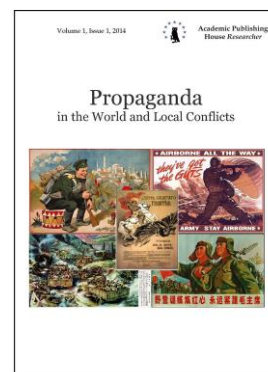


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Mediatization of the Topic of Human Victims of the Occupation in the Soviet Newspaper Periodicals of 1943 (on the Example of Photographic Materials)

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Abstract

The article reviews mediation processes that accompanied the preparation of the first trials of war criminals in the USSR in 1943. During the liberation of the country's territories occupied by the Nazi invaders, the truth about the atrocities committed against peaceful Soviet citizens was revealed. The crimes of the enemy and his accomplices were covered in the Soviet press, including through photo-printing of newspapers. In this article, we analyzed the content and dynamics of the photographic presentation of this topic in the central and regional printed periodicals during 1943, and also evaluated the possible effects of its impact on the audience. This aspect is of interest in the context of the topic of information preparation of the first trial of the accomplices of the enemy, which took place in Krasnodar in July 1943, as well as the next war crimes tribunal that was held in Kharkov in December 1943.

Keywords: the Second World War, the German fascist invaders, collaborators, crime, Krasnodar trial in 1943, human victims, the Soviet newspaper, media policy, photographs.

1. Introduction

Seventy five years have passed since a high-profile trial over the accomplices of the German fascist invaders, which took place in Krasnodar. It was the first process in a series of tribunals referred to as the “Soviet Nuremberg” by researchers. Today, the issue of the organizational and legal principles for prosecuting Hitler’s war criminals and their accomplices can be considered as the one that has been quite thoroughly addressed. In this regard, particular emphasis should be put on the dissertation research, monograph and scholarly papers by A. Ye. Epifanov (Epifanov, 2017; Epifanov, 2001). A number of Russian researchers are successfully working to reconstruct the historical context of specific tribunals and create a detailed picture of these events in “faces” (of victims, the accused, judges, spectators) (Stepanov, 2010; Astashkin, 2015). However, in our view, one essential aspect of the topic of the trials over war criminals still remains inadequately studied. This is the information preparation. The useful works that highlights this aspect include the papers by D.Yu. Astashkin (Astashkin, 2016), V. Voisen (Voisen, 2012) and I. Bourtman (Bourtman, 2008). The author of this paper also published the findings of her own content analysis focused on the issues of mediatizing the topic of crimes committed by the Hitlerites and their accomplices (as illustrated by the example of information support of the tribunals carried out in Krasnodar in 1943 and in the 1960s) (Tazhidinova, 2016; Tazhidinova, 2017).

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2. Materials and methods

Since photographs provide valuable documentary evidence, and given the purpose and special nature of their use in the printed media, the discourse analysis of the photographic presentations covering specific events, topics and problems becomes more relevant than ever. Our study is centered on the topic of the victims of the occupation, spotlighted by Soviet printed periodicals in 1943, i.e. over the year when the war was yet to end, and the country was swept by a first wave of trials over German fascist invaders and their accomplices, charged with grave crimes against civilians. The study of the photographic imagery devoted to this problem was carried out using the materials of two central newspapers (*Izvestija* and *Krasnaja Zvezda*) and a regional newspaper (*Bolshevik*, the official printed mouthpiece of the Krasnodar Krai Committee and the City Committee of the AUCP B (All-Union Communist Party Bolsheviks), Krasnodar Krai Council of Working People's Deputies). The analysis of the photographs is an integral part of our content-analytical research into publications in the Soviet printed periodicals of 1943, which covered the range of issues related to the atrocities perpetrated by the enemy in the temporarily occupied territories of the USSR. In general, this study intends to discover the role that the Soviet printed media played in the preparation of the Krasnodar trial of 1943. (Tazhidinova, 2016). The interpretation of the photographs focuses much on the communicative force of the photographic images, considering the meanings they contain and those messages that they carried to the audience of the Soviet printed media at the time of publication.

The methodological foundation of the study was formed by the principles of objectivity and historicism, which imply an unbiased approach to the analysis of problems under review and a critical attitude to sources, as well as mean considering phenomena in the corresponding historical environment. The comparative and historical method allowed for a comparison of the situation, which preceded the Krasnodar process (July 1943), and the circumstances that evolved shortly before the next major trial – in Kharkov (December 1943).

3. Results and discussion

In earlier works, we already described the goals of the articles, thematic collections and photographs in the Soviet press periodicals (central and regional ones), which highlighted the issues of the atrocities perpetrated by the enemy in the temporarily occupied territories of the USSR (Tazhidinova, 2016). As a reminder, their first goal was to foment hatred towards the enemy on an emotional level; an objective basis for this was provided by the statistics and details of the atrocities committed by the Nazis on the USSR's territories liberated from the occupation. Secondly, the dynamism of publications on this topic was fuelled by the need to make the desired effect on the international community, and respond to the provocative “newsbreaks” on the part of the Hitlerites. Activities undertaken by all Soviet media had great significance for the preparation campaign before the first open trial over the enemy's accomplices, held in Krasnodar from July 14 to 17, 1943.

The presentation of the Krasnodar process in 1943 in the Soviet print media was by no means limited to the chronicles of its court sessions, although, of course, the chronicle was the core of this presentation; accordingly, readers' attention is focused on the Soviet system of justice as a subject of the process. Other elements of the presentation (we mean by-liners and photographic materials, that have received only cursory attention of researchers so far) were targeted other subjects in the process. So, by-liners purposefully focused on the “executioners” from among the accused. Although the images of the latter (photographs or cartoons) never leaked into the Soviet press (and this tactical move was a specific feature of the Krasnodar process presentation), the content of these articles is critical, and we will certainly provide an in-depth analysis of it in the near future. Speaking of the photo design of the newspapers containing the materials on the process, it also had its own essential focus.

In addition, the support of the Krasnodar process with photographic materials deserves attention because in the period under review, providing most Soviet newspapers with visual evidence did not yet evolve into routine practice. For a regional newspaper, placing one or several photographs became what is called an “event of the issue”. A number of central printed editions did not provide many photographs as well; for example, far not every issue of *Izvestija*, one of the country's leading newspapers, published photos. In this context, it is obvious that any photographs

attracted exceptional interest of the readership, if the pictures did appear and in particular if they reproduced the stories that were rarely seen in the Soviet press.

At this point, we should note that the visual display of the traces of the “excruciation” practiced by the Nazis on the USSR territories, liberated from temporary occupation, was not ranked among themes widely employed by social and political newspaper journalism; photographs that recorded the ravages of warfare were constantly demonstrated by Soviet newspapers, but human victims of Hitler’s terror were left behind the scenes. This policy can be explained, on the one hand, by the wish to show delicate empathy for people who were already utterly afflicted and saw enough of the horrors of war. Probably, the very ugliness of “the work of death,” which journalistic cameras would inevitably fix, deterred the newspapers from publishing shocking images. On the other hand, civilian casualties – those who were not kept safe or protected – were an indirect incrimination for the authorities. They were a reproach to their weakness and inability to confront the aggressor at a certain time; of course, the authorities did not want for others to draw such conclusions and did not intend to instigate them.

Over the first half of 1943 (right until the Krasnodar process), photographs of victims in the USSR’s territories liberated from the occupation appeared only twice in the pages of *Izvestija*. The first publication exposed the “atrocities of the German fascist cannibals in Rostov-on-Don” in mid-March. The Report on the Crimes of the Hitlerites in this city was then accompanied by 8 pictures with half of them showing the bodies of the shot and tortured Rostovites (*Izvestiya, 1943: 13 marta*). The next selection of photographs was released in *Izvestija*’s April issue that covered the atrocities of the German fascist invaders in the cities of Vyazma, Gzhatsk, Sychevka and Rzhev (*Izvestiya, 1943: 6 aprelya*). This issue, in addition to an editorial and large communication from ChGK (Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices), also featured a selection of 7 photographs. Three of them captured the corpses of killed women and children, and in another picture, citizens could see the ChGK Chairman himself, N.M. Shvernik, in the group of people standing in the ruins of Sychevka. Actually, only these two “cases” formed *Izvestija*’s contribution to the visualization of “atrocities” in the first half of 1943.

We cannot say that *Izvestija* made efforts to provide diverse photographic perspectives for the materials of the first open trial in Krasnodar in July 1943; we discovered no pictures from the courtroom nor from the execution site in the six issues of the newspaper, which covered the proceedings of this case. It is all the more obvious that the focus of attention was deliberately put on the human victims of Hitler’s terror in the Kuban region; it was this death toll that was featured by 8 of 9 photographs in four consecutive issues of the newspaper.

The first two photos actually preceded the Krasnodar Tribunal, and it is significant that they were not even “tied” to any text. Indeed, *Izvestija* of July 14, 1943, published no materials related to Krasnodar, but the penultimate page of the issue contained two photographs of adults and children “killed by carbon monoxide poisoning <...> found in an anti-tank ditch on the outskirts of the Krasnodar city” (*Izvestiya, 1943: 14 iyulya*). The three issues of the newspaper, which followed, consistently presented materials on the Krasnodar trial and necessarily exhibited photo selections on the topic of “atrocities committed by the German fascist invaders and their accomplices.”

Actually, this was the first experience of such variety, which produced a prolonged and, accordingly, massive impact on the audience of the printed media. The images reflected two kinds of “atrocities” that were primarily discussed at the trial. This was poisoning people in the “gas chambers” and burning alive in the Gestapo building. *Izvestija*’s selections included no pictures of people living at that time, whether they were the accused, lawyers, witnesses or the public. One minor exception only concerned people in “white coats.” The panoramic photo of the excavated graves, printed in the issue of July 15, only allows for visible outlines of doctors or other medical staff far in the background. In the issue of July 16, the materials on the trial were illustrated with a photograph which showed medical expert Dr. P.S. Semenovskiy making a post-mortem examination of the corpse of a child “brutally murdered” by invaders (however, the face of the doctor who bent over the body remained hidden, but his shocking manipulations with the body turned up in the foreground) (*Izvestiya, 1943: 15 iyulya, 16 iyulya, 17 iyulya*). As for the location of all these photographs, they were traditionally given the lower part of the 2nd or 3rd page of the 4-page newspaper. The authors of the photographs were TASS photo correspondents I. Ozerskiy, F. Belosludtsev and others.

Photographs of photo chronicler Belosludtsev were also printed by Krasnaja Zvezda. Some of them were similar to those published in Izvestija, and they were even located almost in the same positions in specific numbers. The message of the created photographic series was also in no way different from Izvestija's line. Three successive issues of Krasnaja Zvezda were illustrated by 8 photographs, 7 of which showed the bodies of Krasnodar inhabitants tortured to death by the Hitlerites (*Krasnaya Zvezda, 1943: 15 iyulya, 16 iyulya, 17 iyulya*). These photographs, placed directly under the trial materials, showed the two most terrible sites in liberated Krasnodar – the anti-tank ditch where Germans brought thousands of people poisoned with carbon monoxide, and the Gestapo building in which they burned 300 people. The quality of the photographic images, printed by newspapers, left much to be desired and was able to worsen the already painful emotions from viewing them. Comparison with other photo materials in both printed editions (in other issues or on other topics) reveals that they often have a higher level. We can take the liberty of suggesting that the photo chroniclers left the blur in the images intentionally to mitigate the details of the horrifying shots.

Speaking of the Kuban newspaper *Bolshevik*, it featured the materials of the trial in five of its issues, but none of them were supported by visual evidence. In general, photos documenting the atrocities of the German fascist invaders in the Krasnodar Krai were already displayed by this regional edition a few months earlier. The presentation was designed as a very strong block in the *Bolshevik* issue arranged by theme to expose specific crimes of the Hitlerites. The photo block was published March 28, 1943 and accompanied the editorial "Let us punish the murderers!" (*Bol'shevik, 1943: 28 marta*). 9 photos inserted on different levels of the 2nd page of the issue (horizontally at the top and at the bottom, vertically in the center) were supposed to bolster the Report on Fascist Atrocities in Krasnodar and a series of exposing articles. The photographs captured traces of the "atrocities" in Krasnodar and in the Apsheeronskaya stanitsa (village) – they presented material devastation and victims in equal proportions. No documentary photographs of the atrocities perpetrated by the invaders on the Kuban land in 1943 appeared in the newspaper, with one exception. A single photograph was published in the May issue of *Bolshevik* directly above the block of propaganda materials titled "We will wreak vengeance on fascist bandits for blood and tears of Soviet people!" The photo showed inhabitants of the Akhtyrskaya stanitsa, Abinsk district, bending over the corpses of the villagers shot by Germans (*Bol'shevik, 1943: 12 maya*).

In general, if compared with textual evidence (editorials, topical collections, articles), photo documents in the regional press were not given much space, which could be related to technical and material difficulties of publishers. At the same time, it is logical to assume that photographs attracted attention and enhanced the reliability of the content detailed in articles. In addition, *Bolshevik* announced the launch of photo display cases and exhibitions on the atrocities that took place during the Kuban's occupation. We know from the newspaper that in April 1943, such photo display cases were installed right on the streets of Krasnodar, and people crowded around them all day long. The exhibition featured materials shot in the first days after the city's liberation and during grave excavations. The Museum of the Local History of Sochi prepared a special display on the same topic to be launched in early summer (*Bol'shevik, 1943: 13 aprelya, 30 maya*).

In August 1943, three weeks after the execution of eight people sentenced at the open Krasnodar trial, *Bolshevik* announced to the Kuban audience that soon a cine-magazine "The People's Verdict" would come out, created by a special Soyuzkinokhronika crew based on the materials of the Krasnodar trial process (the cine-magazine already began its run in Moscow). A month passed, and one week (from September 5 to 12) witnessed the newspaper advertising the documentary shows in the "Velikan" movie theater (the very venue where the trial took place); prices for all places were "reduced," and team viewing applications were accepted (*Bol'shevik, 1943: 10 avgusta, 31 avgusta, 5 sentyabrya*).

Over the remainder of the year after the Krasnodar process, the regional press, to the best of its ability, continued its efforts to make the public aware of the atrocities in the Kuban and other regions of the country, but from the perspective of their photo coverage, its contribution – already rather small – was further minimized. The issues of *Bolshevik* printed only one photograph over the second half of 1943, which is related to the issue of the "atrocities." This is a photo from the September issue of *Bolshevik*, which showed Red Army soldiers standing over the bodies of twenty inhabitants of the Peshkovo village, Orel region, shot dead (*Bol'shevik, 1943: 10 sentyabrya*).

Generally speaking, the question of the trends in photo design of textual materials on the atrocities “after” the Krasnodar trial is, of course, important. If we turn to *Izvestija*, we will find out that the trend reflected a surge in photographic materials in September, and following the events – no photos, right until the illustration of the materials on the Kharkov trial in December 1943. In September, photographic documents were published in four issues of *Izvestija*; they were directly associated with further liberation from the occupation of the country's all new territories and with the facts of atrocities uncovered there. This is about the Orel city and region; *Izvestija* of September 7 featured an editorial and a large report by the ChGK, accompanied by 6 photographs of the atrocities perpetrated by Germans in Orel. This photo coverage was different from the “model” coverage of the Krasnodar trial as the former showed a greater variety of topics and scenes. Although the dominating idea of the images (of 4 of 6) still described opened graves, but one shot captured a ChGK member, Academician N.N. Burdenko when he examined skulls and corpses. In addition, the publication included a photo of hanged Orel inhabitants ([Известия, 1943: 7 сентября](#)).

September issues of *Izvestija* printed photographs of the atrocities three more times, and in all cases, they denounced the atrocities of the Hitlerites in Ukraine. 3 photos of the corpses of children and women showed traces of Germans’ stay in Makeyevka. A distinction was that the victims here were listed by name and with details on how exactly they were killed ([Известия, 1943: 12 сентября](#)). Another 6 photos in the newspaper's two issues captured the traces of the invaders’ stay in Poltava. They were about the burning of civilians in the building of the Poltava museum and in the school building in the state farm Stekhovka, the Grobinovsky Selsoviet (rural council), Poltava district ([Известия, 1943: 28 сентября, 30 сентября](#)).

Analyzing the September photos, it is noticeable that most of them were made with the higher quality compared to those that were made in Krasnodar and published during the trial process in July. It is particularly salient in the photographs from Makeyevka shot with maximum zoom and clarity – and therefore chillingly realistic – whose author was a special military correspondent of *Izvestija*, S. Gurariy. Now the photo blocks were more often filled with living people who had just dug up graves or were performing forensic medical examination. An example is, in particular, a photo from Orel which showed city residents and the Red Army soldiers frozen in front of the pit, or the military doctors examining skulls directly in the pit (author – E. Kopyt, TASS photo chronicle).

Finally, the last visualization on the subject of the atrocities, published by *Izvestija* in 1943, was related to the trial in Kharkov in December. It is much more laconic than what bolstered materials of the Krasnodar trial in July; it appears only in two issues of the newspaper and includes only three photographs (two of human remains from excavated ditches, one of hanged Kharkovites) ([Известия, 1943: 16 декабря, 17 декабря](#)). The authorship of the photographs, which were traditionally placed on the third (i.e. next to the last) page of the edition, is not given, but the photographs seem clearer than the Krasnodar ones.

4. Conclusion

An analysis of the content and trends in the photo presentation on the subject of human victims of Hitler’s terror in the occupied territories of the USSR, featured in the Soviet printed media throughout 1943, allows us to speak of intensified propaganda activities in terms of “retaliation policy.” The key goal that the Soviet leadership tried to achieve by various methods, including the media policy tools, was to prevent Hitler’s “executioners” from going unpunished for their monstrous crimes.

Photographic materials depicting the atrocities of the enemy against civilians received increasingly wider presence in newspapers since early 1943. Their quantitative growth and visual “harshness” reflected the trajectory of information preparation before the first open trial over war criminals, which was soon held in Krasnodar July 14-17, 1943. As for the photo materials on the trial itself, the coverage of the Krasnodar tribunal by the central and regional printed media has a specific feature (if compared to subsequent reports of the “Soviet Nuremberg”) – the focus of the photo visualization. It is essential that the photos, which preceded and accompanied the chronicle of the trial in Soviet newspapers, captured not the accused, judges, witnesses or spectators, but the victims of Hitler’s terror in the period of the Kuban's occupation. We can suggest that this explicit

perspective of the trial's photo coverage was not chosen by chance; it certainly made a strong impression on readers both inside the country and abroad.

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