

## VHH Conference

### Documenting Nazi Crimes through Film: Soviet Union, 1942–1945

Paris, November 24–27, 2022

## Abstracts

### Karel Berkhoff

#### ***What does Soviet footage from the 1940s tell us about the Holocaust in Kyiv and its Soviet aftermath?***

From late 1943, Soviet cameras filmed several times at Nazi killing sites in Kyiv. Among them was the Babyn Yar ravine, where filming took place in November 1943, early 1944, October 1944, and September 1946. In Berkhoff's discussion of the history and value of this footage, two angles—testimony and geolocation—will be at the forefront. With regard to testimony, there is the person of Fima (Efim) Vilkis, the first Holocaust survivor from Kyiv to be filmed with sound. He was presented to the foreign audiences as the main witness about Babyn Yar, but then he disappeared from view. What can be said about the man and his testimonies? The geographical angle is represented by a visit by the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). This footage, seemingly never shown in the Soviet Union, provides important topographical information rarely found elsewhere. If used along with other sources, this record is vital for reconstructing and geolocating the former killing site.

### Tal Bruttman

#### ***Auschwitz, the misunderstanding. Images of a KL***

The images produced following the discovery of the various sites of Auschwitz by the Red Army at the end of January 1945 largely contributed to the confusion between concentration camps (KL) and the fate of the Jews. This confusion is all the more paradoxical in that the film based on these images largely conceals the fate of the Jews, associating them only marginally with Auschwitz. The paradoxes presented by the Soviet-produced film *Osventsim* (1945) are legion. We never see the inside of the barracks, with one exception. Only one sequence, which has since become iconic and has been reused hundreds, if not thousands, of times since, shows inmates in one of the buildings. Not only is this sequence a re-enactment, but this image of women in this type of wooden barrack, which has been widely disseminated, does not correspond to reality: the vast majority of women detained at Birkenau were held in the first sector of the camp, the BI. Yet the BI is never visible in the film, as if it was impossible to show the buildings made of concrete. Only the wooden barracks that line the IB as far as the eye can see are shown. In the same way, the multiple scenes showing prisoners, men and women mixed, coming out of one or the other camp, show a reality that did not exist: men and women were detained



separately. A large part of the images showing the prisoners also present the paradox of not being filmed in the camp: they are filmed in the walkway surrounding Auschwitz I, sometimes making it look like the prisoners are in the camp, while they are standing where the SS men stood... The film focuses mainly on two things: the prisoners, dead or alive, and the detention elements embodied by the barbed wire, which is omnipresent, and can be seen in the background or the foreground, or in close-up. The whole film aims to show that Auschwitz – a site never clearly defined, mixing Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Monowitz – is a concentration camp that is at the same time barbaric, murderous, and modern, with a focus on technological elements: electrical equipment, various plans drawn by the SS, crematoria, and gas chambers. These last two elements are detached from the other mission of the site, the “final solution”, and are used to demonstrate the horror of the concentration camp.

### **Marilyn Campeau**

#### ***Through Evgenii Khaldei’s lens: War photography as a tool of revenge and Holocaust documentation***

Although Evgenii Khaldei became famous for the victory photograph of the hoisting of the Soviet flag on top of the Reichstag that he took in 1945, the Soviet Jewish wartime photojournalist used his camera to document German war crimes throughout the war. As an official photographer affiliated with the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), Khaldei traveled alongside Red Army troops to create visual records of daily life on the front, the Soviet encounter with the evidence of the Holocaust, and the ways in which fighters avenged the victims of the German invaders. Paired with the generous commentary about his works that Khaldei left behind, his pictures shed light on the “Jewish eye” – to borrow David Shneer’s expression – that the photographer casted at the wartime events. These images trace how, during the war, Khaldei, who found out in 1942 that members of his family had been shot and thrown into a ravine near their hometown of Stalino [today Donetsk, Ukraine], developed a sense of history in direct relationship with his Jewish identity. His photographs gathered evidence of the enemy’s atrocities in the city of Kerch in 1942, Rostov prison in 1943, as well as his portrayals of scenes from the Budapest ghetto in 1945. This can be contrasted with his images of war destruction on Austrian and German soil, labelled as proper Soviet retribution. Together, all these pictures form a vibrant story of the complex wartime experience of Red Army soldiers during World War II and the Holocaust. Integrating sources in Russian, German, English and French, this paper is based on research conducted in the context of the creation of an annotated historical guide for the Evgenii Khaldei Photography Collection held at the Picker Art Gallery of Colgate University in Hamilton, NY.

### **Paula Chan**

#### **‘For a Complete Record’: Photography in Soviet investigations of Nazi crimes**

When issuing updated instructions for investigating Nazi atrocities in 1944, the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission specified the need to photograph forensic excavations of mass graves. “Make sure that corpses are photographed at the pits from which they are extracted and not in isolation,” the instructions warned. “So as not to create the impression of staging.” From the time the Commission was founded on November 2, 1942, photography was a vital tool for conveying the horrors of the German occupation. Refuting accusations that the USSR was responsible for massacring Polish prisoners of war in Katyn forest further magnified the importance of generating an irrefutable visual record of Nazi guilt. This presentation juxtaposes central priorities against local practices to demonstrate the efforts of Stalin’s government to bury “the Katyn lie” beneath images of genuine victims of Hitler’s regime. Tracing the diverse origins of the Extraordinary State Commission’s photographs brings into focus dividing lines between the evidence itself and propagandistic use of these materials. Recognizing such distinctions, in turn, enables scholars to mine the Commission’s collections for not only insights on the war and the Holocaust, but a deeper understanding of the relationship between official narratives and private truths in the Soviet Union.

### **Michal Chojak**

#### ***Soviet footage, witnesses and Yahad-In Unum’s investigation on the Holocaust in Eastern territories***

The collection of Soviet films made available by the conference organizers includes several clips showing the liberation of Nazi-occupied cities by the Red Army. One of the recurring scenes filmed by Soviet cameramen is the exhumation of bodies. The purpose of this presentation will be to examine the extent to which this Soviet footage, and in particular the excerpts concerning the exhumation of bodies, can constitute research sources for Yahad-In Unum's ongoing investigation of the shootings carried out by Nazi units in the Eastern territories. Particular attention will be paid to the figure of the witness, especially the “child witness”, omnipresent in the Soviet footage, who was also a potential observer of the massacres perpetrated by the Nazis during the occupation.

### **Kiril Feferman**

#### ***Between propaganda and facts: Soviet wartime footage of Nazi atrocities in the Crimea and the North Caucasus***

The presentation examines the relation between the footage of Nazi atrocities in the Crimea and the North Caucasus shown in Soviet wartime documentaries, on the one hand, and the actual atrocities committed by the Germans and their accomplices in these areas. The regions in question are different, insofar as the thorough investigation of the Nazi atrocities and their presentation via propaganda venues, such as documentaries, are concerned. The Crimea, or to be more precise, the Kerch area, was partly and temporarily liberated by the Red Army in early January 1942 and the investigation of the Nazi atrocities was launched immediately. These atrocities had taken place only 3 to 4 weeks

before the area was recaptured by the Red Army, which made it possible to start an investigation and concomitantly to make use of the extermination site and the corpses kept there to create a documentary within a very short time. One of the reasons for such a haste had to do with the Soviet desire to produce a visible proof of the German atrocities, which could be attached to the note of the Soviet Foreign Minister delivered on January 6, 1942. The inevitable outcome of such a haste was the lack of correspondence with the outcome of the investigation, which was finished only later. In contrast, the North Caucasus was liberated in its entirety in January 1943. This led to the almost immediate start of the investigation of the Nazi atrocities, which was conducted swiftly but without too much haste. Propaganda footage was likewise made quickly but it was released and provided with a text only later to fully synchronize with the results of the investigation on the ground, finished only in summer 1943.

**Jeremy Hicks**

***The influence of humanitarian film and the 1921–22 famine relief campaign on WWII Soviet films of atrocity***

Soviet cinema in 1941–42 was the first in the world to show images of the dead bodies of its own citizens, including the Jewish population, who had become victims of the Nazis: none of the other belligerents were willing to produce and distribute such images, and only then when filming the camps in 1945. This paper argues that the explanation for the Soviets' willingness to show the distressed and distorted human body lies in a previous episode, the 'Volga Famine' of 1921–22, when Soviet Russia produced and distributed films depicting the effects of the famine. In addition to making their own films, they permitted foreign camera crews to film the disaster. This brought the Soviets' first success in distributing films internationally (especially, but not exclusively, in Germany), to fundraise for famine relief. When the Soviets once again came to appeal for international aid in their fight against the Nazis, the films they made implicitly drew on this previous experience, by the focus on the body.

**Alexander Kruglov**

***Representation of the work of the Extraordinary State Commission in Soviet war newsreels and documentaries of Soviet military cameramen in 1943–1944***

No abstract available

**Laurel Leff**

***American press coverage of Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe***

The American press provided less coverage of the Eastern front than of any other military theater during World War II. It is not surprising then that the massacres of Jews in the Soviet territories also received less coverage than other aspects of the Holocaust. Less,

however, doesn't mean nothing. From the German invasion in June 1941 to the war's end, American newspapers published and radio stations broadcast sporadic accounts of the individual killings of tens of thousands of Jews in towns and cities throughout Eastern Europe. Two events in particular, the two-day massacre outside Kyiv on September 29–30, 1941 and the liberation of the Majdanek camp in August 1944, drew both extensive coverage and some controversy. American news organizations began publishing soon after the event mostly small, inside accounts of what is now known as the Babyn Yar massacre, relying first upon Soviet statements and then upon first-person accounts and site witnessing. American reporters traveled to Majdanek at the time of the Soviet liberation – a sign of what was to come eight months later in Germany itself – and wrote stories that were prominently displayed on newspaper front pages. That contemporaneous reporting on Babyn Yar and Majdanek raises two questions that continue to bedevil scholarship in the field: Did American journalists doubt that the massacres had occurred, at least in the numbers and manner represented? Why did American journalists downplay the fact that most of the victims of these atrocities were Jews? In other words, what does the coverage of these events tell us about American journalists' understanding of the Holocaust as it was happening? In addition, the contemporaneous coverage prompts a new and increasingly vital research question: how did visual representations, either eye witnessing or photographic images, play into journalists' understanding at the time and the way the events were covered?

**Michael Loebenstein and Ophir Levy**

***Challenges to creating access to Soviet footage***

The Visual History of the Holocaust project set itself an ambitious goal: to aggregate a hitherto dispersed corpus of historical filmic materials. In the discussion, we will talk about our experience of researching and acquiring archival films from collections in Europe, the United States, and the successor countries of former Soviet republics.

**Marie Moutier-Bitan**

***The geography of the Holocaust through Soviet cameras: research perspectives***

As soon as the territories were liberated from Nazi occupation, Soviet cameras captured evidence of the crimes committed. This evidence – destruction, exhumed mass graves, bodies – was filmed in the immediate environment of the crime. What do these filmed images bring to the study of the geography of the Holocaust in these Eastern territories? This intervention will offer excerpts of films from several Holocaust sites (synagogue, ghetto, shooting sites), confronted with textual documents and testimonies. We will see that beyond the redundant motifs (barbed wire, ruins, bodies), the moving image captures topographical and spatial details that are extremely valuable in the micro-geographical and micro-historical understanding of the stages of the Shoah.

## **Alicja Mroczkowska**

### ***Post-war exhumations in Poland – Focus on documenting local Holocaust sites***

Jewish graves are scattered all around the Polish landscape: in towns, villages, rural countryside and forests, most often in unknown locations. In order to locate and secure them, efforts have been made by few, yet fully devoted organizations. These ongoing activities will be discussed in the context of forensic and commemoration work with local Jewish burial sites and their communities – both local Polish, and Jewish – historical and contemporary. The focus and starting point for my analysis are photographs of exhumations and of reburials of Jewish victims in Poland, which are a part of the Jewish Historical Institutes' archive, as well as the Soviet Archive material presenting exhumations and burial ceremonies of Polish victims. I use these photographic images to present the social aspects of exhumations within local spaces, and the work with dispersed Holocaust local sites of violence, which have become sites of non-memory, not fully forgotten, yet remaining unrecognized and unprotected for decades. I compare them to work with burial sites of Poles, and with mass graves found in death camps. I therefore present the history and the idea behind the exhumations of Jewish graves in Poland, as well as the changes towards the approach of forensic study, documentation, and protection of Jewish burial sites due to political, and historical aspects. I aim to analyze the ramifications of exhumations and reburials conducted at the end of World War II, and in the post-war years, and within the social perspective of the present, as many parts of working with burial sites can be perceived as a part of a wider context of Holocaust memory work in Poland.

## **Tanja Penter**

### ***Images of victims and survivors and gender roles in public mourning***

Using several Soviet wartime film documents from the Donbass region, the paper examines the representation of the liberation of the region in 1943 by the Red Army. In particular the documentation of German occupation crimes, the representation of victims and survivors, and the staging of public mourning are examined. Moreover, it will be discussed, how the image of Nazi crimes presented in Soviet wartime footage of the region relates to other archival records.

## **Pavel Polian**

### ***Auschwitz, between document and staging***

Auschwitz was one of the “capitals” of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes. The 20-minute documentary film *Osventsim* (1945), directed by Elizaveta Svilova, produced at the Central Newsreel Studio (later renamed the Central Documentary Film Studio), is also well known as one of the most remarkable films about Nazi crimes, but without emphasizing the Holocaust. RGAKFD has preserved both the film and its footage (primary

shooting). This presentation will compare the source material and the final film, the periodization of the work on the film will be clarified. A certain emphasis will be placed on the characterization of the staging elements during the filming and on the influence of *Osventsim* on other art genres.

### **Valérie Pozner**

#### ***Confronting the images of war crimes during the Russian invasion of Ukraine***

My contribution to the discussion will focus on how the war in Ukraine has affected the work on the Visual History of the Holocaust project, with particular emphasis on the interplay of similarities and differences between the images of World War II and those of today. I will conclude with more general reflections on the analysis of atrocity footage that are inspired by the current situation.

### **Valérie Pozner**

#### ***The constitution of the film records (kinoletopis') and their subsequent uses***

The documents we are dealing with in the ex-Soviet archives are, on the one hand, edited films, and on the other hand, archival materials gathered under the generic title “Kinoletopis’”, i.e., “Cinematographic Chronicles”. The presentation will focus on this collection: the main stages in its creation since 1936, the criteria according to which the documents were chosen and indexed, the difficulties encountered and the consequences of the choices made from 1943 onwards, particularly the repercussions today for the identification of shots. Finally, I will mention some examples of the use of documents from this collection.

### **Babette Quinkert**

#### ***The documentation of the liberated camps for Soviet prisoners of war using the example of Lamsdorf (Silesia)***

With more than 3 million dead, Soviet prisoners of war were one of the largest victim groups among Soviet nationals. Documenting the crimes committed against them was one of the central tasks of Soviet photographers and filmmakers. Using the example of Stalag 318 (VIII F) Lamsdorf (Silesia), which was liberated in March 1945, in this presentation an overview is given of motifs and settings that were selected for further use (and thus survived in the RGAKFD). The comparison with photographic materials from other contexts shows that a typical spectrum of motifs emerges, which are intended to document the crimes as well as the rescue/supply of the liberated by the Red Army and the preservation of evidence. It also becomes clear which aspects are left out and not addressed. In order to contextualize the film material from Lamsdorf, photographs and documents from other archives are consulted in addition to the research literature. The

fundamental question is why the film footage from prisoner-of-war camps – although it is obviously similar in many respects to the footage from the concentration and extermination camps – unlike the latter, still plays no role in the memory of German mass crimes.

**Irina Rebrova**

***People with disabilities as Nazi victims in the Soviet wartime documentaries and official reports: A close reading of the materials of the open trials in Krasnodar and Kharkov***

This paper aims to situate people with disabilities, including children, as one of the special Nazi victim groups into the Soviet narrative of suffering of “peaceful Soviet citizens” during the period of Nazi occupation of the Soviet regions. A close reading of the interrogation protocols and paperwork of the open trial cases of 1940s confirms that the defendants and eye-witnesses testified to special groups of Nazi victims: Jews, patients of psychiatric clinics, Sinti and Roma, communists, partisans. Nevertheless, the Soviet mass media (newspapers and documentaries) presented the entire Soviet people with a special attention to women, children, and aged men as the main Nazi victims. This was done to shift the focus from the Nazi racial policy to the suffering of “peaceful Soviet citizens” and to call for a revenge for mothers, sisters, and children. In my paper, I will underpin this argument by the sources of the Krasnodar and Kharkov trials and the propaganda documentaries made during these trials. A comparative analysis of the interrogation protocols of the defendants and their filmed statements in the court shows the mechanism of constructing “the convenient story” of what had happened with the special groups of Nazi victims in the Soviet propaganda.

**Fabian Schmidt and Anna Högner**

***Depicting atrocities: Ethics of sharing Holocaust images***

The Ethics Guideline of the Visual History of the Holocaust project states, that “Analysis and presentation of documents should not be disrespectful towards the victims nor encourage revenge or resentment” and that “Curators shall always remember that the project is about real people, and take care for not provoking any harm, stigmatization, discrimination by their conduct and their research”. But what does this entail? And how can this prerequisite be met in a project in which Holocaust related audiovisual material is being transformed into “content” online to a yet unprecedented extent? At the end of our 4-year project we would like to reflect the projects’ output against the background of significant ethical positions from memory studies, history, art history, religion, and pedagogy and to open a discussion on the question of how to frame the presentation of Holocaust related materials, and how to respect the dignity of those depicted.



**Fabian Schmidt and Alexander Zöller**

***The return of the cameras: Liberation footage as palimpsest and substitution of perpetrator imagery in Eastern Europe***

Contrary to established assumptions, the arrival of film cameras which documented the liberation of the camps and other sites of Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe was not always an historical first. In several instances, the perpetrators had themselves carried out film activities, even in locations such as extermination camps. While the liberation footage that exists today offers documentary proof or at least traces of Nazi crimes, previous documentation efforts with an altogether different attitude, but similar purpose appear to have been conducted: to record the extermination process on film. The talk summarizes the existing evidence, highlighting lost – and, as a general rule, deliberately destroyed – films whose existence has been mentioned by survivors, and offers a contrasting perspective to approach the Soviet liberation footage in a new way.

**Anastasiia Simferovska**

***A witness on commission: Zinovii Tolkachev as a Holocaust artist***

From October 1944 to March 1945, Zinovii Tolkachev, a Red Army soldier and artist on a mission, created two art series: “Majdanek” and “The Flowers of Oswiecim”. The Polish and Soviet press regarded Tolkachev’s depictions of the liberated death camps as first-hand visual testimony and a valuable historical document. Multiple exhibitions of Tolkachev’s artwork throughout Poland in the wake of WWII were the first attempts to present the Nazi atrocities through means of art. In my presentation, I will analyze Zinovii Tolkachev’s “Holocaust art” from three different perspectives: historical, artistic, and ideological. I will juxtapose his “Majdanek” and “Oswiecim” series in order to explore the relation between the witnessed and the imagined in Tolkachev’s reflections on the Holocaust. I will use the visitors’ responses to Tolkachev’s art exhibits and discuss the discrepancy between the official Soviet narrative and people’s reflections on the (im)possibility of depicting atrocity through art. Exploring Tolkachev’s military commission to depict Nazi crimes as an ethical and artistic dilemma, I will sketch the artist’s role in introducing the images of the Holocaust to the cultural discourse of post-World War II Eastern Europe.

**Irina Tcherneva**

***Professional skills for filming crimes. Shedding light on the Soviet footage through textual archives***

In my talk, I suggest an approach to the collection of Soviet footage through professional practices, informed by the socialization of the filmmakers while shaken by the armed conflict. First, I will describe the corpus of films, its limits and what goes beyond, what was filmed but not handed down to us. Then, I will outline aesthetic and thematic choices of the filmmakers, trying to illustrate how they are negotiated in the textual documents

which enlighten the images. A tension will be highlighted: an impulse from the authorities to standardize the filming of atrocities and a gnawing resistance of the professional community to this compartmentalization of sensitive documents. In doing so, I endeavor to explore and historicize the visual registers at play, in order to question in a different way the often noted duality between document and propaganda.

**Vanessa Voisin**

***Filming the crimes of the enemy: The cameramen, Soviet front***

No abstract available