

[25] Semen Laskin, *Roman so strannostiami* (St. Petersburg, 1997), 31.

[26] 'антисоветская деятельность выражающаяся в пропаганде антисоветских идей и попытке сорганизовать вокруг себе антисоветский настроенную интеллигенцию'. UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 4).

> According to reports by artists, Vera Mikhailovna Ermolaeva, formerly a noblewoman, previously associated with the Mensheviks [...] has recently attempted to form a circle of reactionary elements around her, from those amongst the intelligentsia. At Ermolaeva's apartment, there are conspiracy gatherings of groups of people united by their shared political attitudes [...] V. Ermolaeva often organises exhibition-viewings of the works of artists associated with her [...] and their students, at her apartment. The exhibitions are held behind closed doors. Those who do not share the views of Ermolaeva [...] do not have access. Amongst those around Ermolaeva [...] the view has been disseminated that Soviet art is on the wrong track and is gradually dying.[27]

There are at least four distinct allegations mentioned here: association with the Mensheviks (Ermolaeva's brother had been a member before his death in 1919), unauthorised public gathering ('conspiracy gatherings'), and criticism of the path of Soviet art. An investigation report written on 29 March 1935 repeated the latter accusation, claiming that Ermolaev went 'against the party line in the sphere of art'.[28] Yet precisely what was deemed so problematic about the content of her work is unknown. Whilst records show that, following this arrest warrant, a search of her apartment led to the confiscation of a stack of social-democratic newspapers, private letters and a few graphic plates, the seized works have not been recovered, and therefore the specific details of their subversive content remain unknown.[29] The statement of indictment deems Ermolaeva to 'be the author of a number of counter-revolutionary works of art, which were distributed amongst her circle. Ermolaeva most severely poisoned her negative attitude to Soviet reality.'[30] Yet, even the NKVD's capacity to invent justification for arrests was stretched when articulating why Ermolaeva's work was specifically anti-Soviet. Ultimately, the faintly ridiculous reasoning was that a poem she illustrated showing a cartoon fox depicted a 'petty go-getter hired by the GPU.'[31] On 29 March 1935, NKVD meeting minutes record her to have been found to be a socially dangerous element, leading to her being tried on 20 September 1937, facing charges under Article 58-10 and 58-11, and was sentenced to death, executed by firing squad six days later.[32]

Ermolaeva's surviving oeuvre, with its anonymised images of subjects stripped of their identifying characteristics who gaze unseen and unseeing out of the canvas, now appears to be an

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[27] 'По имеющимся данным художниками Ермолаевой Верой Михайловной быв. дворянкой, раннее связанной с меньшевиками [...] за последнее время делается попытка сорганизовать вокруг себя реакционные элементы из среди интеллигенции. У Ермолаевой на квартире происходят законспирированные сборища группы лиц, которых объединяет общность политических установок [...] Ермолаева В. М. у себя на квартире часто устраивает выставки-просмотры работ художников, связанных с ней [...] и их учеников. Просмотры закрытые, на кои не разделяющие взглядов Ермолаевой [...] не имеют доступа. Среди окружающих Ермолаева [...] распространяют мнение, что искусство в СССР находится на ложном пути и постепенно отмирает.' UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 4).

[28] 'против линии партии в области искусство'. Investigation report, 27 March 1935, UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 34).

[29] Marochkina, 'Ermolaeva', 48.

[30] 'Ермолаева также является автором ряде контрреволюционных произведений которые распространяла среди своего окружения в этих произведениях Ермолаева наиболее резко отравила свое отрицательное отношение к советской действительности.' Investigation report, 27 March 1935, UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 34).

[31] 'проныра мелкого калибра устроившийся на службу в ГПУ'. UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 37).

[32] 'Соц. опасн. елемент'. Abstract from minutes on a NKVD meeting on Ermolaeva, 29 March 1935, UFSBSP (f. 48469, d. 1, l. 5)

eerie prophecy of her eventual fate. The 1934 portrait of an unidentified woman in a hat, created mere months before her arrest, could be a self-portrait of a woman who was soon to have her citizenship revoked, her status as a political subject rescinded and her material records in history removed, leaving only a silhouette figuring its own absence (fig. 168). Her paintings now seem prescient of what T. J. Demos has called 'modernity's phantoms': 'the disturbances and lingering presences, or presences of absence in the order of visual appearance, through which current social rotations manifest the symptomatic traces and uncanny signs of modernism's history of violence and exclusions.'[33] Yet, explicating the precise nature of political engagement in such works presents an enduringly open-ended question. The narrative remains a tangled necklace, with only so many connective links which can be teased out before arriving at a knot of unknowability. Various viable scenarios present themselves. If we accept that the Group of Painterly-Plastic Realism were catalysed by the politics of invisibility under Stalin, then their application and adaption of their art as a response to this can be seen in two ways. Either it can be deemed a resistance, a subversive determination to continue a tradition of inherent creativity in a period where it was no longer tolerated. Alternatively, it can be seen as a capitulation, a realisation of what Komar and Melamid described as the 'full and horrifying powers of the avant-garde', offering further proof that, somehow, the art of negation, elimination and absence, was somehow inherently censorial, and that obediently following Suprematism to its logical endpoint could only fully realised in a climate where human existence had become easily erasable.

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[33] T. J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin, 2013), 13.

CONCLUSION

When he visited Moscow in 1927, Walter Benjamin observed that the conditions of cultural life in Soviet Russia had created a curiously symbiotic relationship between artists and officials: 'in Russia [...] the intellectual is above all a functionary, working in the departments of censorship, justice, or finance.'[34] It is telling that the first department that Benjamin cites in this statement is censorship. In doing so, he posits that Soviet censorship was not a unilateral imposition of power from above and that it was not wholly resisted by those circumscribed by it, but that it was one part of the myriad fluctuating forces which constituted cultural production.

Almost a century after Benjamin's observation, a scholarly shift towards censorship studies has succeeded in removing the moral opprobrium from the concept in order to facilitate its study. The premise of a culturally productive side to censorship underpins this thesis, which has explored how avant-garde artists responded to and even reproduced the aesthetics of censorship in their work. This line of enquiry was prompted by a Komar and Melamid article, which insinuated that the affiliation between the Russian avant-garde and the early Soviet state was not as politically innocent as it is often presented. Specifically, they implied there was something inherently censorial about the visual language of Malevich's modernism, that there was something prophetic about its self-annulling symbolism. The writers raised this possibility anecdotally, rather than developing it as a substantiated argument. In taking up the gauntlet and testing this hypothesis across numerous different media and time periods, this thesis has given the complex web of issues embroiled in this relationship the attention it deserves.

In the forty years since Komar and Melamid's article, the field of art history has changed to provide a multitude of ways to interpret the interactions between artists and institutions of censorship in more nuanced ways, which accommodate the full complexity of cultural exchange. This rich and growing body of scholarship has been extended and energised here by taking the atypical and under-utilised approach of exploring censorship as an aesthetic phenomenon. The argument has been built around close visual analysis of case studies which have been visibly censored, redacted, or attacked. The focus here has been on the formal presence of the censor's cut:

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[34] Walter Benjamin, 'Moskau' in *Selected Writings, vol, II: 1927-1934,* ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge, 1999), 38.

its signs, shapes, techniques and textures. Paying attention to these surface phenomena enables a reassessment of content which is so often hidden in plain sight, and pushes historical inquiry in new directions.

Cumulatively, the examples demonstrate the extent to which censorship was not a case of mindless obliteration of an image, but a step in its semiosis, its changing ritual of signs. In making this point, however, the thesis also raises challenging questions about artists' professional affiliations and relationships with power brokers. It has been a truism of the humanities post-Foucault that artists' creative activity is not produced independent of structural power: clarifying the precise mechanisms of these interactions remains a rich area of research with regards to the Russian avant-garde. This thesis has contributed to it by considering interactions with censorship throughout the interwar period, tracing the changing allegiances of artists and institutions. This research confirms that the relationship between artists and censorship was not single or linear, but a spectrum of varying responses. The balance of symbolic power shifted depending on where artists were at that time in relation to their affiliation with state institutions, and their situation within the changing political climate. This fluctuating network of changing social networks and professional connections has necessitated a chronology which allows insights into artists in different phases of their career, including periods when they operated as both insiders and outsiders of the state arts institutions.

Section one began with the late Imperial era, where avant-garde identity was still predicated on their anti-establishment status. It has shown that this position outside of the dominant field of power did not obviate their stylistic mimicry of its strokes and symbols. This symbolic borrowing is then shown to have grown in complexity, as artists were absorbed into the institutions of the early Soviet state, working alongside censors there and adapting their artistic styles to its ends. Section two moved on to consider ad-hoc, individual strands of censorship, focusing on the phenomena of defacement. This not only revealed a consistent iconography but also called attention to an instance where the artists were compelled to perform the tasks of political censorship themselves, with their iconoclasm coming full-circle in what was as much a means of personal survival as professional advancement. Section three returned to the field of painting, considering the same tropes and styles which had been used to shine a light on the aesthetics of censorship, now reflecting this own glare to reveal a pinball effect of symbolic mimicry, from creator to censor and back.

Recurrent throughout the interlinked case studies which illuminate this account have been three simple forms: the black square, the black bar, the black circle. These shapes, well-established in avant-garde iconography, have reappeared as a means of redacting text, removing politically sensitive content and defacing photographs of the denounced. Highlighting their role in this function

offers an illuminating counterpoint to their more prominent manifestations as oil paintings, revealing instead a symbolic unity according to the semantics of erasure and annulment.

This thesis has thus contributed to knowledge both by honing new methodological approaches as well as uncovering new archival content. It has brought to light several hitherto unpublished sources. Particularly valuable findings include the discovery of new versions of the albums *10 let Uzbekistana* and *Pervaia konnaia*, which challenge received assumptions about authorship and complicate the symbolic practice of defacement. These findings are also valuable because their inherently interdisciplinary nature provides fertile ground for further study. More analysis remains to be done on the practical functions, metaphorical meanings, sociological rituals, political repercussions and civic interpretations of photographic defacement. Such sources, however, do not divulge their secrets easily. Their inherently politically sensitive nature poses challenges for analysis and interpretation, as they lack the sorts of administrative metadata (dates, provenance, authorship) which historians generally rely on for substantiated analysis. Many of the case studies which have formed this argument were created in a culture of secrecy and silence, leaving little if any paper trail. Institutions like Glavlit, for instance, have left limited and often inaccessible records, and the challenges of analysing photographic defacement are particularly pronounced. Sources such as defaced albums exist in an archival vacuum, surrounded by silence. The skills and questions traditionally used to establish the essential context for interpretation and use of historical data have accordingly been adapted here, with a heavy emphasis on the use of visual analysis to elicit embedded meanings, intended and unintended, in the work. The picture that emerges is one of consistent patterns, within which the permutations of abstract art were appropriated towards various other ends, including editorial functions such as acts of expurgation.

Rather than a battling polemic between the creative artist and oppressive censor, I instead thus offer a model of symbiotic relationship, mutually informed and mimicked across various media. Victim, perpetrator, artist oppressor: all of these typecasts collapse within a complex symbolic system which has the potential to unify works of art and works of extirpation, and in doing so makes the case that censorship is part of the traditions, not only of communication and information but of culture and creativity as well.

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