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Alhóndiga Bilbao

## FIFTY YEARS OF THE USSR THROUGH THE LENS OF DMITRI BALTERMANTS

[1939-1989]

Captain Baltermants of the Red Army, a graduate from the Moscow University Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics and a Mathematics lecturer at the Military Academy, attained his first professional commission as a photographer in 1939, with 'Izvestia', the main Soviet newspaper. They sent him to photograph the arrival of the Soviet troops in Western Ukraine. The result was so impressive that the biggest and most influential daily in the Soviet Union offered him a post on its staff as a photographer. Few people would have changed the brilliant outlook of an academic career with military rank for the nomadic life of a photographic reporter, but Baltermants took the decision without hesitating.

1939 was the year that Soviet culture underwent a huge change in style. The socialist realism, imposed by the communist authorities since the mid-1930's, had virtually supplanted all other aesthetic trends in every sphere of art, including photography, where only recently had pictorialism, modernism and reports come to coexist. With his first photographic reports, Dmitri Baltermants satisfactorily fulfilled the demands of the new era. However, behind him was the great period of the Soviet vanguard, represented by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Sergey Eisenstein and others. In 1926, at the age of 14, Baltermants began working as a printer for the publi-

cation 'Izvestia' and he also tried himself out as a projectionist and an assistant to architects and professional photographers. As of June 1941, Baltermants became war correspondent for 'Izvestia', reporting on the battles of Moscow, the Crimea and Stalingrad. In 1943, due to a mistake by an editor, his photographs were wrongly titled and unwittingly sent to print. He ended up in a penal battalion and barely survived. He was 'rescued' because of a serious injury that almost led to him losing his leg. After hospital treatment, in 1944 he returned to the front as a photographer, working this time not for 'Izvestia' but for an army newspaper called 'Na razgrom vraga', photographing military operations in Poland and Germany. The majority of his war photographs only came to light during Khrushchev's 'thaw', while the famous 'Grief' which earned him world renown, was printed for the first time in the USSR in 1975, thirty years after it was taken.

When he returned from the front as a medal-bearing veteran, with thousands of negatives and hundreds of printed works, Dmitri Baltermants spent a long time seeking work in vain. The penal unit was a smear on his curriculum, at the same time as his Jewish ancestry closed the doors of the Soviet press to him, even those in which his work was admired. Eventually, the poet Aleksey Surkov took the risk of hiring him as a

photographer. He was the chief editor of 'Ogoniok', the most important picture magazine, which sold millions of copies. It was here that Baltermants worked until his death in 1990, running the photography section from 1965.

Baltermants embarked on his professional career at a time in which the USSR was already being sealed by the 'iron curtain', which isolated Soviet art from the rest of the world. In this period, photography went from being a popular and respected art form to being slave and servant to the ideological machine, about to lose its status as an art. Baltermants was one of the few photographers who showed their success both at home and abroad, and for almost half a century. In Russia, millions of 'Ogoniok' readers decorated the walls of their dreary community flats with his front-page photographs. Outside the USSR, Baltermants used to take part in international exhibitions and he was a member of the most prestigious juries in world photography competitions at a time in which the very idea of going abroad was almost beyond the physical existence and mindset of Soviet citizens.

Although, in keeping with Soviet standards, Baltermants' career was an enormous success—he continued photographing, publishing and exhibiting all over and he was allowed to work abroad—he was never just a Soviet photographer. His brilliant professional aptitudes, his impeccable sense of composition—although Rodchenko invented the diagonal composition, Baltermants 'the mathematician' was a master of the horizontal—, as well as his innate aristocratism, enabled him to continue being an independent cosmopolitan artist who maintained normal relations with the Soviet regime and never tried to take revenge on anybody. Even his more lyrical images managed to maintain a certain distance from the object. For this reason, the majority of his works represent not only a photographic archive of Soviet history, but also a philosophical metaphor of his time, awaiting the future.

Baltermants was so good in his photographic reports from the front, staging or semi-staging images praising the heroic jobs and the achievements of the Soviet people or their landscapes or portraits. He did not dis-

dain resorting to 'collage', inserting ominous clouds in war photos to raise the level of tragedy in the events he was portraying. In Soviet photography, touching up was normally used to erase unwanted figures from history. Baltermants did the opposite: He deliberately increased the size of the leader, stuck the figures of 'VIPs' from the Communist Party on the platform prior to the photograph of the Mausoleum, where the great Soviet figures lined up during the celebrations. Then he would photograph the 'collage', whereby his 'ideal compositions' ordered the ranks of Stalin's closest followers, who fought to attain the best possible place beside 'the people's leader'. On one occasion, Stalin noticed something was wrong with those photographs and demanded an explanation. Fortunately, the incident was resolved with no serious consequences.

Political portraits were a special chapter in the work of Dmitri Baltermants. He took portraits of the general secretaries of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Stalin and Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev. He observed Soviet leaders with no servile fear, without irony or compassion. He saw them through the eyes of a free man, who was capable of capturing not so much the questions of protocol, but rather symbolic moments, which revealed the personality of those who embodied the moment, as well as the time which was shown through their personality.

Baltermants was aware of the legacy of the Russian photographic vanguard and that of the world in general. He mixed with Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau, Marc Riboud, Joseph Koudelka and other great masters of the late 20th century. Alternatively, this strong man, wise, valiant and handsome, skilfully created and protected the fundamental myths of the Soviet regime about the life of the strongest and happiest people on earth. On the other hand, he laid bare the reality of those myths in the most brutal of ways, revealing in his photographs the pain and joy implicit in every human being, which do not depend on geographical frontiers or social structures.

## Olga Sviblova

Director of the Moscow House of Photography Museum

## Organisation



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