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VISUAL FRAMING OF RED MARTYRS: SOVIET AND YUGOSLAV PARTISAN PROPAGANDA COMPARED

Abstract: *This paper compares the Soviet propaganda of the Second World War with that of Yugoslavia, focusing on the visual image of partisan martyrs. As for the wartime communist propaganda in Yugoslavia, since Yugoslav Partisans were an ill-equipped resistance movement, it had only restricted resources and networks for agitation. Yet it does not mean that the wartime mobilization of Yugoslav Partisan movement was an ephemeral one, because the method of agitation did not radically change in socialist Yugoslavia. While nations involved in the Second World War tended to organize massive propaganda (especially through visual representations such as films, newsreels, posters, paintings and pictorial magazines), Yugoslav Partisans could not afford to conduct such large-scale propaganda. In addition to the Theater of People's Liberation, a performer's group which played a significant role in the newly liberated territory, memorization through a photographic image exerted significant agitating effect in the Yugoslav Partisan propaganda.*

Key words: *Second World War, Soviet propaganda, Yugoslav propaganda, visual culture, partisan martyrs*

Introduction

Over twenty years after the end of the Cold War, more and more research focusing on the Communist era from the viewpoint of

cultural history keeps appearing. But still, many approaches to the Communist culture of the Eastern European countries put an emphasize on how Soviet Union exercised its influence in shaping a united Communist culture of post-WWII Europe regarding official culture of Eastern European countries as a miniature of its “original,” i.e. the Soviet culture. This reminds us that the Stalinist culture was regarded as the model foisted upon Soviet citizens by the regime. The view has been challenged from several perspectives. For example, in his work *The Total Art of Stalinism*,¹ Boris Groys traces the origin of socialist realism back to the Russian avant-garde, and Jochen Hellbeck’s autobiographical research of ordinary people charts how individuals struggled to meet the social requirements during the period of Stalinism.² In this sense, I think that the study of Communism in Europe needs to free itself from the notion that the Soviet regime one-sidedly created the whole Communist culture in Europe. This will enable us to examine the differences among various Communist cultures and to point out the regional peculiarities which come from their own cultural and social background.

This paper compares the Soviet propaganda of the Second World War with that of Yugoslavia, focusing on the visual image of partisan martyrs. As for the wartime communist propaganda in Yugoslavia, since Yugoslav Partisans were an ill-equipped resistance movement, it had only restricted resources and networks for agitation. Yet it does not mean that the wartime mobilization of Yugoslav Partisan movement was an ephemeral one, because the method of agitation did not radically change in socialist Yugoslavia. While nations involved in the Second World War tended to organize massive propaganda (especially through visual representations such as films, newsreels, posters, paintings and pictorial magazines), Yugoslav Partisans could not afford to conduct such large-scale propaganda. In addition to the Theater of People’s Liberation, a performer’s group which played a significant role in the newly liberated territory, memorization through a photographic image exerted significant agitating effect in the Yugoslav Partisan propaganda. In the following sections, I compare how the images of partisan martyrs were popularized in Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia.

1 Гройс Б., *Утопия и обмен*, Москва 1993.

2 Hellbeck J., *Laboratories of the Soviet Self: Diaries from the Stalin Era* (Ann Arbor Mich, UMI Dissertation Services, 1998)

*Retrospective Visualization of Heroes –
Soviet Union*

As Andrei Sinyavsky noted that “The cult of the heroic is generally endemic to Soviet Civilization,”³ the Stalinist era has created various heroes such as political leaders, Party officials, scientists, cosmonauts, pilots, shock workers and other ordinary individuals who made a remarkable contribution to the state. This led to the introduction of the title “Hero of the Soviet Union” in 1934, as a form of highest recognition in the Soviet Union. The title took an important role in motivating people into the war, and during the Second World War, a considerable number of soldiers received this award. Among them, the first female recipient of the Hero of Soviet Union reward was a partisan girl Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya (1923-1941).⁴

Kosmodemyanskaya was a high-school girl who volunteered for a partisan unit in 1941. In November, according to some second-hand witnesses, she received an order to fire on the village of Petrishevo, which was then under German occupation. In the middle of her duty Kosmodemyanskaya was captured by Germans and then hanged in public. Just before the execution, Kosmodemyanskaya made an impressive speech to the villagers and shouted to the Germans: “You’ll hang me now, but I am not alone. There are two hundred million of us. You can’t hang us all”. This episode was soon reported in a *Pravda* article by Pyotr Lidov (27 January 1942), which made Kosmodemyanskaya one of the most famous partisan youths. In the same year, Stalin awarded her with the order of the Hero of the Soviet Union. Since then, many places and organizations had been renamed after her; many poems, children’s tales, and songs tell her story; her visual image was represented through various media images, such as statues, portrait photographs, paintings, and a film. The most famous painting is Kukryniksy’s *Tania – The Feat of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya* (1942-1947), which describes the very moment when Kosmodemyanskaya bravely made a speech on the gallows (Fig. 1). The film *Zoya* (dir. Lev Arnshtam, 1944) also depicts in detail how Kosmodemyanskaya was caught, tortured, and executed.

3 Sinyavsky A., *Soviet civilization: A Cultural History*, Joanne Turnbull transl., New York 1990, pp. 118.

4 On Kosmodemyanskaya and Matrosov, see: Stites R., *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*, New York 1992, pp.98-101; Fritzsche P., and Hellbeck J., *The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany*, in: *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds. Cambridge 2009, pp.302-341.

Another representative figure of the Soviet Partisan martyrdom is Alexander Matrosov (1924-1943). Born an orphan and having spent his early youth in correctional camps, Matrosov gradually awoke as a Communist. Legend has it that in the battle near Pskov in 1943, the infantry soldier Matrosov threw himself over a German pillbox and blocked the machine gun with his own body. For the honor of his self-sacrifice, Matrosov was posthumously awarded a Hero of the Soviet Union in 1943. As was the case of Kosmodemyanskaya, many songs, paintings, statues, and a postwar film *Private Aleksandr Matrosov* (dir. Leonid Lukov, 1947) were dedicated to Matrosov (Fig. 2).

Although their photo portraits exist, there were no photographs which show their moment of death; visual images of Kosmodemyanskaya and Matrosov were, in a manner, constructed collectively, based on the existing recorded material. Their heroic deeds became known not that technically recorded evidence such as photographs and documentary shots but from word of mouth and Kosmodemyanskaya and Matrosov became famous through visual images created by various artists. This way of visualizing heroes can be found widely in Soviet propaganda under Stalin's regime. For instance, there is the case of a pioneer boy Pavlik Morozov who was killed by his relatives for turning his father in as an anti-Communist, and posthumously praised for this bravery of putting ideological values before family ties. While no photograph of Morozov remains, there are many paintings that depict the scene where Morozov accuses his father. The unreleased film *Bezhin Meadow* (1937) by Sergei Eisenstein was also based on the Morozov story. Although the loss of mechanically recorded evidence raises doubts about historical factuality, about whether this is fictional or real, the retrospective visualization of the story which renarrates the very moment of death, from the aspect of agitating effect, compensates for the lack of the original evidence.



Fig. 1 Kukryniksy, *Tania – The Feat of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya* (1942-1947)



Fig. 2 Postage stamp dedicated to Matrosov, sold in 1944.

Photographic Image as a Certificate – Yugoslavia

The Soviet concept of creating heroes was imported into the Eastern European countries and played a significant role in forming the new socialist regimes in the Eastern bloc.⁵ As early as 1941, the Yugoslav Partisans established the title “The Order of the People’s Hero”. Some of the most famous recipients were a Montenegrin, Ljubo Čupić (1913–1942), and a Croatian, Stjepan Filipović (1916-1942).⁶ The main feature of their visual image is that they were recorded in a photograph taken just seconds before their execution to become icons of the Yugoslav Partisan struggle.

Čupić was a law student who joined the Communist resistance movement, and was captured by Chetnik collaborators in Nikšić and subsequently shot in public in 1942. In a photograph taken by an anonymous photographer, Čupić, with his hands in handcuffs, is flashing a smile though facing his own execution by firing squad. Showing the gap between Čupić’s tender smile and the awaiting tragedy, this photograph became the symbol of strong will and firm conviction (Fig. 3). This image was intensively used in partisan propaganda and post-war memorization of the Second World War and in 1947 Čupić was awarded the People’s Hero of Yugoslavia.

Filipović, another icon of Yugoslav Partisan martyrdom, was commander of a local partisan unit in Valjevo.⁷ He was captured by Germans and Axis allies in 1942. Legend has it that seconds before being hanged, Filipović thrust his hands out and shouted “Death to fascism, freedom to the people!” which became the official partisan slogan. This moment was recorded

5 Andrzej Wajda’s 1976 film *Man of Marble* fictionally depicted this phenomenon in Poland during the period of Stalinism.

6 Also known as Stevan Filipović.

7 On Filipović, see: Belić-Koročkin-Davidović M. and Davidović R., *Stevan Filipović - Istina o istorijskoj fotografiji*, Beograd 2012.

in a photograph taken by the amateur photographer Slobodanka Vasić, in which Filipović was making a speech with his neck already tied to the gallows (Fig. 4). In 1944, this photograph was found and appeared for the first time on the front page of the *Politika* (4 November 1944). This provocative shot, along with that of Čupić, soon became an icon of Communist resistance in Yugoslavia. While his image shortly appears in the Soviet Mosfilm's propaganda film *In Mountains of Yugoslavia* (dir. Abram Room, 1945), a shot of Filipović is a kind of adaptation of this photograph, presented in exactly the same manner as it was in the photo-shot. Several statues were also put up with his hands thrusting upward. As was the case of Čupić, Filipović's photograph has also been widely circulated in newspapers and textbooks.



Fig. 3 Ljubo Čupić
taken in 1942.



Fig. 4 Stjepan Filipović
taken in 1942.

Compared with partisan heroes in the Soviet Union, Yugoslav Partisan heroes are unique in a way that they became known through the single image of the moment of their death. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes defined the essence of photography as the “that-has-been (ça a été),” which functions as a certificate of the subject person’s presence. Citing the photograph of Lewis Payne awaiting his death penalty for the Lincoln assassination conspiracy, which was taken in 1865 by Alexander Gardner, Barthes finds the ultimate form of the “that-has-been” in the temporal paradox that “there is always a defeat of Time in them: that is dead and that is going to die.”⁸ In the same way, photographs of Čupić and Filipović also create a piercing impression by showing this temporal paradox: they are

8 “Il y a toujours en elle un écrasement du Temps, cela est mort et cela va mourir,” Barthes R., *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, Paris 1980, p.150.

going to die at the time of the photograph, but viewers know that they are already dead.

Showing the real fragment of the historical moment is not a case limited to the iconography of Partisan martyrs. For instance, there are well-known photographs which symbolize partisan's fight in Bosnia, *Kozara Girl* and *Refugees*, taken in 1943 by Žorž Skrigin (1910-1997). While *Kozara Girl* documents a cheerful partisan girl in Kozara beaming with a smile, *Refugees* capture the tragic moment when a mother with two little children fled for their life at Knežopolje⁹. These images became renowned not because those women conducted remarkable deeds in the war, but because of the striking impression those photographs evoke. Similar examples can also be found in shock worker campaigns, in which the visual images of shock workers, such as Alija Sirotanović, were highly limited to one or two. Those limited shots more or less seem to have exhibited agitating effect since they were the monumental fragments of historic events.

Conclusion

While Soviet and Yugoslav partisan propaganda used similar motives, a closer look at the difference in visualization would suggest the two major directions in displaying the agitating images. Generally, to make a story of unknown person into an ideal code of conduct needs an effort to show the story as striking as possible. Reconstructing the whole scene of crucial moment in paintings, remolding their faces in heroic portraiture, and renarrating the whole episode in film are all one means. This demonstrates the event and central figures comprehensively and brings them mentally closer to the viewers. Obviously, the iconography of Soviet martyrs belongs to this category.

Another means can be found to provide a fixed image in certification of what had actually happened. In his *Technics and Time 2* (1996), Bernard Stiegler proposed “deeds which have not simply “come to pass” precisely because these traces still provide these events with a kind of presence, the ghostly presence of past times to which the material witness is a *medium*.”¹⁰ The

9 On work of Skrigin, see: Миланка Тодић, *Фотографија и пропаганда 1945.-1958*, Бања Лука: ЈУ Књижевна задруга / Панчево: Helicon, 2005, стр. 66-67.

10 “Disparus qui ne sont pas simplement «passés», puisque précisément ces traces leur accordent encore une sorte de présence, la présence *revenante* d'époques révolues dont le témoin matériel est un *medium*.” Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps 2: La désorientation Galilée*, Paris 1996, p.13. Quoted from English translation: Bernard Stiegler Stephen Barker transl., *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation* Stanford, University Press, California 2009 p.5.

photographs of Yugoslav martyrs seem to be a good example of this type of image display. During the Second World War, the Yugoslav Partisan organization did not have sufficient materials, facilities or networks needed to conduct the large-scale media spectacle. Instead, what Yugoslav Partisans attempted to do was to document the historical moment through the medium of photography and to reuse such photo-images in agitation and memorization. Especially photographs of Čupić and Filipović supposedly yielded a strong enough effect because their images were traces of the past in which “that which is dead and that which is going to die” co-exist.

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Масуми Камеда
Јапанско друштво за промоцију науке, Јапан

ВИЗУЕЛНИ ПРИКАЗИ ЦРВЕНИХ МУЧЕНИКА:
ПОРЕЂЕЊЕ СОВЈЕТСКЕ И ЈУГОСЛОВЕНСКЕ
ПРОПАГАНДЕ

Сажетак

Овај рад пореди совјетску и југословенску пропаганду из Другог светског рата, с фокусом на визуелне приказе партизанских мученика. Што се тиче ратне комунистичке пропаганде у Југославији, будући да је покрет југословенских партизана био слабо опремљен покрет отпора, она је имала ограничене ресурсе и мрежу за агитацију. Међутим, то не знали да је југословенски партизански покрет у смислу ратне мобилизације био ефемеран, будући да се метод агитације није радикално променио ни у социјалистичкој Југославији. Док су државе које су биле укључене у Други светски рат махом организовале масивну пропаганду (нарочито путем визуелних помагала какви су били филмови, билтени, постери, слике и илустровани часописи) југословенски партизански покрет није могао да приушти себи такву озбиљну пропаганду. Поред народно-ослободилачког позоришта, групе извођача који су одиграли значајну улогу на новоослобођеној територији, памћење путем фотографских слика имало је значајан агитациони ефекат у пропаганди југословенских партизана.

Кључне речи: Други светски рат, совјетска пропаганда, југословенска пропаганда, визуелна култура, партизански мученици

