

Dmitri Baltermants: Documenting and Staging Soviet Reality
September 23, 2017–January 7, 2018
Bowdoin College Museum of Art

DMITRI BALTERMANTS

DOCUMENTING AND STAGING SOVIET REALITY

The distinguished Soviet photojournalist Dmitri Baltermants documented World War II and the following years of reconstruction in dramatic images that affected viewers in the USSR and around the world. Dmitri Baltermants (1912–1990) had graduated from the Math and Mechanics School at Moscow State University, with plans of teaching mathematics at the Higher Military Academy. Life drastically changed in 1939, when the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiya* sent him abroad to cover the Soviet-German annexation and partition of Poland and Ukraine. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Baltermants was one of the first photographers on the battlefield. After the war, he worked for the Soviet illustrated magazine, *Ogonyok*, and in 1964 was named its photographic editor.

Many of Baltermants's photographs were censored under Stalin and only became well known in the 1960s, in the era of the reform-minded leader Nikita Khrushchev. Even then, Baltermants's images never presented an eyewitness account of combat or fulfilled their claim to objectively portray life in the USSR. Throughout his career, Baltermants altered many of his negatives to fit into the current Soviet ideology. He commented retrospectively, "In my time I was the leader of staged photography. I made some truly grandiose stagings." Straddling the line between fact and fiction, his photographs served as an important form of state propaganda and reveal much about Soviet hopes and perceived challenges over the formative decades of the Soviet experiment. All of Baltermants's photographs included in the exhibition are silver gelatin prints, printed in 2003.

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Digging Anti-Tank Trenches Near Moscow, October 1941

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas

2015.50.2

This photograph, taken in 1941 after Germany's surprise invasion of the Soviet Union, is among Baltermants's earliest surviving work. On June 22, Hitler disregarded the Soviet-German nonaggression pact and ordered the invasion of the USSR, setting off what Stalin named the Великая Отечественная война (The Great Patriotic War). As a government-sponsored photojournalist for the newspaper *ИЗВЕСТИЯ* (Izvestiya), it was Baltermants's duty to circulate images of the united Soviet front. In his depictions of women, children, and older men dutifully digging anti-tank trenches on the peripheries of Moscow, Baltermants emphasized the omnipresence of the war effort. Just three months into battle, German troops were only 50 miles away from Moscow, and Soviet military and civilian casualties had already surpassed a million. This image provided a much-needed boost to public morale.



Anti-Aircraft Gunner, ca. 1941–45

Anonymous Gift

2013. 27.4



Battle for Kamenka Village, Near Moscow, 1941

Anonymous Gift

2013.27.9

These images put the viewer on the front lines alongside the valiant Red Army. In addition to fulfilling their propagandistic purpose, however, the lyricism in these photographs elicits an aesthetic response. The low-angle shot of the concentric circles of the gunner's rifle and the intriguing framing of the battle for Kamenka, a village outside Moscow, were compelling to viewers and proved successful as socialist realist propaganda. Born in 1912, Baltermants was raised in Moscow amidst a time of radical artistic revolution. These photos were shaped by Baltermants's aesthetic predispositions forged during the constructivist times of the interwar period.

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Downed German Plane, Breslau, spring 1945

Anonymous Gift

2013.27.7



A Trophy of War, ca. 1941–45

Anonymous Gift

2013.27.5

Baltermants was a government-sponsored photojournalist assigned to produce an officially sanctioned image of the war. He chose and framed his subjects carefully in order to inspire and influence Soviet citizens. These two images of downed planes show Soviet soldiers celebrating successes of the Red Army. However, during Germany's initial invasion of the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa, the Soviet air force was hit particularly hard. It is estimated that over 2,000 Soviet planes were destroyed on the first day alone. These photographs, therefore, showcase Soviet revenge as much as Soviet triumph.



Berlin is Taken, May 1945

Anonymous Gift

2013. 27.6



First Decorated Heroes of Liberated Odessa, 1944

Anonymous Gift

2013.27.8

Baltermants reminisced, "Besides ideological requirements – let's make the Party committee look good – it was also a matter of what we thought, then, a photograph should be. Especially in the press, a photograph had to be 'elevated,' people got dressed up to be photographed." Consider then the image of the burning city of Berlin immediately before the German surrender, as well as the moment of seemingly idyllic Soviet happiness in Odessa during the war. These photographs, Baltermants said, were "explained not only by the shameless lying of the photographers. Most often, they were observing the rules of the genre."

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The Spoils of War, Occupied Germany, ca. 1941–45

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas

2013.28.5



The Victor, 1945

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas

2013.28.8

Taken as the Soviet army advanced across Germany, these two photographs illuminate the cultural contempt felt by both sides during the so-called Great Patriotic War. *The Victor*, alternately titled *The Superior Race*, depicts a proud Soviet soldier mocking a larger-than-life statue of a German Teutonic knight. Similarly, in *The Spoils of War*, a soldier is seen pretending to shoot a stuffed bear, an animal often used derogatorily in the western press to represent the brutal Russian empire. During World War II, German National-Socialists claimed racial and cultural superiority over the multiethnic Russians. Hitler instructed his troops: “We’re absolutely without obligation as far as these people are concerned... . There’s only one duty: to Germanize this country by the immigration of Germans, and to look upon the natives as Redskins.” This command justified increasingly atrocious treatments of Soviet POWs and Soviet citizenry alike.



From a Day of Grief, Kerch, Crimea, January 1942

Anonymous Gift

2013.27.2



Grief, Kerch, Crimea, January 1942

Gift of Jon and Nicole Ungar

2016.46.1

In January 1942 the Red Army liberated Kerch, Crimea from the German occupation and discovered the remains of 7,500 Jewish men, woman, and children who had just been massacred. Baltermants focused his lens on this woman mourning the death of her husband, excluding obvious references to the deaths of women and children as well as to the identity of the victims as Jews. This decision ensured that the image would evade Stalinist censure and, as a representation of

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universal suffering, would serve to enrage and rally fighters. When published in *Ogonyok* magazine in 1942, the caption suggested that Soviet people were being “killed indiscriminately—Russians and Tatars, Ukrainians, and Jews.” Returning to this work in the Krushchev era, Baltermants took the negative of the image on the right, lowered the sky, and darkened the clouds to create his now-famous composition about the human toll of war.



Forward, 1943
Anonymous Gift
2013.27.10

Forward depicts Soviet soldiers heroically charging ahead in battle. This dramatic depiction of the Red Army represented a shift in Baltermants’s war reporting and indeed reflects a watershed moment in his career. During his coverage of the Battle of Stalingrad in the previous year, one of his photographs of German prisoners of war had been miscaptioned and prompted severe punishment. Stripped of his captain’s rank and journalistic status, Baltermants was assigned to a penal battalion. At the end of 1943, however, after recovering from an injury sustained in battle, Baltermants was able to return to photojournalism, now for the Red Army newspaper) *Ha Pазрoм Bпaza* (*Death to the Enemies*). This publication for military personnel rather than the general public necessitated a change in subject matter and tone of Baltermants’s later works.



Resetting German Clocks Forward to Moscow Time, May 1945
Anonymous Gift
2013.27.3

This image celebrates the Soviet victory over Germany by showing Red Army soldiers resetting a German clock to Moscow time. The Soviets found themselves on the winning side of the war and were the first Allied troops to reach Berlin. Stalin, eager to prove the legitimacy of the USSR, found himself at the head of a burgeoning superpower. The western Allies, England, France, and the United States, initially welcomed the Soviet Union’s military success, and their relations remained momentarily cordial. However, the West also recognized the threat that the USSR posed. The alliance would not last long in the post-war era: the preconditions for the Cold War were already set in place.

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Two Factory Workers Posed on a Staircase, ca. 1950

Gift of Jon and Nicole Ungar

2016.46.12

In the post-war period, Soviet artists were considered “engineers of the human soul” and charged with the heroization of the proletariat in the Soviet press. Stalin demanded such idealizations as he attempted to industrialize the Soviet Union, hoping to pass the productivity levels set in the West. This low angle photograph of factory workers posing on the staircase provides a symbolic—and literal—elevation of the status of workers.



Construction Workers with Rebar Towers, ca. 1960

Gift of Steven and Claudia Schwartz in honor of Gabrielle Perou Lubin, Class of 2014

2012.30.1



Powerhouse Workers, Ordzhonikidze Plant, Moscow, ca. 1960

Gift of Jon and Nicole Ungar

2016.46.4

Labor, according to these and countless other images, was a source of pride and happiness for the Soviet people. The top image bears a stark resemblance to the tradition of Soviet propaganda posters; the bottom depicts power workers gazing straight at the viewer. Despite their positive messages, Baltermants’s work was not exempt from censorship. Several of his factory photographs never made it to the press because they depicted sweat on the faces of the workers. The reality of strenuous labor was not in line with Stalin’s ideas. These photographs are a testament to Baltermants’s skill to create compelling images within the strict parameters and doctrines of the regime.

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Overhead View of Reading Room, Moscow, ca. 1960

Gift of Jon and Nicole Ungar

2016.46.19



Bathers, Kiev, 1959

Gift of Jon and Nicole Ungar

2016.46.3

All aspects of modern life were shaped by ideology. In addition to labor, photographers depicted Soviet ingenuity and leisure. The communal experience of living in a socialist state that cared for all of its citizens can be gleaned from these two photographs. In near-identical compositions the same sweeping high angle shot frames the bathers in Kiev and the co-ed students of the reading room. From an elevated position the photographer reveals the beauty of the communist utopia of a society of equals.



The Uniform of the Atomic Age, ca. 1960

Gift of Jon and Nicole Ungar

2016.46.13



Cosmonaut in the Simulator Receiving Instructions, ca. 1960

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas

2014.53.1

An important chapter of the Soviet narrative was the recognition of scientific advances, especially in heated competition with the United States. A nation condemned by generations of domestic and foreign commentators as “backwards,” the Soviet Union pushed the quality of life for its citizens and the country’s international status through math, science, and engineering. The results were stunning. The initial surge of the Soviet Union in the space race was one of the proudest moments under Stalin. The cosmonauts were much celebrated throughout the country and in the Eastern Bloc and upheld as role models. Furthermore, the nation’s nuclear prowess provided external security never before imagined.

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Red Square Parade Commemorating the 47th Anniversary of the October Revolution, 1964

Gift of Steven and Claudia Schwartz in honor of Gabriele Perou Lubin, Class of 2014
2012.30.4

In 1964, when Khrushchev was forced to retire, there was a shake-up in all administrative levels of government. Coincidentally, Baltermants was promoted to head photographic editor of *Ogonyok* ((*Огонёк*, an illustrated magazine for which he had been working since the war ended. Capturing this celebratory moment in Red Square was a cathartic moment for Baltermants. He not only survived in a dangerous profession under Stalin's purges, but also gained international recognition under Khrushchev's Thaw.

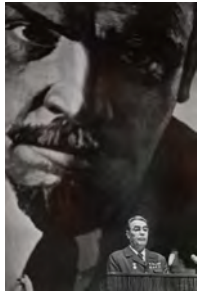


One-Legged Man, Chukotka, ca. 1977

Anonymous Gift
2016.42.2

Baltermants continued to be aware of the dangers he so narrowly avoided. The photograph of the one-legged man in Chukotka—the north-easternmost part of Russia—might have had special significance for Baltermants. While fighting in Stalingrad with the penal battalion, he suffered a grave leg injury and barely escaped amputation. It is tempting to see in this ominous photographic silhouette of a one-legged man a reflection of the photographer on a fate that could have been his own.

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Without Looking Back (The Two Ilyiches), 1970
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas
2013.28.6



Girl with Optical Device, ca. 1970
Courtesy of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas
2013.28.13

The Soviet Union was a nation focused on the future. These images, one of Brezhnev giving a party talk in front of an expansive print of Lenin and the other of a Soviet girl looking upwards into an optical device, emphasize this forward motion. In the 1920s, Lenin established Soviet youth leagues—commonly referred to as Komsomol—dedicated to indoctrinating a new generation with Historical Materialism, the Soviet rendition of history adopted from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that promised a bright communist future. Lenin saw the potential of photographs in this historic narrative based on the struggle of the working class for emancipation: “It is a very good idea to record history through the lens. History in photos is clear and comprehensible. No painting is able to depict what the camera sees.” Baltermants dedicated his life to recording Soviet history and left behind images that invite further study of the aspirations, accomplishments, and shortcomings of a bygone era.