

REMEMBERING WW II: SOVIET WAR PHOTOGRAPHY 1941-1945

Today it is obvious that Soviet photography from 1941 to 1945 occupies a unique place in world photography. For four years a large team of professionals was assigned to visually document a subject of previously unimagined scale, one that linked catastrophic events affecting millions of people on enormous expanses of territory - from the North Ice Ocean to the Caucasus, and from the Volga River to Berlin.

Some may think that war photographers did not have to try very hard to get interesting shots – that the reality was so dramatic it spoke for itself. But this view is clearly naive. There was no substitute for craftsmanship. Once they had fulfilled the role for which they were intended by appearing in the press, photographs which merely documented the war went no further: no longer wanted, they did not make it into the archives. Those that did live on possessed something above and beyond their assigned duty– perhaps a quality of abstraction, or an unconscious personal reaction on the part of the photographer, or an unforgettable revelation of the emotions gripping their subjects. War photographs clearly bore the marks of the Soviet mentality and some recognizably echoed systematic propaganda. But the importance of official dogma faded in the light of the truths they revealed about the war and the people who fought it, lived through it, and died in it. Photojournalists recorded what they saw, as they saw it—during bombardments, or when freezing in the trenches, or as they passed the precious time of day with soldiers during a momentary lull. Simple stories took on sudden, unexpected, and altogether different colors as battles began or ended. Reflecting on the work of a photojournalist, Konstantin Simonov wrote: ‘When I think about the profession of the photojournalist at war, I think of how difficult this profession is. We writers can write later, after the event: we don’t have to write at the time. We can jot things down in our notebooks – two or three words – and then expand this into a complete picture, using our memories. They, however, can photograph only when the event is actually happening ...’

Perhaps the most important feature of Soviet war photography was the undeniable humanism of each reporter’s response. This quality was not diminished by the brutality of the scenes that were shot or by the well-known and well-enforced official mandate to shoot only certain subjects. In terms of the dramatization of its subjects and illustrative expressiveness, Soviet photography made a great leap forward in its evolution during the four years of the war.

Remembering WWII exhibition is dedicated to the 60th anniversary of Victory over Nazi Germany. The exhibition dates are April 1-30, 2005. Gallery hours are Tues. – Sat. 11am – 6pm. For more information please call the gallery at 212-315-2211.