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I. Hands at Work

Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.



Fig 1: Exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

The Hand at Work or How the KGB File Leaks in the Exhibition

Tatiana Vagramenko
University of Barcelona, Spain
vagramenko@ub.edu

Gabriela Nicolescu
University of Oxford, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The article tells the story of the use and perception of images of violence from an unusual trial against a group of believers, arrested in 1952 in Ukraine. Visitors to an exhibition held in 2019 at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca were invited to look at two sets of photographs: originals and spruced-up copies coming from a recently opened criminal file retrieved from the SBU (former KGB) archive in Kiev. Through the reconstruction of the story of the people who suffered the arrest, we attempt to question the use of research ethics and of heritage in relation to retrieving from archives and displaying violent images of the past. What are the attributes and limits of showing? And what can we learn from the hand at work, the process of actively manipulating the image?

KEYWORDS

Images of violence; museum exhibition; KGB archives; clandestine religion; Soviet Ukraine.

Introduction

In November 2019 in Romania at the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca images of a four-volume criminal file retrieved from the Archive of the Ukrainian Security Service (former KGB Archive) were exhibited on a museum wall. It was a room dedicated to Police Aesthetics, part of a larger exhibition on clandestine religion in the secret police archives in Central and Eastern Europe.[1] Visitors were invited to look through a piece of semi-transparent paper at the mugshots of a group of people from Soviet Ukraine charged by the MGB (as the Soviet security services were known at the time) as members of the "ecclesiastical-monarchist organization 'the True Orthodox Church.'" The exhibition research team felt that the images were too powerful to be exhibited large, or framed. The team decided to exhibit the images on a clipboard that visitors could handle themselves and covered the clipboard with semi-transparent tracing paper. Out of the entire exhibition in Cluj-Napoca these images were the only ones explicitly showing violence. The exhibition generally was not about the repression itself, but about how the secret police represented, visualized, and systematized the groups that they were pursuing. The images and materials presented were all confiscated, collated, or created by the police or secret police and originated from diverse so-called "anti-

religious" operations. As the introductory label of the exhibition written by the curators Gabriela Nicolescu and James Kapaló notes, the materials have a dual character: they were used by the secret police as incriminating evidence against religious communities, but they also represent memory and cultural patrimony, bearing testimony to the creative spirit of groups and individuals who suffered persecution.

The text printed on the tracing paper varied (Figure 1). We had a shorter version and a longer version. The shorter text told visitors that violent images were on display. It also invited them to look behind the paper at the images and see if they noticed any difference between the two sets of photographs. The longer text told a story of what we labelled "Singing Women".

But truly, this was only a simplification of the materials found in the file. As this article shows, the story of Panfil Kolesnik and of his family and religious group, including children, has many layers to be discovered.

This article examines the use of archival images of violence and suffering in the creation of post-Soviet heritage, namely by being exhibited in a museum context after being retrieved from the formerly top-classified secret police file. While choosing to display the images of violence—but also providing a choice to the visitors "not to look"—we are aware of the ethical concerns raised and the danger in the banal recirculation of images of historical violence that "may prevent, rather than facilitate, engagement with the historical subject" (Crane 2008: 309). While historian Susan Crane advocates for the reclassification of Holocaust photographs, we try to find different ways to look at and read the images of violence. Following the opening of the secret police archives after 1989, the life of these secret materials then embarked on an entirely new trajectory. An increasingly massive amount of digital (and open-access) objects from recently opened communist-era archives began to travel in the public sphere. The process is irreversible. Today they circulate more widely still on various social media platforms, where one often finds them completely removed from any sense of their original context and pasted into new narratives. In order to avoid this "banal attention" Susan Crane writes about, we seek to historically contextualize the images, to immerse them within the story of socialist repression but also within the storylines of those people who were pictured, including the afterlife of the MGB file in which the images were enclosed. By gradually adding layers of the story, we grasp a multivalent power of the photographs under scrutiny. In other words, through "thick reading" of the file and reconstruction of the story, the spectator can see the changing meanings and the historical agency of the photographs and begin to read the images in a different way: not (only) as images of violence and suffering but as images of resistance and resilience. This re-contextualizing approach reveals the believers' agency not only as victims but as historical actors who withdrew from the Soviet system, choosing instead nonconformist social and religious alternatives.

The pictured persons were not crying as we thought originally, they were singing and praying; despite the police officers trying to restrain them for the arrest photograph. Prisoner resistance to being photographed is not necessarily uncommon. In the broader European context, one finds instances of police attempting to photograph reluctant arrestees, such as Irish Fenians refusing to sit for their mug shots and laughing at the camera, or a female suspect contorting her face for the photographer (Suibhne, Martin 2005: 107; Gunning 1995: 27-29; Tagg 2009: XXV). Such candid photos reveal the hidden reality that lurks behind police photography in general, that is, as Christian Phéline described it, the exercise of political power on the body and image

Singing Women

They never stopped singing and praying—during their arrest, while their photographs were being taken, during their pre-trial interrogations, and even during the court hearing.

This group of twenty-three believers were arrested as members of the True Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 1952. All we know about them now is that they were poor peasants who practiced their faith in their private homes, mainly at night. This was enough to charge them with conducting anti-Soviet activity and propaganda.

Their trial was highly unusual, breaking all the standards of the secret police's criminal procedures. As reported in the secret police internal statements, believers resisted arrest: they barricaded the entrance of their house, tore their own clothes off, fell on the floor, crying and singing out loud. Later they refused to answer any questions during the entire pre-trial investigation. "*God knows*" and "*I will only answer before the Judgement of God*" were their only answers to the investigators while all the time they were praying out loud and singing religious hymns, even during the court session.

During their pre-trial detention, believers went on a hunger strike as a result of which five of them died a few days after being sentenced by the court. The arrested believers also refused to walk, to talk, or even to sleep on their beds. The policemen had to carry them everywhere, to the interrogation rooms and to the courtroom. They were sentenced to between ten and twenty-five years in labor camps. Most of them had their sentence reduced in 1955 as a result of an amnesty after Stalin's death. However, some of them were arrested again in 1957.

Here we see two versions of their arrest photographs. As the photographs were being taken, believers intentionally closed their eyes, turned their heads away from the camera, or sang while the secret police violently tried to restrain them, their hands and black gloves clearly visible. Police officers later tried to correct these "spoiled" photographs and to remove the traces of their violent intervention from the images. The "spruced-up" copies with the shaded hands of policemen were used in the official documentation, while the smaller-size original photographs were appended to the back of the arrest questionnaires.

Archive file:
HDASBU, fond 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 1

of the suspect in which the camera itself operates as an extension of the law and the embodiment of the discipline-mechanism (quoted in Gunning 1995: 27). But the case of the images exhibited in the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca reveals another important dimension and, hence, ethical implication. Looking at their file in the present we believe that the arrested believers refused radically, on religious grounds, to be photographed or recorded during interrogation sessions. By exposing these images of resistance we run a great risk of becoming co-creators of this story of violence. Yet, by adding layers of tracing paper, we also make the image less visible to the audience. Therefore, we prevent visitors from looking at these images easily. We invite them instead to reflect on and debate the impact of violence on people and the harmful hand at work. In this case, the museum/ exhibition space is conceived as a healing place, not as one that recreates torture. We undertake a "thick description" of the file and the photographs and interpret the layered process of working with the image and of using the image as document in staging a past and, later, in us telling the story of a regime and the process of coming to terms with contested pasts.

In the history of socialism there are multiple examples of manipulation of images to correct past events for present purposes. There is the Soviet anecdote about an imagined Armenian Radio broadcast, reproduced by Watson: "Armenian radio is asked 'Is it possible to foretell the future?' Answer: 'Yes, that is no problem: we know exactly what the future will be like. Our problem is with the past: that keeps changing'" (1999: 2).

This example has an obvious meaning: that socialist ways of looking at history were troubled by the representation of the past. This tendency was also encountered in the socialist obsession with documenting and archiving the present (which was believed to be unquestionably "glorious")—an attitude which clashed with the need to re-write the past for present uses. In these processes of archiving and re-writing, there was always something left by mistake, or something that was not never thought to become visible, a remainder or a trace which escaped deletion.

Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) uses the example of a hat as a trace. In February 1948, two Czechoslovakian communist leaders stand together on a snowy Prague balcony. One of them gives his hat to the other leader. The two men are photographed and this becomes an emblematic image of the Czechoslovakian revolution. Four years later, the owner of the hat is expelled from the Communist Party and executed; he is removed from all official records, including the now-famous photograph. All that survives of him—in the photograph—is his hat on the other leader's head.

We have taken the notion of layers and exploited the very manipulation of the document attempted by the KGB investigators, and later the manipulation researchers and visitors operated. The composition of the file from the Archive of the Ukrainian Security Service is deciphered in the composition of the display. What we found in the archival material was a double manipulation of the truth and of the image. First it was the manipulation of force. To imprison, to restrain by force the arrestee, to hold his or her head with brutal hands is something horrible. Second, to shade out hands and gloves in the attempt to delete the hand with a scratch, is again another form of lie. Talking about icons and iconoclasm during the Reformation in Germany, Koerner wrote: "The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth" (2002: 93). We know that scratched surfaces talk about a desire or requirement to delete something.[2] As we have discussed elsewhere (Nicolescu 2017), acts of creation of images and displays have ethical dimensions; wherever there is such intervention or manipulation, intuitively we sense that



Fig 2: Exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

something important is there. For those of you who will read this article up to the end, we write the story of Panfil Kolesnik and of his group, but also in order to add another layer to our museum exhibit—a letter written by the youngest child of Panfil Kolesnik in 1998. This letter was not introduced in the display, but is essential for understanding the importance of telling this story further.

This study addresses the complicated process of making heritage out of controversial and traumatic pieces of knowledge retrieved from the secret archives. Telling the story of these people in a museum context shifts the way archival images are perceived. We transform these images into heritage, we give them a public dimension, one that allows for manipulations and domestications of memories. The making of heritage, particularly related to the contested past of totalitarianism, is a controversial social and cultural process—an act of communication and meaning making that creates ways to understand and engage with the present (Smith 2006: 2). It involves a dynamic interplay between the agency of a spectator, the agency of "things" displayed, and a social context in which this interaction occurs. Through this field of interaction, new values and meanings are embodied—an often emotional moment that creates a sense of commitment and belonging in the present (Plets 2019: 1081). The heritage is ours—whoever is looking at the images—although people depicted in the photographs are not related to us, nor are their religious communities that left living traces of memories. Yet it is us who attach social and cultural values to them and link them to the present. Historian David Lowenthal explains that in a world full of hunger and strife people need heritage, because they need simplified stories about the past that can solve present insecurities. When grandparents can no longer tell these stories to their children on their laps, heritage does this work.

> Heritage starts with what individuals inherit and bequeath... [It] offers evocative personal inventory: memories... old photographs... family words and tales... grand-mother's old quilt ... a locket with a picture of a long-forgotten aunt... smells that trigger past events ... an old wedding dress... father's pocket watch... our ancestral cemetery... special holiday meals... [. . .] a favourite teddy bear... a tree you climbed as a child... [. . .] a lullaby... (Lowenthal 1998: 31).

We are interested in delving into the images themselves, but also into what transpires between the viewer and the photograph when these images are not told in a private context but looked at, commented on, and interacted with in a public institution (Figure 2). Their role in the technology of memory. The relationship between the state-produced photography, post-socialist memory of violence, and traumatic pasts. Memories of state violence.

What do we learn from the file

In May 1952, a group of twenty-three believers was arrested in eight neighboring villages in the Kiev region of Soviet Ukraine. No one knew much about them. Their co-villagers described them as Stundists or Baptists and knew nothing more than the fact that, even though they displayed Orthodox icons, crosses, and church books in their homes, they never went to Orthodox Church and did not recognize Orthodox priests. The members of the group lived isolated lives; they rarely talked to their neighbors, avoided representatives of the Soviet authorities, and never discussed their faith except to repeat the phrase: "God knows" (*Bog znaet*). All we know about them now is that they were poor peasants who gathered for prayer in secret in their homes, sometimes travelling between villages to pray together. Statements taken from forty-eight witnesses (all of them recorded by KGB investigators nearly a month before the group's arrest) confirmed that the believers refused to enroll in local collective farms or to work at other state enterprises, never paid taxes or registered for other Soviet documents, and never used money ("the mark of the dragon")[3] or sent their kids to public school. They farmed their individual plots and occasionally worked on the side in exchange for food and clothes. Some had been arrested before and had spent time in prison. Others had had their children forcefully taken from them and had never seen them again.

The MGB official closing indictment charged the group with conducting anti-Soviet activity and propaganda as members of the "ecclesiastical-monarchist organization 'the True Orthodox Church.'" Although none of the twenty-three defendants, nor the forty-three witnesses, nor even the interrogators themselves ever mentioned the name of the True Orthodox Church, the nature of the case required rigid categorization according to the standardized Soviet secret police practice. It required the assignment of otherwise ordinary semi-literate peasant believers from the Ukrainian countryside to an established "cliché from an infamous stock of characters" (Vatulescu 2010: 38; Verdery 2014: 56). Starting from the late 1920s, the Soviet state launched an all-country repression campaign against popular religious dissent movements and grassroots religiosity, which were as difficult to control as they were difficult to define. The concepts such as the "red-dragon-type organization," the "ecclesiastic-monarchist underground," and the "True Orthodox Church" were formulated on the pages of the secret police (known as OGPU in the late 1920s) files. A novel documentation genre, a model criminal file and model indictment against the "ecclesiastic-monarchist underground," printed as a brochure and circulated amongst regional GPU branches, worked as a sort of manual that transmitted a constellation of categories and techniques and trained secret police officers in the regions to produce homogenized and standardized knowledge through repeated formulae and frames (Vagramenko 2021). The group on trial in May 1952 fit into this framework; it was a model case applied in practice.

Having said that, the case was unusual and seems to break the standards of the investigation file of the late-Stalinist period. Four volumes of the case were the outcome of

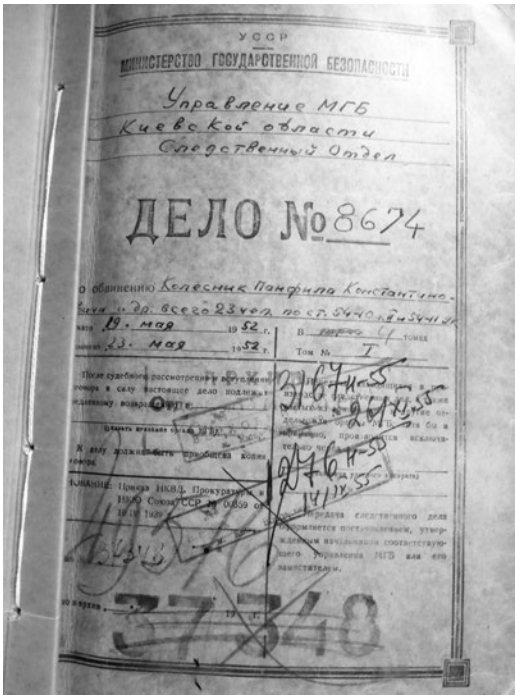

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Fig 3: Criminal file on Panfil Kolesnik and other 22 believers. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346.

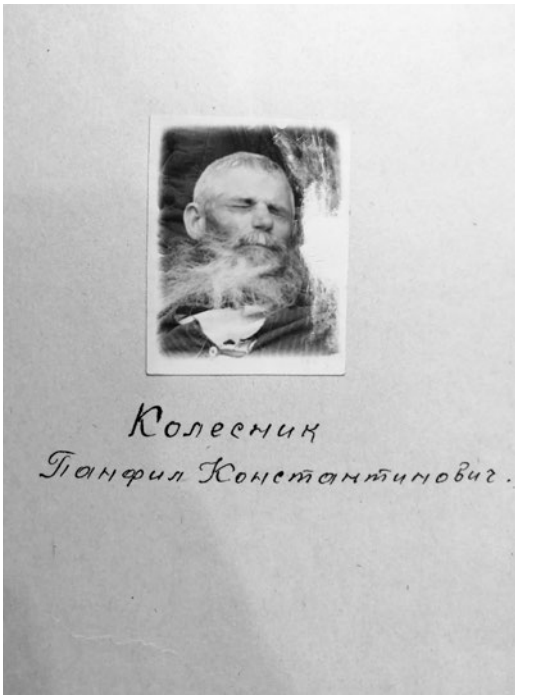


Fig 4: Arrest photograph of Panfil Kolesnik. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346. ark. 3.

an exceptionally short (at least for the 1950s criminalistics standards) investigation. The pre-trial review of the believers was brief: a mere three days of interrogations and then an additional night of twenty-two orchestrated confrontations between the arrestees and witnesses (conducted from 9 p.m. until 4 a.m.). During the review, the believers refused to answer questions, responding to everything by saying simply "God knows" or "I will only answer to the Judgment of God." They offered no denunciations or confessions. They never stopped singing and praying. They kept at it when the police came for them, as their arrest photographs were being taken, during the interrogations that preceded their trial, even during the court hearing. The case lasted nine days between the arrests and the court hearing with its final decision—twenty-five years in labor camps for most of the defendants.

Another important piece of information that we learn from the file is its unusual visual composition. The file opens up with a single photograph pasted in the middle of the page, with yellowed traces of glue, and only a name handwritten under the photo: Panfil Kolesnik (Figures 3 and 4). An image shows an old bearded man with closed eyes, his head turned away from the camera, and a torn jacket. On the right side of the photograph, something was thoroughly scratched off. Whereas KGB photography normally functioned as an extension of the textual narrative—identification photographs of arrestees or surveillance photographs appeared as inserts within standard textual files—this file singled out the image from the rest of the documentation narrative. It was attached to a blank sheet of paper. Apparently, the photograph was taken in prison, and it was supposed to be the man's criminal identification portrait, commonly known as the mugshot. Nevertheless, the image clearly broke all the rigid rules and guidelines applied to the taking of mugshot photos in Soviet criminalistics practice. The guidelines required that arrest photographs

have a standardized two-shot form, one full frontal facial view paired with a view from the side, almost always shot against a light background, free of distractions that might obscure the contour of the face, combined with the textual description of the arrestee's features. According to the Soviet criminalistics manual, no physical intervention in the photograph was allowed (Vyshinskii 1935: 52-54; more on KGB photography see Vagramenko, forthcoming). The photographs we find in the file followed none of the above mentioned rules. Yet if shadings were made in order to hide some infringement of the criminalistics standards, why was the "deviant" image of Panfil Kolesnik placed so central in the file, as if to attract attention?

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *anonymity and simplification*. We realize that for the Cluj-Napoca exhibition we did not choose the image of Panfil Kolesnik, but only of some women in the group. We did not give their names. We even hesitated between calling them Singing Women and Crying Women. We were not sure what the images in the archive showed. Very often ethnographic and museum exhibitions talk about people generically without giving names. Sometimes they do this for reasons of lack of space, other times because they do not have access to the archival materials that usually accompany objects and images brought in the exhibition. It also happens that they do not give names because when a specific image or object was taken from the field, names of people from whom the images/ objects came were not considered important. Simplification operates on another level in many museums. Once objects are taken from their context, they can be manipulated more easily.

The other twenty-two individual cases in the file started with similar mug shots of the arrestees, except the case of Panfil's wife, Maria Kolesnik, whose mugshot for some reason was removed, leaving only traces of yellowed glue on a blank page (they were possibly re-used in Maria's subsequent trial in 1957). The images captured an unusual dynamic: as the photos were being taken, old and young women and men intentionally closed their eyes, turned their heads away, some images with grimacing faces tell that depicted arrestees were crying or singing, yet some others helplessly hung on the policemen's hands. Nine photographs were visibly altered—scratches obscured something in the photographs (Figures 5 and 6).

As we sift through pages of the file, we discover *what* was so thoroughly scratched out of the images. The smaller-size, original photos were appended to the back of the arrest forms. There we see what was removed: the officers tried to restrain the resisting believers, their hands and gloves clearly visible. When police officers later tried to correct these "tainted" photographs, they removed the evidence of their violent intervention from the images, which one can see in the spruced-up copies with the hands of the policemen shaded out (Figures 7 and 8).

The gap, or how the file leaks

It is this discrepancy between the original photograph and its spruced-up copy that gives a glimpse into what happened. This gap between the original image and its primitive photomontage—shaded hands and gloves of policemen violently restraining the arrested—also tells us about the very process of knowledge production. "The voices of the persecuted reach us (when they do) through the filters of their persecutors' questions and as copied down by third parties, the notaries," points out Carlo Ginzburg while reading transcripts of inquisition trials (1980: x) in an observation that is directly applicable to the Soviet secret police interrogation protocols. The voices of defendants are

filtered through the KGB interrogator's questions, and we can (or cannot) hear them through his (in)ability to master the narrative of the protocol. In both historical cases, the transcripts of (inquisitorial and Soviet political police) trials are the product of pressure and coercion. Yet Ginzburg grounds his research on the conception of discrepancy between the questions of the inquisitors and the responses of the defendants—the gap separating the narrative of the interrogations by the judges from the responses of the defendants. This narrative gap allows him to salvage from inquisitorial trials the fragments of forgotten popular culture of sixteenth-century Italy. There is little gap to be found in the KGB file. The Soviet interrogator was empowered by the system to distort the voices of the persecuted, as well as to emasculate the entire document's heteroglossia, the co-existence of a variety of often antagonistic voices that participated in the production of the text (Verdery 2014: 51–52). In the production of the narrative of the KGB file, the task of the officer was to subordinate it to a single dominant interpretation or to the governing epistemologies. This order constituted the established state narrative of the documentation and determined what can and cannot be said and what can and cannot be shown. In other words, in its record keeping, the Soviet secret police processed discordant textual pieces or voices into a standardized textual format—the wooden language that is often difficult to read. This biased compilation of heterogeneous sources constructed a new socialist reality and had enormous power over people's lives. The final text of the criminal file was supposed to demonstrate the utmost victory of the Soviet power over the anti-Soviet enemy. In this instance, to triumphantly unveil the organized political insurgency hidden behind the mask of spontaneous religiosity.

In this production of socialist reality, however, the secret police files sometimes failed to overcome heteroglossia. The interrogators were often not so skillful (or educated enough) at mastering the narrative and encoding the text in standardized formats. Sometimes we can find the narrative gap Ginzburg writes about that separates the dominant Soviet narrative and the answers of the persecuted. Likewise, brushed-up interrogation protocols can leak the voices of persecuted believers with their faith and agency, undermining the patterns of KGB narrative and exposing different storylines and viewpoints. To make it clear, let's compare the following three answers of the same woman during the lengthy interrogation, which was part of a criminal case that preceded the arrest of Panfil's group.

Defendant: "We prayed and read the Gospel and the Saints' Lives. Panfil used to tell us that every true believer and he who truly wants to achieve salvation of the soul has to [trust] God always and to follow God's commandments—do not offend anyone, do not kill, love your neighbor, do not steal and do not lie, and do not sin with words nor deeds. He spoke nothing else . . ."

Officer: "We know that he gave you and others direct instructions about anti-Soviet activity. Why don't you report on this?"

Defendant: "He possibly told something but not in front of me, therefore I can't report on this . . ."

Officer: "The investigation knows that under the guise of religious teaching he, in fact, carried out active anti-Soviet work. We suggest you to report the truth in regard to this matter . . ."

Defendant: "He used to give us anti-Soviet instructions and trained us in an anti-Soviet way, using our religious superstitions. He carried out his anti-Soviet agitation during prayer meetings at his house."[4]



Fig 5: Altered arrest photograph of Raisa Kornienko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 185.



Fig 6: Altered arrest photograph of Maria Tishchenko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 242.

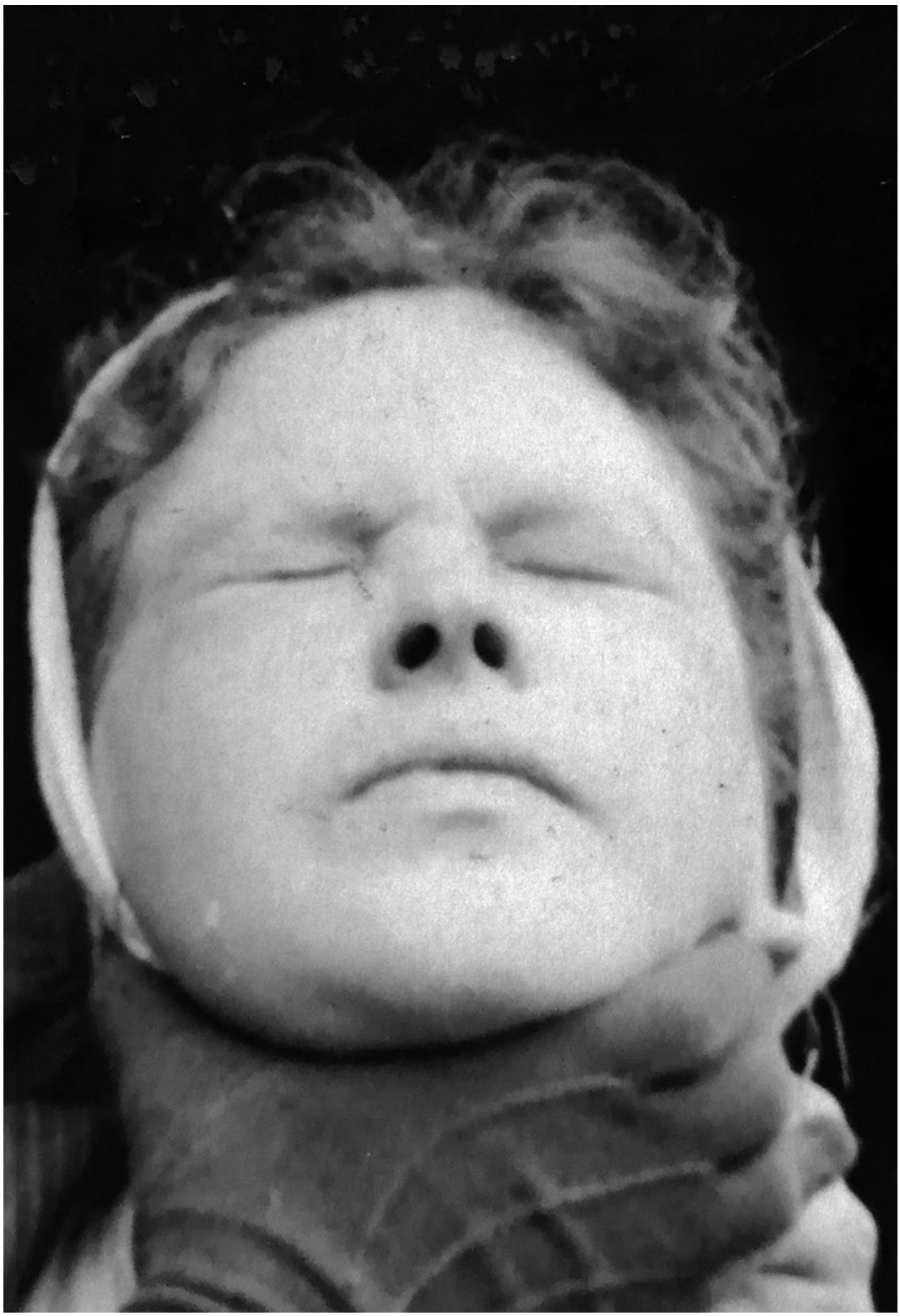


Fig 7: Original arrest photograph of Raisa Kornienko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 192 rev.



Fig 8: Original arrest photograph of Maria Tishchenko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 249 rev.



Fig 9: Altered arrest photograph of Galina Kravchenko.
Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 96.

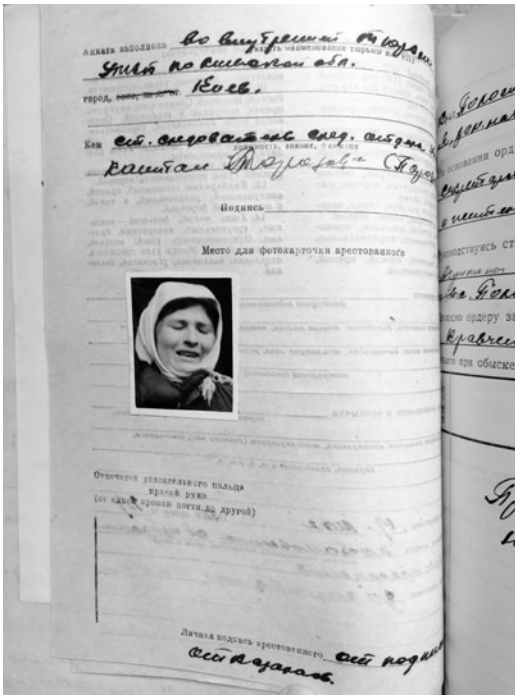


Fig 10: Original arrest photograph of Galina Kravchenko.
Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 103 rev.

The time gap between these three answers was several hours. We can only guess what happened during these hours, whether the discrepancy between the answers was a sign of coercion or a relative inability of the interrogator to master the narrative at the very beginning. On another occasion one can find the mixture of registers within the same sentence: "[*register A*] I decided to follow Dakhno and Panfil and to live [like them], to pray, and to give up earthly life in order to save my soul, [*register B*] that is to say I decided to continue my participation in the anti-Soviet activity of the Dakhno's group."[5] The mixed register and the gap between different representations of the same voice allow us to read *against* the archival grain: to retrieve stories of the unrecorded life of an ordinary believer in the Ukrainian countryside during late Stalinism. It also allows us to read, as Ann Stoler suggests (2009: 22–28), *along* the archival grain and to look into internal mechanisms of the KGB file production. This is all the more important, as the KGB documentation was the product of the state machine and a fundamental element in the technologies of knowledge production—the technologies that, according to Stoler, reproduced the state itself.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *process*. The hand at work in an archival context is something that researchers very often see—documents are annotated, changed. One can see various drafts and changes made to various documents, be they texts or images. But these changes are also testimony of temporal changes, of processes. How can museums capture such processes? We have used the tool of the layered display, one in which the visitor participates actively in the process of discovering the change made to the document/ image (Figures 9 and 10).

Similar to textual forms of the secret police documentation, the photographs enclosed in the file provide an insight into

both the repressed histories of popular religion and the origin and mechanisms of knowledge production. The difference (or Ginzburg's gap) between the original image and its copy with the primitive photo manipulation unveil the use of violence, which the MGB tried to conceal—shaded hands and gloves of policemen violently restraining the arrested. These "banal traces of difficult history" (Elizabeth Edwards, quoted in Sarkisova and Shevchenko 2011: 91) show how standardized representation of the "enemy" contrasted with what the original mugshots, together with the file stories, disclosed: peasant religious radicalism which the upheaval of Stalin's Terror and the turmoil of the war had brought forth. The gap between the two versions of the images also reveals what Ann Stoler (2009) calls the file's epistemological and political anxieties: the law of what cannot be shown, the disturbed Soviet order and common sense. It finally exposed the fear on the part of the secret police of breaking the code of silence surrounding the use of violence and of disclosing what might be seen as a failed case of enemy unmasking.

The somewhat crude editing of the images shown above—replete with shaded-out gloves and hands—tells us something of the technical approach of an officer to a photograph and the logic behind it. What could actually spoil a mug shot: the things outlined in internal manuals, such as closed eyes or grimacing faces of prisoners; or rather aspects that could not be found in manuals, such as the hands of policemen exposing violence? As we argue elsewhere, these physical alterations, or what Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004: 13) would refer to as "material intervention in the narrative" of the photograph, have the power to fundamentally alter the meaning and content of the image. Thus, in addition to exposing the usually hidden coercion that was inherent to the arrest process, this set of MGB photos shows how the language of the photograph was re-instrumentalized to generate a different narrative and hence new meaning and agency as evidence for the prosecution of the group on trial (Vagramenko, forthcoming).

The techniques of retouching and photo manipulation were formally prohibited in the police practice. Yet, they were not as straightforward as open violations of police procedure or conscious manipulation of police photography for malevolent ends. Nor were they a mere embodiment of a disciplinary technique (Tagg 2009; Suibhne, Martin 2005: 102; Gunning 1995: 29–31). The use of photography by the Soviet political police assisted the production of a new kind of knowledge and power. Through the repurposing of photographs for new functions, or by shading elements that were considered to be out of place, the Soviet secret police created new objects of knowledge and reinforced the regime of truth that laid the foundation of a new social order.



Panfil's story: A holy man or a ringleader

The arrest on May 19, 1952 was part of a larger MGB campaign to purge popular religiosity from the Ukrainian countryside in the mid-1950s. Four months prior to the arrest of the twenty-three believers, local KGB officers "liquidated" another group of believers from the same villages, also tried as True Orthodox Christians. In a snowball effect, their interrogations threw up new names, hence new arrests and new trials, which, in turn, triggered new arrests. Sometimes spouses, relatives, and acquaintances of the arrestees formed a separate criminal case.

The defendants were mainly widowed or single mothers and their children of full legal age. Many of them had lost their husbands during the Second World War. Among the arrestees were also younger persons with school education, former

Komsomol members, kolkhoz workers, and socialist activists. They withdrew from Soviet life once they had chosen religious conversion, which took place during or immediately after the war. All were classified as poor peasants in the arrest forms: a hut with a straw roof and a small household plot was the biggest property listed. Some were wandering from village to village, begging or doing casual work in exchange for goods. Upon their arrest, the children of the defendants were taken into custody and sent to orphanages; as we will show later, the story of one of the children unexpectedly appeared in the afterlife of the file.

A fifty-two-year-old poor shoemaker, named Panfil Kolesnik, was the main defendant (the group criminal file was titled "Kolesnik and others"). He was arrested along with his wife Maria and his son Ivan. Panfil was known in the surrounding villages as a visionary elder (*prozorlivyi starets*) and a holy man, "the man who lived the life of a righteous man" (*zhivet zhizn'u pravednika*), and people used to gather at his house for prayers. The interrogator translated this as the "ringleader (*glavar'*) of the illegal underground group." Panfil was also a man of radical religious principles. He turned his peasant house into a domestic church, full of icons and ecclesiastic books, and fully dedicated himself to God. "You have to pray everywhere and think nothing else but about saving your soul," witnesses reported his words. He preached the narrow path of losing everything in the name of God—the thorny path, he told, not everybody could follow. "He has chosen only God and to think of nothing else, in the hope of saving his soul on the Last Judgement, the Doomsday," testified one of his followers. Another arrested woman recalled Panfil's word: "I have decided to go to all lengths, even to death, in the name of God, for all I want is to save my soul."[6]

The file traces the beginning of Panfil's religious path as far back as 1926, the time of the post-Revolution turmoil. During the collectivization in the 1930s, Panfil refused to join kolkhoz and the Soviet authorities confiscated his private piece of land and a farm. In the following years, he worked as a shoemaker in exchange for food or goods, never touching Soviet money. Panfil and his co-believers did not recognize secular authorities: they did not take part in Soviet state enterprises, refused to accept Soviet internal passports, and to participate in state elections, did not pay taxes, nor signed up for the Soviet government loan. Fully withdrawn from social and state life, holding lengthy overnight prayers and avoiding contacts with their neighbors, they sparked both rumors and curiosity. Reportedly the Soviet authorities from *sel'sovet* administration and Komsomol activists visited their houses on a number of occasions: "to inquire about the nature of their faith (*sushchestva ikh very*)," but never heard anything from them except "God knows".

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *field specificity.* How can we interpret Panfil's position in relation to the state? Are there any current figures behaving in similar ways today? How do contemporary art exhibitions regard and display these movements of opposition in the present? It seems that various fields and disciplines intersect. One wonders what happens if materials obtained from one field are used in others.

For some believers, the May 1952 arrest was not their first encounter with the Soviet repressive machine. Some had been previously sentenced for refusal to serve in the army, others for not paying taxes or accepting Soviet documents. In winter 1940, the court ruled to terminate Panfil's custody of his three minor children for refusing to give them a communist education in a public school. The children were forcefully sent to the orphanage. "After his children were taken away, he ran across the village barefoot in winter and prayed, but soon they came after him too, to arrest him," a neighbor reported.[7] As we read the file, we learn that during the

war, the orphanage was closed down and children lived on the street. The eldest child, Ivan, was wandering and begging until he reunited with his family after the war. The fate of the other two children remained unknown. In May 1952, at the age of twenty-four, Ivan was arrested together with his parents, Panfil and Maria. By the time of the arrest in 1952, Panfil's family counted two more minor children, aged seven and eleven. They too were sent to the orphanage; but this time, as we will see later, the file gives a glimpse into their further life.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *nuance*. The information that we found in this file and the richness of analysis is extremely nuanced. What do museums need in order to be more nuanced? In our case, it is very probable that an entire room/ exhibition could have been dedicated only to this file. But are museums places to diffuse nuanced information, or rather places to condense information and tell short stories? In the exhibition we focused mainly on the idea of layers, which is crucial to how archives work. By allowing visitors to touch the boards on which more layers of images and texts were exhibited, we wanted to create a metaphor of the archival research. We wanted to show to them a slice of the richness found by the researcher delving in the archive.

More layers of the file story: arrest and verdict

Their arrest and trial were anything but ordinary. Based on the official description of the events that appears in the file's closing indictment, the believers who had gathered at Panfil's house for overnight prayers resisted the arrest and barricaded themselves in the house, tearing off their clothes, breaking windows and furniture, falling to the floor, and hysterically screaming and singing.[8] The file, however, included the statement of the group conducting the arrest, written in haste on a crumpled notebook sheet. This document describes the events in a different way: the arrest group (the MGB officers and village council members) broke the windows and forced their way into the house. "The arrest was undertaken with the use of force," it states (this can explain the broken furniture and torn clothes). Believers were kneeling to pray, when the officers broke in. Refusing to follow police orders, they sat on the floor holding hands and began to sing and pray aloud as the officers were dragging them into the truck.

Following their arrest, a number of the believers went on a hunger strike and were forcibly fed, as a result of which possibly as many as five of them died just a few days after sentencing. They also refused to walk, talk, or even to sleep in their beds while in prison, which meant that they had to be carried everywhere, to the interrogation rooms and the courtroom included. Once in the court room, the believers refused to sit and lay down on the floor. They were singing religious songs and praying aloud, as the judge was reading the closing indictment:

The investigation has proven the following: the illegal anti-Soviet organization True Orthodox Church is the most reactionary ecclesiastic-monarchist organization whose aim is to carry out hostile activity in order to restore the old monarchist order in the USSR. To achieve this, the members of the organization, under the guise of differences with the legally functioning in the USSR [Russian Orthodox] church, carried out active hostile work against the current state and social order in the USSR.[9]

Another accusation was that the defendants carried out active anti-Soviet agitation, popularizing "monarchist" teaching, despite all the witness interrogation protocols that testified rather a sort of vow of silence amongst the believers and their refusal to communicate with the outside world, with even the closest neighbors

knowing little about their faith. Following the same logic, the judge criminalized the religious upbringing of the defendants' children: "In order to recruit new members into the sect [they] educated their children in religious spirit and drew them into the True Orthodox Church underground."[10]

The prosecutor asked for twenty-five-year sentences for each of the defendants except the two youngest women aged twenty-two and twenty-three. For his final plea, Panfil was brief: "God be my judge, I ask only God to pardon me."[11] The rest of the defendants, except one woman, refused to make his or her final plea. Unexpectedly, after days of silence, an elder woman, Agrippina Rybak, gave up: "I ask the court to forgive me. I have realized that this faith is hostile towards Soviet power. My husband was killed in the war, I ask the court to pardon me." We do not know what made her speak, and whether she had previously kept silent at all, or she had been silenced in the file. Her case is even more ambiguous as we learn that apparently she was the only one from the group who did not go on hunger strike while in prison: the medical report on her force-feeding is absent. Her final words possibly saved her life, as she became the third person in the group who got a reduced sentence—ten years in labor camps.

The court pronounced the verdict on May 29, 1952. Two days later, on May 31, one of the defendants, Khristinia Tishchenko (aged sixty), died in the MGB prison No.1 in Kiev, before deportation to a labor camp could occur. A month later, on June 26, her twenty-six-year-old daughter Maria died in the same prison. Panfil Kolesnik was reported dead on June 10, in the same prison. Paraskevia Kornienko (aged fifty) and Matrena Ivashchenko (aged fifty-eight) died the following two months in the same prison. Natalia Nakoreniuk (aged sixty-four) died a few days after she was deported to the Gulag. The rest of the surviving convicts had their sentences reduced in 1955 and then commuted altogether in 1956, as a result of the amnesty following Stalin's death. Some were rearrested in 1957, however, and sentenced to new terms. Paradoxically, the state bureaucratic machine continued to appeal and review Panfil's verdict in the following several years (up to 1956): first, it declined the re-examination of his case, then initiated the appeal process and approved the reduction of his term, and finally amnestied him. Even though Panfil had died long ago behind the walls of the same state machine.

As an echo of the story, three years after the trial, being already Gulag prisoners and working at the copper mines of the infamous Steplag labor camp, two believers, Raisa Kornienko and Liubov Levchenko, refused to sign the document on the reduction of their term: "due to her religious convictions," wrote a prison officer, adding with a spelling mistake, "a nun (*manashka*)."[12]

The file's afterlife instead of conclusions

After the final release of the defendants, the file was closed with the following wording: "release due to the inexpediency of imprisonment;" but it had its afterlife in postsocialism. As was the case with most of the Soviet-era criminal cases based on "political crimes," this case of the twenty-three believers was re-examined by the rehabilitation commission in 1992. All former prisoners were rehabilitated, most of them posthumously. Yet, there was one more document that the archivist had appended to the file as late as 1998. It was a letter written by one of Panfil's children, Miron Kolesnik, and sent to the Ukrainian Security Services forty-six years after the trial. In his letter, Miron inquired about the rehabilitation status of his parents and his brother Ivan, all of them accused in the case. His letter shed light on a story that did not make it into the file. Miron was eight by the time of the



Fig 11: Exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

arrest of his family in 1952; his elder sister Irina was eleven. After both parents and their elder brother Ivan were imprisoned, Miron and Irina were sent to an orphanage. Their new birth certificates stated "parents unknown." From the letter, we also learn that their mother returned home in 1956 being very ill. (We do not know whether she was able to reunite with her children). The next year, however, she was arrested again and sentenced to another ten years, which she served fully in the Mordovian Gulag. She died shortly after her final release. Miron's brother Ivan followed the same path of the second term and deportation to the labor camp. "My parents and my brother were repressed for no justifiable reason, in 1957 as in 1951, for they committed no crimes. They all were religious, [honest] and hard-working people," Miron wrote in his letter. He knew about the hunger strike that happened many years ago in the MGB prison and he knew about the death of his father but he never managed to find out where his father was buried. The archive kept not record in this regard.

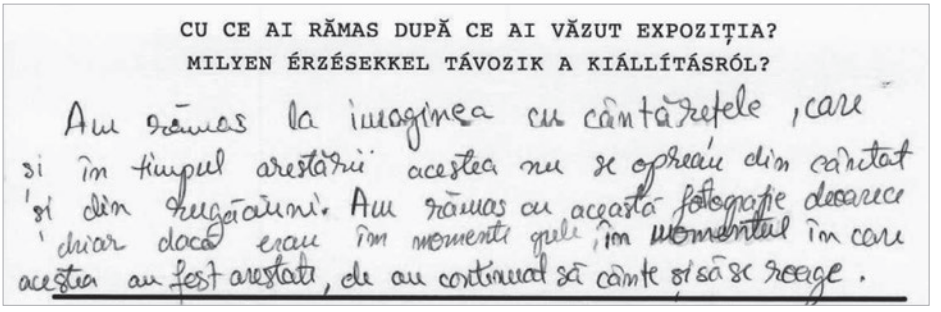
Miron's story enclosed in a letter at the end of his father's file shows that archival files are alive. Papers, letters, notes can continue to be added. But Miron's story is also one about the role of museums and heritage sites as institutions which tell stories. Heritage, Lowenthal warned us, can be used for good purposes as well as for bad ones. As researchers and curators, we need to know how to write the stories so that we heal wounds rather than make new ones. In the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca, we hope we managed to heal.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *beyond text*. Having the images exhibited on the wall, a different encounter with the visual material takes place. As we have already developed this idea elsewhere, museums have the power to tell stories beyond texts; "museums allow for a bodily proximity and a new type of knowledge to emerge" (Nicolescu 2020).



Fig 12: Students visiting the exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

The many visitors that stopped in front of this display and were attracted by its message wrote feedback cards explaining how this story and the entire exhibition moved them. The text below is an example of what a secondary school pupil or a student in Cluj-Napoca took from the exhibition. Looking at the scanned card and the calligraphy one can almost sense the emotion felt by this young visitor.


CU CE AI RĂMAS DUPĂ CE AI VĂZUT EXPOZIȚIA?
MILYEN ÉRZÉSEKKEL TÁVOZIK A KIÁLLÍTÁSRÓL?

Am rămas la imaginea cu cântărețele, care
și în timpul arestării acestea nu se opreau din cântat
și din rugăciuni. Am rămas cu această fotografie deoarece
chiar dacă erau în momente grele, în momentul în care
acestea au fost arestate, de au continuat să cânte și să se roage.

Fig 13: A feedback card written by a visitor of the exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. © Hidden Galleries project.

"I took with me the image of the singing women which during the arrest did not stop singing and praying. I kept in mind this photograph because it made me think that even if they were passing through very difficult moments during the arrest, they kept singing and praying."

Other examples of feedback cards add to this one.

I only came for a short visit, but what I saw here was so captivating that I stayed for hours.

*

I was impressed with the women that were tortured in prison, who even though suffered, did not stop from testifying their faith. The entire visit was impressive and I enjoyed learning new things about my own country.

*

I got to experience a small portion of the emotions of those times. I was left with the question of conserving these articles and objects in the archives or within the communities. I am glad that I have the right to religious freedom.

*

Contact with a life that I would have never known about otherwise. I found a small part of history that I don't remember learning about in school. I looked at life experiences and tragedies that were, until now, just some names in an archival inventory. Signed by students UAD (University of Art and Design).

*

A very enlightening and comprehensive exhibition! I've never seen an exhibition of this kind before and covers a part of history and society I knew very little of. I particularly liked the asking of the ethical questions relating to these materials.

As Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko argue, there is a "radical incompatibility of the different narratives derived from the same photographs" (2011: 88). Images that originally were used as evidence against anti-Soviet activity, nowadays, retrieved from institutional obscurity in their dusty files and pasted into the new narratives of a public exhibition, they acquire new meaning and new agency as witnesses for the prosecution, this time not for the dictatorial regime but against it. This demonstrates, Sarkisova and Shevchenko's argument goes on, "the malleability of photographic interpretations as well, paradoxically, as the powerful evidential appeal that images . . . continue to exert as undeniable 'certificates of presence.'" In a similar vein, in the display as well as in this essay, we have attempted to show how the different ways of looking and seeing the images of the Soviet-era repression shape the memory of the past for individuals, as well as for communities. When we did not know an answer, we asked questions. As some quotes inserted above show, the exhibition texts asked questions of visitors about the ethical use of the images on display. Reading the feedback cards, one notices how various visitors learn different things and adapt what they learn to their previous knowledge and educational background. Looking at these "certificates of presence," younger generations learn stories that were not told by their grandparents and parents out of fear, out of shame, or out of ignorance/lack of knowledge. Talking to young visitors, we learn that their grandparents suffered similar persecutions or that they were employed amongst the persecutors. There are mechanisms involved in the articulation of the traumatic experience and in how the difficult stories are to be told in the present.

The recent past is recent, and there are still wounds to be discovered and healed, by domesticating the past for our own uses. Heritage allows for revisitations of archives in contemporaneity (the digital archive of the project and the displays), but it also stages past traumatic experiences for us to learn in the present from convoluted pasts.

NOTES

1. The exhibition *Imagini din Galerii Secrete* was curated by Gabriela Nicolescu and James Kapaló as part of the project "Creative Agency and Religious Minorities: 'Hidden Galleries' in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe," funded by the European Research Council (No. 677355), with additional research on Ukraine under the project "Religious Minorities in Ukraine from the Soviet Underground to the Euromaidan: Pathways to Religious Freedom and Pluralism in Enlarging Europe," funded by the Irish Research Council (No. GOIPD/2017/764). The display of these Ukrainian files was also taken further to subsequent exhibitions: *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* at Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest; *Through the Lens of the Secret Police* at University College Cork, curators Gabriela Nicolescu and James Kapaló; and the VR exhibition *The Underground*, curators Tatiana Vagramenko, Dumitru Lisnic, and James Kapaló.

2. As it was the case with photographic manipulation in the Stalinist period, when a political *persona non grata* was to be airbrushed out, cropped, or blacked out in all official publications and posters, or photographs of repressed relatives were removed from family photo albums for the safety of those who remained (King 1997).

3. Haluzevyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukraïny [State Archive Branch of the Security Services of Ukraine in Kyiv] (HDASBU), f. 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol.4, ark.71rev.

4. HDASBU, f. 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 2, ark. 27-29rev.

5. HDASBU, f. 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 2, ark. 12rev.

6. HDASBU, f.6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 2, ark.13 rev.

7. Ibid., ark. 212.

8. HDASBU, f.6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 4, ark. 3.

9. Ibid., ark. 4.

10. Ibid., ark. 13.

11. Ibid., ark. 77 rev.



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