

1.14

Soviet War Photo, Crimea, 1942

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In January 1942, seven months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Soviet press photographers descended into the region around Kerch, in Crimea, to document the Red Army's counteroffensive against the Wehrmacht. In the first week of December, the Gestapo had registered 7,500 Jews in Kerch, who were marched to an anti-tank ditch on the outskirts of town, separated men from the women and children, and all shot by Einsatzgruppen D.¹ On 31 December, the city was liberated from Nazi occupation, offering one of the first scenes of the Nazi war against European Jewry.

In March 1942, *Ogonyok* ran a photo essay about Kerch with images by Dmitri Baltermants. Among the eight published photographs, three are of lone women in a state of grieving. The most visually dominant photograph, on the left side of the two-page layout, depicts a woman, whose surrounding landscape is obscured by an overlaid image of a corpse. The caption reads, "Residents of Kerch search for their relatives. In the photo: V. S. Tereshchenko digs under bodies for her husband. On the right: the body of 67-year-old I. Kh. Kogan." On the same page, the editor placed Baltermants' photograph of P. Ivanova, whose head is thrust backward, body contorted, as her hands clutch a kerchief as she weeps.

None of Baltermants' published Kerch photographs conjure up the mass murder of Jewish men, women, and children. They show living non-Jewish women mourning dead, presumably Jewish men, even though just beyond the frame were thousands of dead Jewish women and children lying in the same trench. Baltermants' choice of subject—massacred men—as well as the way he photographed grieving women encouraged readers to see the aftermath of battle, rather than the racially motivated murder of Jews and others. His photographs echo a long history of wartime images documenting the aftermath of battle or civilian massacre. Art historian Elisabeth Bronfen coins the phrase "pathos formulas of battle," following Aby Warburg's concept of the pathos formula. Pathos formulas of battle "organize the visual experience of battle in such a way as to . . . sustain the illusion that the audience is in control of the spectacle, rather than being overwhelmed by the intensity of slaughter," in this case, the horror of the Holocaust.²

The paragraph introducing the photo essay shows how editors contextualized his pictures: "These photographs were taken at a moment after the German occupiers drove [these people] out to this place. 7,500 residents from the very elderly to breast-feeding babies were shot from just a single city . . . They were killed indiscriminately—Russians and Tatars, Ukrainians and Jews. [. . .]" While the captions under



Figure 1.14a Dmitri Baltermants and Israel Ozerskii, “Hitlerite Atrocities in Kerch,” in *Ogonyok*, 2 March 1942. P.I. Ivanova appears on the left page, lower right corner.

each photograph emphasize that the occupiers murdered civilians, while obscuring the racial nature of the murders, the article accompanying the photographs euphemistically drew attention to Jewish deaths by noting that the first to be shot had been “Soviet citizens of one particular nationality.”³

Very few Soviet photographs of the war were republished until the early 1960s, when the state began to commemorate the war. Baltermants’ photographs of grieving women at Kerch, most significantly the photograph of Ivanova, were presented differently twenty years later. During the war, *Ogonyok* editors had cropped her small and placed her low and off to the right. When Baltermants returned to his archive to find signature war images, he found four versions of Ivanova. He selected a different negative from the 1942 published photo, this one with dramatically outstretched arms and head bowed in a heightened state of pathos (Fig. 1.14b).

It was not published during the war, because his favored negative had been damaged in the developing process. As he turned his news picture into a commemorative art photograph, he had the luxury of time to repair it. By darkening the sky and increasing the contrast, he also repurposed Ivanova for her new function: as an image encouraging universal meditation on loss rather than one about the Nazi racial war.



Figure 1.14b Dmitri Baltermants, *Grief*, photo taken in 1942, published in *Ogonyok*, 1965. © Dmitri Baltermants/The Dmitri Baltermants Collection/Corbis.

In 1962, for his fiftieth birthday, there were plans to host a solo show for Baltermants in Moscow. He produced a maquette of an exhibition catalog, which included the new, retouched version of *Ivanova* with a title, rather than a caption: *Gore* or “Grief.”⁴ Although the 1962 show never happened, “Grief” appeared one year later in a Czech publication and was exhibited in London in 1964 at “People and Events of the USSR,” a show which aimed to educate the British viewing public about Soviet everyday life using contemporary photography.⁵ A visitor to the exhibition may have been surprised to find that it opened, not with daily life, but with Baltermants’ images from the war.⁶ *Ivanova* was third on the wall, although she was now titled “Sorrow (Ditch of Kerch),” rather than “Grief.”

A few months later, in January 1965, Baltermants’ own magazine, *Ogonyok*, of which he now served as photo editor, published “We Will Not Forget,” a glossy two-page layout of *Ivanova*. Printed next to the photograph was Heinrich Böll’s comment “these women’s cry becomes humanity’s cry.” The same year, Baltermants exhibited “Grief” in a group show at New York’s Gallery of Modern Art. *New York Times* critic Jacob Deschin raved that “One picture in particular—a post-battle scene with mourners searching the field for their dead—may possibly go down as one of the great wartime landscapes of all time.”⁷ “Grief”

became so well known that, in the late 1970s, the German magazine *Die Zeit* reviewed a book of Soviet war photographs calling “Grief” “world famous.”⁸

Never did anyone identify the dead in the picture or why they had been killed. Media outlets from the wartime British *Picture Post*, which published Baltermants’ Kerch photographs, to the *New York Times*’ review of the redone Ivanova, called this early Holocaust liberation photograph a scene of post battle tragedy, just as the photographer seems to have always wanted it. From the moment Baltermants turned away from massacred Jewish women and children and photographed living women in dramatic bodily displays, Ivanova’s cry stopped being her own and became the cry of humanity encapsulated by its eventual title—“Grief.”

Notes

- 1 See Maxim Shrayer, *I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013): 31–58.
- 2 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Spectres of War: Hollywood’s Engagement with Military Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012): 113–23.
- 3 Zvi Gitelman, “Internationalism, Patriotism, and Disillusion: Soviet Jewish Veterans Remember World War II and the Holocaust,” “Occasional Paper: Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” US Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 2005: 116–17.
- 4 Catalog maquette in the Teresa and Paul Harbaugh Archive, Denver, CO.
- 5 Eleonory Gilburd, “The Revival of Soviet Internationalism in the Mid to Late 1950s,” in D. Kozlov and E. Gilburd, eds, *The Thaw* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013): 362–401.
- 6 Collection of USSR-Great Britain Society in Leeds University Archives, MS 1499/23/6 and 7.
- 7 Jacob Deschin, “Gallery Exhibits on View,” *New York Times*, 16 May 1965: X16.
- 8 “Abgrund des Krieges,” *Die Zeit*, 24 August 1979: 35.