

Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret'iakov at the Communist Lighthouse*

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Crash industrialization and forced collectivization—the twin and ultimately catastrophic economic policies of the Five-Year Plans of the late 1920s and '30s—opened myriad new travel destinations for the intrepid cultural worker in the Soviet Union: mammoth industrial sites, monumental hydroelectric stations, extravagant canal construction projects, gigantic collective farms. Tours to such destinations were typically authorized, organized, and funded by a network of state agencies, whose purpose was not so much to gather information about these far-flung sites—the secret police (OGPU [Unified State Political Administration]) stationed throughout the Soviet Union could much more efficiently assist with that—but rather to secure much-needed affirmative representations of the successful implementation of Plan policies. Soviet and foreign intellectuals, writers, artists, and photographers visited these sites of economic and social engineering in droves; perhaps the most paradigmatic of all was the once sympathetic *communiste de coeur* André Gide, whose 1936 tour resulted, unexpectedly, in a stinging negative critique, *Retour de l'URSS*.

The present essay unpacks a major episode in the crowded itinerary of one such radical tourist, Sergei Tret'iakov. Beginning in July 1928 and continuing through the summer of 1930, Tret'iakov made four extended visits, totaling some five months in all, to a remote collective farm [*kolkhoz*], the so-called Communist Lighthouse [*Kommunisticheskii Maiak*, or *Kommaiak*] in the Georgievskii district of the northern Caucasus's Stavropolskii region.¹ These trips were authorized out of Moscow by the primary state agency in charge of the collective-farm system,

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1. This essay is the first installment of a larger project that considers the production of a number of radical tourists active in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, including John Heartfield, Gustavs Klucis, Lotte Jacobi, and Langston Hughes. (I borrow the term “radical tourism” from Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s classic essay “Tourists of the Revolution,” trans. Michael Roloff, in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media* [New York: Seabury Press, 1974], pp. 129–57.)



Sergei Tret'iakov
rowing. 1929.

Kolkhozsentr (All-Union Center of Agricultural Collectives), and by the Federation of Writers. The latter also published two anthologies of essays that Tret'iakov wrote as a record of his experience, *The Challenge: Collective-Farm Essays* (1930) and *A Month in the Country (June–July 1930): Operativist Essays* (1931).²

Over the course of his visits to the Communist Lighthouse, Tret'iakov became directly involved in numerous aspects of its political, cultural, and agronomic organization, thereby transcending traditional definitions of the role of the literary writer. Of these activities, I focus here on his photographic practice, the scale of which was vast. Where once the camera had served exclusively as a powerful metaphor for the documentary prose style he sought to develop—"I will kodak [*kodachit'*]," he promised in his 1925 travelogue "Moscow-Peking"³—it now became, literally, one of his two favorite "recording" devices, the other being the essay or sketch [*ocherki*]. Out on the farm with his Leica, Tret'iakov took some two thousand

2. Sergei Tret'iakov, *Vyzov: Kolkhoznye ocherki* (Moscow: Izd-vo Federatsiia, 1930); and idem, *Mesiats v derevne (iun'-iul' 1930g.): Operativnye ocherki* (Moscow: Izd-vo Federatsiia, 1931). (The second title plays on that of a classic of nineteenth-century Russian literature, Ivan Turgenev's *A Month in the Country: A Comedy in Five Acts* [1850].) Many of these essays first appeared in Soviet newspapers and magazines. In December 1931, the Malik Verlag in Berlin published a slightly abridged compilation of both volumes as *Feld-Herren: Der Kampf um eine Kollektiv-Wirtschaft* [Commanders of the field: the struggle for a collective economy], the dust jacket of which Heartfield designed on the basis of a Russian poster, in collaboration with his brother Wieland Herzfelde.

3. Sergei Tret'iakov, "Moskva-Pekin," *Lef*, no. 7 (1925), p. 33; quoted in Devin Fore, "All the Graphs': Soviet and Weimar Documentary between the Wars" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2005), p. 170.

photographs.⁴ “Almost nobody [at the Communist Lighthouse] knows me as a writer,” he reported; instead, “all the collective-farmer workers know me as the ‘uncle’ [*diad’ku*] who takes photos.”⁵ Gratifying his desire to photograph at every turn, Tret’iakov became on the farm what might be called a “photographist” [*fotografist*], a neologism he himself coined in August 1928 to distinguish the non-professional practitioner from the professional photographer, whom he condemned as a seductive purveyor of false syntheses.⁶

Twenty-one of Tret’iakov’s collective-farm photographs are reproduced in *The Challenge* and *A Month in the Country*; others are published as photo-essays in various illustrated magazines.⁷ Along with the writer’s scattered notes on photography, the published photographs serve as the basis for the following discussion.⁸ My chief argument is that Tret’iakov’s experience on the *kolkhoz*, and in particular his experience with the camera on the *kolkhoz*, tested the limits of the factographic model that he had recently developed in concert with his colleagues at the journal *Novyi lef*, and ultimately led to his formulation of a new model for cultural practice, to which he gave the name “operativism.” As a coda to my story of this shift, I fast forward in the final section of the essay to consider the quite different place of the photograph in Tret’iakov’s thinking circa spring 1934, on the eve of the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, at which Socialist Realism was officially announced as the “basic method” of Soviet literature and literary criticism.

Making a Kolkhoznik

If the medium of this shift from factography to operativism was the camera, it was also, and equally fundamentally, the collective farm itself. A first question to ask, then, is how and why Tret’iakov, a successful futurist poet, dramaturgist, film scenarist, and sketch-writer [*ocherkist*], ended up in a place so utterly remote from his experience to date. Like many of his contemporaries (and, indeed, antecedents), Tret’iakov believed that literature both could and should contribute to

4. Sergei Tret’iakov, “Raport: Pisatel’—kolkhoznik,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 9, 1930; reprinted as “Raport pisatel’ia-kolkhoznika,” in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 11.

5. Sergei Tret’iakov, “Diad’ka, kotoryi snimaet,” *Zhurnal’ist*, no. 17 (1930); reprinted in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 195.

6. Sergei Tret’iakov, “Fotozametki,” *Novyi lef*, no. 8 (1928), p. 40; trans. as “Photo-Notes,” in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips, trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 252; see also Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot,” *Novyi lef*, no. 4 (1928), pp. 14–16; trans. in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 238–42.

7. See, for example, Sergei Tret’iakov, “Vykhodnoi v kolkhoze,” *Smena*, no. 12 (1933), pp. 12–13.

8. To the best of my knowledge, there exists no study of Tret’iakov’s photography. A brief reference to the photo-essays is made in Leonid Volkov-Lannit, “Grani prileteli k ob’ektivu,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 10, 1935, p. 5. With respect to the history of photography, Tret’iakov is primarily known, instead, as the Lef colleague of Rodchenko, and as the author of the text of the first-ever monograph on Heartfield; see Sergei Tret’iakov and Solomon Telingater, *Dzhon Khartfil’d: Monografiia* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1936).

the resolution of social problems, and that it was the writer's task to secure the social efficacy of his own literary production. Among Tret'iakov's Lef colleagues, the most famous formulation of an activist role for the writer was that of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who in 1926 proposed the "social command" [*sotsial'nyi zakaz*]⁹—any requirement, desire, or wish voiced by the society at large or by a specific segment within it—as an "indispensable" element in the production of verse, as essential to the poet as his or her words, pens, pencils, typewriters, skills, techniques, and sense of purpose.⁹ Two years later Tret'iakov pushed the envelope of Mayakovsky's literary activism, by both responding to, and in turn reiterating, the Party's ubiquitous exhortation of that year: "Writers, to the collective farms!"¹⁰

The collective farm was a cooperative formed through the consolidation of individual farms and peasants. The process of collectivization, already under way on a voluntary basis since the October Revolution, was drastically accelerated in response to the grain procurement crisis of 1927–28, which threatened the Soviet Union with economic collapse. Considered an essential precondition for the mechanization of agriculture and the raising of labor productivity, collectivization was often foisted upon a reluctant countryside. With the introduction of the first Five-Year Plan in 1929, peasants were increasingly coerced into joining cooperatives by means of a concurrent and extremely violent campaign of dekulakization.¹¹ The process of collectivization was as rapid as it was brutal: The average size of collective farms in the northern Caucasus, where the Communist Lighthouse was located, increased almost fourteenfold in the course of a single year, from sixteen households per cooperative in 1929, to 222.5 households per cooperative in 1930.¹² In accordance with a ruthless economy of scale, collective farms were typically amalgamated, in turn, to form gigantic combines [*kombinaty*]. In 1929, for example, the Communist Lighthouse, initially established as a modest commune during the civil war, was integrated with numerous other nearby collective farms to create a combine called The Challenge [*Vyzov*], which Tret'iakov playfully referred to as "the collective farm of [all] collective farms."¹³ A fold-out map included at the rear of his first anthology plots the district's new network of combines.

At the heart of the economic policy of collectivization lay a massive project of social engineering: the transformation of the "backward," illiterate, individual peasant into a mechanically savvy, Party loyal, and "cultured" [*kul'turnyi*] collective-farm

9. See Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Kak delat' stikhi?," *Novyi mir* (1926); trans. G. M. Hyde, *How Are Verses Made?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 18–19.

10. Tret'iakov, "Raport," in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 4; see also idem, "Prodolzhenie sleduet," *Novyi lef*, no. 12 (1928), pp. 1–4.

11. Dekulakization meant ridding the countryside of wealthy peasants, who were regarded as class enemies; this involved seizure of property, forced deportation, and sometimes even execution of heads of households. See the recent anthology of primary documents, *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927–1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, ed. Lynne Viola et al., trans. Steven Shabad (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

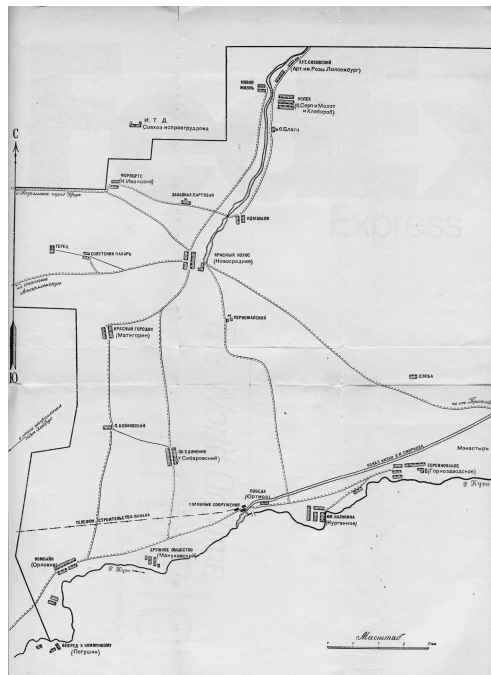
12. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

13. Tret'iakov, *Vyzov*, p. 211ff, and idem, *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 9.

worker [*kolkhoznik* (m.), *kolkhoznitsa* (f.)]. This was a social command writ large, and it proved irresistible to Tret'iakov, who responded by signing up for the Communist Lighthouse. While other writers hoped to contribute to the fulfillment of the social command through the deployment of their professional skills of narration or observation, Tret'iakov, as we shall see, strove for direct participation. ("Peasant women will not become women cadres," he wrote impatiently in January 1928, "merely by so labeling them.")¹⁴ Thus, if the *kolkhoznik's* task was to produce grain for the state, Tret'iakov's task was to assist the state in its production of the *kolkhoznik*. Tret'iakov insisted that in the collaborative process of making a collective farmer out of a peasant, he, too, became one.¹⁵ Conjoined in Tret'iakov's experience on the collective farm, therefore, were two major topoi of the cultural revolution of the early Plan years: agitation for the deprofessionalization of the writer, and, concurrently, the struggle for his redemption (or, as Iurii Olesha would put it in retrospect, his wretched deformation).

14. Sergei Tret'iakov, "Happy New Year! Happy *New Lef!*," *Novyi lef*, no. 1 (1928); trans. in *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, ed. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 265.

15. See Tret'iakov, "Raport," in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 15.



Map of The Challenge combine. ca. 1930.



Tret'iakov and two collective-farmers at the Communist Lighthouse. ca. 1930.

An unsettling photograph taken by an unknown photographer at the Communist Lighthouse in 1930 confronts us, however, with some of the contradictions of Tret'iakov's utopian enterprise. First, it explicitly belies the writer's fantasy of his self-deprofessionalization and redemption in the guise of a *kolkhoznik*. Such a fantasy is disrupted by the evident persistence of class stratification: Dressed in bright summer whites, Tret'iakov appears in the company of two unnamed collective-farm workers clad in filthy work clothes. He is a relaxed and jovial presence before the camera, they are awkward, stiff, and provincial: one poses for the camera, squinting into the sun, grinning a little uncomfortably, while the other tries in vain to resist the gaze of the camera altogether. Behind the trio appears a suggestively wide-open door, as if the two have just been dragged from their labor for a photo op with the visiting Moscow writer. Second, in the gesture that Tret'iakov makes with his left hand—adjusting the cap of his comrade so as to better present him to the camera—the photograph thematizes the very project of social engineering in which the writer, a fellow-traveler and futurist utopian, was engaged on the farm. It is hard not to read Tret'iakov's gesture, no doubt made in a friendly enough spirit, as an allegory of power, as an allegory of the subjugation of the peasantry through the process of forced collectivization.

En Route to Operativism

When Tret'iakov arrived at the Communist Lighthouse for the first time in early July 1928, he arrived as a factographer, eager to write some literature of fact [*literatura fakta* or *litfakta*]. Eager, that is to say, to put the model of practice that he had collaboratively developed, along with Nikolai Chuzhak, Nikolai Aseev, and others in the pages of *Novyi lef*, to work in the service of collectivization. The literature of fact prioritized the “precise fixation of fact” over fiction. As such its chief hallmark and object of desire was documentary prose, theorized as a raw, unmediated recording of sensory data that strained against normative assumptions about communicativity, a kind of fantasy, as Devin Fore has forcefully demonstrated in his recent study of Soviet and Weimar factography, of the possibility of a total conflation of text and reality.¹⁶ Documentary prose not only replaced the Lef futurists' own earlier emphasis on agitation through verse, but was also promoted in opposition to the platform of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), which insisted on “invented belles lettres” and the psychological or realist novel as the vehicle for the portrayal and awakening of revolutionary commitment.¹⁷ Tret'iakov argued, by contrast, that only through the once para-literary or even extra-literary genres of the “memoir, travel notes, the sketch, articles, feuilletons, reportage, investigations, [and] documentary montage” (rather than the “belletristic forms of novels, novellas, and short stories”) could the committed writer contribute to the construction of Soviet life through “utilitarian, journalistic work on current social and economic problems.”¹⁸ The new “novel” of Soviet life was no *War and Peace*, he asserted, but rather contemporary reality itself, the medium of which was the mass-circulation newspaper.¹⁹

But the production of literature of fact on the farm proved to be more difficult than Tret'iakov had expected. In an essay written at the end of his first month on the ground, Tret'iakov conceded that not only was the novel inadequate to the revolutionary task before him, but also reportage itself: Neither a poetic description of the *kolkhoz* nor a compilation of the facts of its history could come anywhere near to grappling with the realities of life on the farm. For the writer to access the latter, Tret'iakov wrote in his essay “Against Tourists,” he or she needed to have an organizational role within the farm's day-to-day operations. Tret'iakov's sole, but in retrospect fundamental, accomplishment of that first month at the Communist Lighthouse was thus the realization that he, as a literary writer, was a “total ignoramus” [*polnyi profan*].²⁰ (Hence his characterization of part one of his

16. See Fore, “All the Graphs,” and idem, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” in this issue, pp. 95–131.

17. Tret'iakov, “Happy New Year!,” p. 267.

18. Sergei Tret'iakov, “What's New,” *Novyi lef*, no. 9 (1928); trans. in Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism*, p. 271.

19. Sergei Tret'iakov, “Novyi Lev Tolstoi,” *Novyi lef*, no. 1 (1927), pp. 34–38; trans. as “The New Leo Tolstoy,” trans. Kristin Romberg, in this issue, pp. 45–50. This paragraph is partially redacted from my “Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde,” *October* 101 (Summer 2002), pp. 72–73.

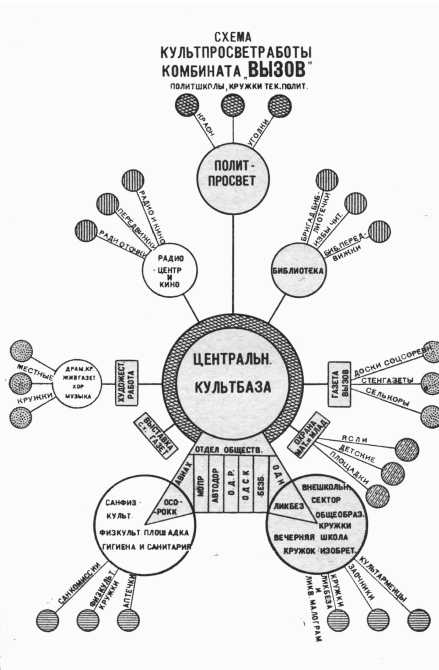
20. Sergei Tret'iakov, “Protiv turistov,” in *Vyzov*, p. 132.

anthology *The Challenge* as the story of a “powerful commune and powerless writer.”)²¹ To extricate himself from this condition of ignorance and uselessness, the writer first needed to clarify the matter of his or her “observation post” [*nabliudatel'nyi post*]: “The worst thing is to observe in the capacity of a tourist or guest of honor: Either you see like a local, or you see nothing.”²² But if seeing like a local was essential to the efficacy of the writer with respect to his fulfillment of the social command, how might the writer, coming from outside, access this particular modality of vision? Tret'iakov's answer was twofold: through sheer duration of experience (i.e., sustained involvement over time), and through advanced knowledge of agronomy.

Committing himself to both (with three more extended visits over the next two years and classes in agricultural science and economy), Tret'iakov became involved in a wide range of organizational tasks on the farm. In 1930, for example,

21. Tret'iakov, *Vyzov*, p. 5.

22. Sergei Tret'iakov, “Na kolkhozy!” *Novyi lef*, no. 11 (1928), p. 9; reprinted as “Pisateli, na kolkhozy!” in *Vyzov*, p. 17.



Left: Diagram of cultural and educational work at The Challenge combine. ca. 1930. Right: Front page of Vyzov. May 21, 1930.

he was elected to the council of The Challenge combine, and was entrusted with the organization of its cultural and educational infrastructure, the purpose of which was to make collective life more “cultured [*kul'turnaia*] and interesting.”²³ This infrastructure he schematized in a diagram published in *The Challenge*: myriad satellites of culturedness spiral around a cultural nucleus.²⁴ One of these satellites was the combine’s newspaper, which also bore the name *The Challenge* and of which he became the editor. For Tret’iakov, the editorship was a chance to exercise control, as he had earlier suggested, over the medium of contemporary reality itself.²⁵ As Tret’iakov tells it, the combine’s newspaper played a fundamental role in the collectivization process; indeed “it would have been difficult to manage without it.”²⁶ From a reluctant Moscow, he secured a typesetter, a typeface, and paper on which to print, and then apprenticed a local herdsman, a “self-taught artist,” to assist the typesetter. Within its first year of publication, more than fifty issues of the newspaper appeared; their articles routinely exhorted collective farmers to give their all: “First in the sowing, we will be first in harvesting” shouts the headline for May 21, 1930.

It was through his work in these various ventures at the Communist Lighthouse that Tret’iakov came to formulate a new model of the writer, the operative essayist or sketchwriter [*ocherkist-operativnik*].²⁷ Tret’iakov used the term for the first time in a report on his collective-farm experience published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in September 1930, and subsequently anthologized in *A Month in the Country*.²⁸ Thus, only at the conclusion of his four extended visits to the Communist Lighthouse did he clarify, at the level of taxonomy, the transformation that had occurred in his own thinking as to the insufficiency of factography alone to the fulfillment of the social command. Certainly, it was operativism that he promoted as his new model of the writer during his speaking tour in Germany, Austria, and Denmark between January and April 1931. No specific reason for this trip is known, but it was most likely prompted, as Fritz Mierau suggests, by the polemical debates then raging in both the Soviet Union and Weimar Germany over the deprofessionalization of the writer and the so-called end of literature.²⁹

Tret’iakov presented an overview of his work at the Communist Lighthouse to the Society for the Friends of the New Russia in Berlin on January 21, 1931; this lecture formed the basis of his essay “The Writer and the Socialist Village,” that

23. Tret’iakov, “Raport,” in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 3.

24. Tret’iakov, *Vyzov*, p. 325. The central circle designates the cultural HQ, around which are represented various sections and departments, clockwise from the top: political education; the library; the newspaper *Vyzov*; the protection of mothers and infants; after-school programs; sanitation, hygiene, and physical education; artistic work (drama, live newspaper, choir, music); and radio and cinema.

25. Tret’iakov, “Novyi Lev Tolstoi.”

26. Tret’iakov, “Raport,” in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 11.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–15.

29. Fritz Mierau, *Erfindung und Korrektur: Tretjakows Ästhetik der Operativität* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976), p. 26.

appeared in *Das neue Russland* in 1931.³⁰ There, Tret'iakov offered his most succinct formulation to date of his theory of operativism and its status as a major advance upon reportage. The operativist transcended the factographer's earlier valorization of the "little reporter" over the belles lettrist, Tret'iakov argued, moving on instead to differentiate between two different kinds of reporters—the merely informative journalist on the one hand, and the operative writer on the other, who participates directly in the "life of the material" in an organizational capacity: "To invent an important theme is novelistic belles lettres," he explained, "to discover an important theme is reportage," but "to contribute constructively to an important theme is operativism."³¹

Sergei Tret'iakov, fotografist

Nowhere in his diagram of cultural and educational work on the collective farms does Tret'iakov mention photography. No reference to photo-clubs, photo-circles, or photo-correspondents, such as were flourishing in factories across the Soviet Union, particularly in the major cities. Perhaps equipment and materials were simply unobtainable, or their cost prohibitive, but the absence of photography in Tret'iakov's plan is puzzling for a number of reasons. First, as Tret'iakov himself had asserted in 1928, "Lef's . . . uncompromising focus [is] on the literature of fact and on the photograph."³² (The latter part of Lef's twin focus was largely shaped, it should be noted, by the theory and practice of Aleksandr Rodchenko, as Leah Dickerman argues in her essay in the present volume.)³³ Second, Tret'iakov had called for the expansion of the ranks of factographers to include amateur photographers and photo-correspondents. Over the protests of some of his comrades, he had even welcomed any shutter-clicking kid [*foto-malchik, lit., photo-boy*] into the Lef fold as one more foot soldier in its war against the easel painters.³⁴ Third, and most significantly, there is the fact of his own extensive use of the camera as a recording device at the Communist Lighthouse.

In addition to making "notes, minutes, [and] sketches," he wrote, "I am recording [*zapisyvaiu*] collective-farm life with a camera. So far, I have about 2,000 . . . negatives."³⁵ In an essay devoted to his farm photography, Tret'iakov described his Leica as "an indispensable photo-diary [*foto-dnevnik*]," and informed the reader

30. See Fritz Mierau, "Tretjakow in Berlin," *Berliner Begegnungen: ausländische Künstler in Berlin 1918 bis 1933* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1987), p. 207.

31. Tret'iakov, "Der Schriftsteller und das Sozialistische Dorf," *Das neue Rußland* 7, no. 2 (1931), p. 42; quoted in Hubertus Gassner, "Heartfield's Moscow Apprenticeship, 1931–1932," in *John Heartfield* (New York: Abrams, 1992), p. 260. See "The Writer and the Socialist Village," trans. Devin Fore, in this issue, pp. 63–70.

32. Tret'iakov, "Happy New Year!," p. 265.

33. See Leah Dickerman, "The Fact and the Photograph," in this issue, pp. 132–152.

34. Tret'iakov, "Prodolzhenie sleduet," p. 4.

35. Tret'iakov, "Raport," in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 11.



Tret'iakov. Tractor Drivers Gather around a Bowl of Borscht. ca. 1930.

that with a forty-exposure roll of film that takes just minutes to load, he is able to record his various encounters more accurately than he could using notebooks; thanks to the camera, he no longer even bothers to transcribe diagrams, wall newspapers, posters, and the like, but simply photographs them for the record.³⁶ Unfortunately, however, Tret'iakov's photographic archive is now presumably lost, perhaps seized along with his Leica at the time of his arrest and execution in 1937 by the secret police.³⁷ Of those 2,000 photographs, we now have access only to those Tret'iakov himself selected for reproduction in his *kolkhoz* anthologies and sundry photo-essays and illustrated articles of the early 1930s, none of which, sadly, escapes the low production value of most Soviet publications of this period (a result of poor quality paper, inks, and registration processes).

Not surprisingly, Tret'iakov's published selection from his *kolkhoz* archive exemplified his anti-aesthetic, functionalist theory of photography. While "[t]here is no such thing as Lef photography," there is, however, a "Lef approach," he argued: "What matters most is how you go about setting . . . up [the shot], the . . . *purpose* of the photograph and why you have to take it, and then finding the most rational means for the actual photographing and the points of view."³⁸ This declaration was Tret'iakov's riposte to the often automatic association of the Lef group with the oblique-angle photography of Rodchenko (which, it is true, animated most of *Novyi lef's* covers, and many of its pages).³⁹ In accordance with his theory,

36. Tret'iakov, "Diad'ka," in *Mesiats v derevne*, pp. 197–98.

37. The NKVD file of Tret'iakov's arrest and execution, which includes details of what was seized, is transcribed in "Vernite mne svobodu!": *deiateli literatury i iskusstva Rossii i Germanii—zhertvy stalinskogo terro-ra*, ed. V. F. Koliazin (Moscow: Medium, 1997), pp. 46–68.

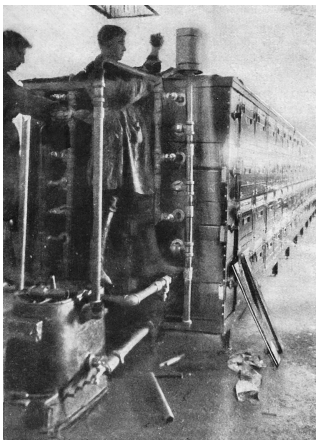
38. Tret'iakov, "Photo-Notes," in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 253 (emphasis added).

39. See Leah Dickerman, "The Radical Oblique: Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye," *Documents*, no. 12 (Spring 1998), pp. 22–25. On the controversy over oblique-angle photography, see the debate in *Novyi lef* between Rodchenko, Boris Kushner, and Tret'iakov, in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 243–51, 270–72.

most of Tret'iakov's photographs are shot from conventional viewpoints, with the exception of an occasional bird's-eye view, justified in order to provide an overview of a particular feature of the collective farmscape (such as its canal system). Even the most exceptional—a close, overhead view of nine tractor-drivers lying face down in a field, their bodies fanned around a communal bowl of borscht that they share for lunch—may be justified in terms of the “purpose” of the photograph: to foreground in the most explicit way possible the intimacy and community of social relations among this cohort of newly skilled collective-farm workers.

Unlike much first Five-Year Plan photography, such as the professional photographs published contemporaneously in the luxury photographic magazine *USSR in Construction*, Tret'iakov's photographs do not overtly fetishize the instruments of agricultural mechanization. In only a single photograph—a steeply recessed view of an industrial incubator—is the photographic field given over to an infinite extension of gleaming metal. But even then, two skilled workers are seen in the left foreground, apparently installing or repairing the incubator's plumbing, while the detritus of their labor is scattered in the foreground, a photographic detail that elsewhere (in, say, *USSR in Construction*) would likely have been retouched and eliminated.

Most typically, Tret'iakov's photographs feature human subjects, often in groups but occasionally alone, and almost all representing the project of social engineering discussed above: the transformation of the peasant into a *kolkhoznik*. Several do so through the portrayal of workers in conjunction with the accoutrements of their newly mechanized agricultural practice: trying out a tractor, or working with a grain thresher. Others reveal new forms of labor organization intrinsic to the acceleration of industrialization and collectivization under the Plans, such as the shock-brigade (e.g., a group portrait of the combine's “Third Tractor Brigade”) and socialist competition (e.g., the distribution of work bonuses



Tret'iakov. Left: Incubator. Right: The Tractor Is Mounted on Springs in Order to Teach Balanced Steering. ca. 1930.



Tret'iakov. Top: The Third Tractor Brigade of The Challenge Combine. Middle: A Loud and Burlly Woman Commander. Bottom: At the Women's Conference of The Challenge Combine, Twelve (Female) Collective-Farmers Entered the Party, ca. 1930.

to shock-workers). Some foreground the process of social transformation even more directly: Tret'iakov photographed a "loud, burly, peasant woman [*baba*]," who, through joining the *kolkhoz*, has risen to become a "commander [*komandirsha*]" of the field; a group of young peasant women who had just joined the Party; and a couple of collective-farmers becoming "cultured" through library study.

But it was not just a matter of individual photographs. Precisely in order to flesh out the social engineering of his human subjects, Tret'iakov advocated the application of his earlier cinematic principle of "extended observation" [*dlitel'noe nabludenie*] to the medium of still photography, in order to produce photo-essays that would treat his subject in a serial fashion. Neither anthology reproduces such a series, but in *A Month in the Country* Tret'iakov describes how, over the course of his several visits to the Communist Lighthouse, he produced a "photo-biography" of a Kazak peasant, documenting through a series of photographs the process by which she became a "tractor-driver-collective-farmer" [*tractorkistka-kolkhoznitsa*]. This involved the writer greeting her in her village in the morning with his camera, and then following her through the course of her day with the tractor brigade as she gradually acquired, over time, the skills of a Soviet *tractorkista*.⁴⁰

In accordance with their affirmative purpose overall, Tret'iakov's published photographs tend to suppress the conflict and discord that characterized the collectivization process. But there are two exceptions. In one, a family's deliberation over whether or not to join the *kolkhoz* is staged in terms of an intergenerational conflict: A clean-shaven (read: modern, Soviet) young man faces the camera, while a bearded (read: backward, pre-Soviet) older man, wearing a heavy sheepskin coat and slinging something like a knapsack over his left shoulder, turns away, as if departing the

40. Tret'iakov, "Diad'ka," in *Mesiats v derevne*, pp. 200–201, and idem, "Dlitel'noe kinonabludenie," in *Vyzov*, pp. 205–10. See also idem, "Ot fotoserii—k dlitel'nomu fotonabludeniiu," *Proletarskoe foto*, no. 4 (December 1931), pp. 20–43; trans. as "From the Photo-Series to Extended Photo-Observation," trans. Devin Fore, in this issue, pp. 71–77.



Tret'iakov. The Son Is For the *Kolkhoz*, the Father Against. ca. 1930.



Tret'iakov. A Purge Is Taking Place.
ca. 1930.

scene: “The son is for the *kolkhoz*, the father against,” Tret'iakov's caption explains. That image of turning away, of imminent departure, inevitably summons the specter of dekulakization, wherein any individual peasant who refused to join a cooperative farm could be labeled a kulak, and thereby forcibly deported from the fertile agricultural regions of the south to the frozen hinterlands of the north. Another photograph documents the phenomenon of the internal purge: A hand deposits a folded ballot in a locked box labeled “purge” [*chistka*], underneath which a sign explains “For the purge of commune personnel.” A purge was the process by which members of the cooperative could vote one another off the farm. As such, it was a means by which a collective farm with “problems” in the social composition of its leadership (read: kulaks) could eliminate those problems, and thereby avoid being denounced by the

Kolkhoztsestr as a “false collective farm.”⁴¹ The purge, in other words, was a euphemism for dekulakization. Tret'iakov readily listed purge-participation among his activities on the farm, including the fact that he addressed meetings devoted to purging the collectives of “kulak or anti-collective farm elements.”⁴²

There were some significant ways, however, in which Tret'iakov's impulse to record was thwarted rather than assisted by the camera. One had to do with precisely his emphasis on human subjects, namely, the sheer difficulty of recording people at work. This difficulty is evident in nearly all the photographs we have considered so far, in the discomfort registered in the awkward poses of their subjects, in their tendency to look away or even at their feet. Tret'iakov regretted the “reluctance” among *kolkhozniki*, especially among women, “to be photographed during working hours”: “This is an old dress,” they would object, or “My hands are dirty,” or “I have to look at what I'm doing, you won't see my face.” Seemingly clueless about the extra-photographic social conventions that might induce or even dictate this reluctance, Tret'iakov blamed this desire to pose for the camera on the professional (i.e., studio) photographer, whose production of idealized portraits had encouraged what he defines, rather severely, as “the habit people have of lying about themselves.” Confronted by the apparent undoing of his documentary project, Tret'iakov resorted

41. See Viola et al., *The War Against the Peasantry*, p. 123.

42. Tret'iakov, “Raport,” in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 10; see also “Chistka,” in *Vyzov*, pp. 293–302. It is worth noting that this last essay was excluded from the Malik compilation *Feld-Herren* (see note 2, p. 158).

to deception: “The method I used to bring people out of their stiff posing was to turn their attention to some defect in their work, and while they were straightening it out, to photograph them—before they had a chance to adopt a pose.”⁴³

Tret'iakov's documentary impulse was also frustrated by certain technical particularities of camera vision itself, such as the distortions produced by foreshortening. He describes an incident in the engine repair shop at the Communist Lighthouse when “the workers were forced [by the writer] to pose against their will.” A technician was measuring the thickness of an engine shaft with a ruler and calipers, but because foreshortening would have reduced the calipers to a tiny “piece of cotton thread,” Tret'iakov asked his comrade to reposition the calipers against another shaft, so as to avoid any distortion. The technician replied forthrightly: “You want to make a fool of me? *That* shaft can never be measured with a pair of calipers.” Tret'iakov concludes his story with an ambivalent observation: “For this man it's the opinion of his fellow technicians that is important. He wants to be photographed as an engineer, not as a hero.”⁴⁴

A third complication was introduced by Tret'iakov himself, when he began to stage “instructional” photographs: “At one time I would shoot only in documentary mode [*dokumental'no*],” he writes in *A Month in the Country*, “I tried, that is, to capture reality as it is. [But] in addition to such ‘documentary’ photographs, I now also take ones that are set up in advance.” The latter show “not how the work is done in reality, but how it should be done”: for example, how to mount a tractor correctly, or how to dissect the carcass of a pig.⁴⁵ Again, Tret'iakov was advancing his argument for a purpose-driven photography: to assist, literally, in the transformation of a peasant into a *kolkhoznik* who could contribute to the accelerated fulfillment of the Plan. As such, the camera was not just a recording device, but also a production tool. Tret'iakov's experience on the *kolkhoz* thus relaxed his hitherto factographic exclusion of the staged. “Photography is not just a stenographer,” he writes in the final issue of *Novyi lef* in December 1928, six months after his first visit to the Communist Lighthouse, “it also explains.”⁴⁶ And though he continues to insist on a binary of documentary and staged, he scare quotes the former term, as we have just seen, as if acknowledging the fragility of its very concept. Tret'iakov's insistence here is significant, for it was the complete collapse of that binary in favor of the staged that would soon become the distinguishing feature of Socialist Realism: “seeing life as it [is] becoming, rather than life as it [is].”⁴⁷

43. Tret'iakov, “Photo-Notes,” in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 253, 255.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

45. Tret'iakov, “Diad'ka,” in *Mesiats v derevne*, p. 201.

46. Sergei Tret'iakov, “Ot redaktsii,” *Novyi lef*, no. 12 (1928); trans. in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 271.

47. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 9. For a recent discussion of the problem of the relationship of factography and Socialist Realism, see Maria Zambani, *La morte del romanzo: Dall'avanguardia al realismo socialista* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2003), pp. 126–42 and Appendix II.



Tret'akov et al. "The Camera in the Hands of the Writer," *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 2 (March–April 1934).

By spring 1934, Tret'akov had repudiated the *polemic* aspects of factography and operativism—the deprofessionalization of the writer, and the end of literature—but nevertheless maintained his preoccupation with both the essay and the photograph. In this final section, I consider a provocative response he gave to the magazine *Sovetskoe foto* in March 1934, when it invited a number of Soviet writers to reflect upon the role and place of the camera in their literary production.⁴⁸ The respondents to this survey represented a heterogeneous group: In addition to Tret'akov, it also included, inter alia, his former adversary Vladimir Stavskii (a once prominent leader of the now defunct RAPP, who would soon become First Secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers); the great master of the psychological novel, Leonid Leonov; and the satirical novelist (and later photo-essayist) duo, Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov.⁴⁹ Such heterogeneity was typical of attempts to create a postpolemical discursive environment in the wake of the Party's April 1932 liquidation of separate literary organizations (such as the RAPP), with their supposedly "narrow" and "elitist" platforms, in favor of a single union of all Soviet writers that would be inclusive of Party members and fellow-travelers alike.

48. Sergei Tret'akov et al., "Fotoapparat v rukakh pisatel'ia," *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 2 (March–April 1934), pp. 24–37.

49. The other contributors were Dzako Gatsuev, Boris Gorbatov, Mikhail Levidov, and Liudmila Popova.

Photographic Waste

But the lead response was by Tret'iakov, and there is reason to believe that it was perhaps he who instigated the survey on behalf of the reportage-oriented *Sovetskoe foto*: Over the past few years, the magazine had served as something of a forum for his defense of hybrid genres such as the photo-essay and photomontage.⁵⁰ In his response, Tret'iakov begins by associating his use of the camera with travel writing in particular, as he has always done. On a "literary journey," he explains, the Leica is a device as essential to the writer as his traditional instruments: "I don't know which would be worse: to lose my notebook and pen, or my camera." Continuous-roll film enables him to create a "visual diary" of his experiences en route and on location, which later plays a fundamental role in his writing process. Accompanying his response are two such diary entries: The upper photograph was taken during a summer 1931 trip Tret'iakov made with a brigade of writers to construction sites in the mineral-rich Lake Baikal region of southeastern Siberia, at the invitation of the newspaper *Za industrializatsiinu* [For industrialization], an organ of the People's Commissariat of Ferrous Metallurgy.⁵¹ In sharp sunlight, a sheet mica-carver holds a thin shard of the mineral up close to her eye, and peers through its translucent materiality as if looking through a viewfinder (as if, in fact, parodying Tret'iakov's act of photographing her). In the lower photograph, which he took in February 1931 while in Europe promoting his new model of the operative writer, two lightermen guide low-slung barges loaded with lumber and other building materials as they are tugged through a Hamburg canal, just as the ice is beginning to break into shards.

Aside from their most minimal captions, Tret'iakov says nothing about either of these reportage-style travel photographs, but the fact of their inclusion in the survey is significant. Though taken in 1931, at the height of Tret'iakov's promotion of operativism, neither pertains to the development of that model, which had become his major preoccupation after the demise of *Novyi lef*, as we have seen. Instead, what is provocative about Tret'iakov's response to *Sovetskoe foto* is his discussion of the status and value of so-called photographic waste [*fotograficheskii brak*]: photographic rejects, defective photographs, flawed photographs. On the *kolkhoz*, Tret'iakov had analyzed the photographic defect as something to be remedied and eliminated through instruction and experience.⁵² His argument in 1934 is quite the reverse. In accordance with their character as diary entries or photographic drafts [*foto-chemoviki*], Tret'iakov acknowledges that a writer's photographs necessarily vary considerably in quality: In some, for example, contours are blurred due to inadvertent or unavoidable movement of the camera, or to conditions of insufficient illumination. Though technically flawed, such photographs are nevertheless

50. See Tret'iakov, "Ot fotoserii," and idem, "Raport proletarskogo khudozhnika: Boitsa bratskoi kompartii," *Proletarskoe foto*, no. 3 (March 1932), pp. 16–18. (*Proletarskoe foto* was the name of *Sovetskoe foto* from 1931 until 1933.)

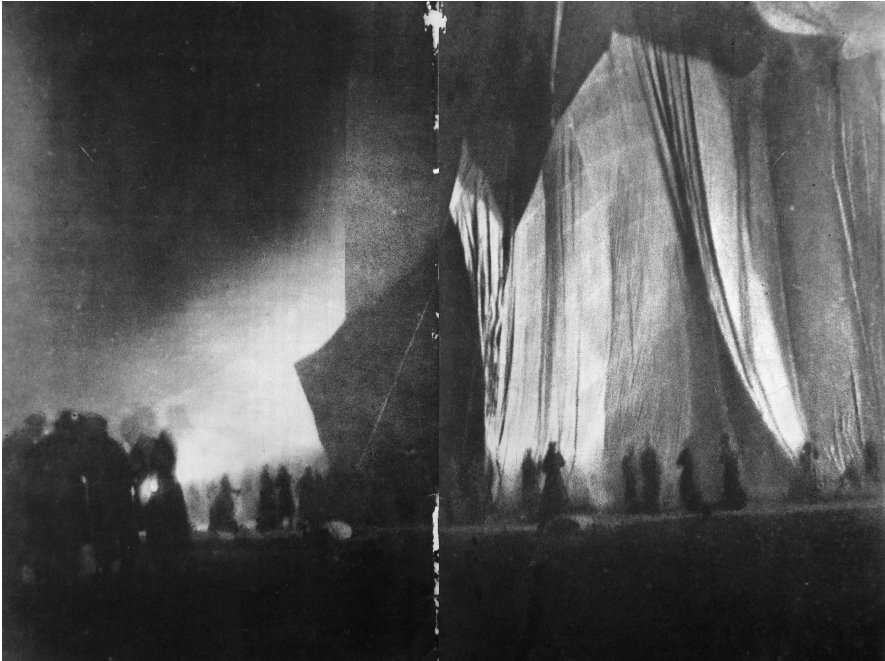
51. See Martin Schneider, "Die operative Skizze Sergej Tret'jakovs Futurismus und Faktographie in der Zeit des I. Fünfjahrplans" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 1983), p. 162.

52. See Tret'iakov, "Diad'ka," in *Mesiats v derevne*, pp. 199–200.

of value, he now insists, insofar as they assist the writer in his reconstruction of events, or serve as points of departure for his illustrator.

More polemically, Tret'iakov then suggests that in terms of sheer dynamism, blurred or underexposed photographs are ultimately more compelling than super-slick images with crisply delineated contours that end up feeling, by contrast, static and monumental. Given this, he is convinced that photographic waste will start appearing in the Soviet press, and that readers will eventually come to appreciate photographs with defects [*defekty*]. As an example, he refers to a photograph recently published in *USSR in Construction*, which documents the pre-dawn inflation of a hydrogen balloon. Here Tret'iakov is most certainly referring to an extraordinary photograph that appears in a photo-essay on the Stratostat SSSR in the February 1934 issue of *USSR in Construction*, the text of which he himself had just cowritten with the cinematographer Eduard Tisse, within an overall design by El Lissitzky and Sophie Küppers. (A list of contributing photographers is given on the last page of the issue, but the specific photograph is unattributed.)⁵³

53. See *USSR in Construction*, no. 2 (February 1934), n.p. Tret'iakov also co-wrote with Tisse the photo-essays on the three other "Bolshevik victories" included in this issue. Earlier, he had contributed the "photo-theme" and entire text of the magazine's special issue on the Soviet Volga (March 1933), and later co-wrote (with Stavskii) the text of its special issue on the peoples of the Orjonikidze territory in the Northern Caucasus (March 1937).



Double-spread from the photo-essay "Stratostat SSSR" by Tret'iakov and Eduard Tisse, USSR in Construction 2 (February 1934).

“With its indistinguishable figures,” Tret’iakov writes, “this is clearly a flawed [*porchenyi*] photograph. But in an utterly exceptional way it conveys the pre-dawn atmosphere of shadows and figures darting around in the floodlights, and the grandeur of the Stratostat as it begins to inflate.” What Tret’iakov seems most to respond to is the way in which this blurred photograph captures the inaugural launch of the Stratostat as theatrical spectacle: raking light carves the stage-like site with a jagged chiaroscuro; cloaked figures huddle at left and disperse around the slowly animated drapery of the Stratostat at right. Precisely in its technical imperfection—in its blur—the photograph records the dynamism of the occasion, an effect further underscored by its reproduction across two pages of the already oversize illustrated magazine. In his fascination with this object, the now former champion of operativism is a long way from the unspectacular photographs reproduced in his *kolkhoz* anthologies. But Tret’iakov is also a long way from the crisply contoured images that make up the remainder of the photo-essay in which the Stratostat photograph appears, and of the February 1934 issue overall, and, indeed, of *USSR in Construction* overall—blue-chip Soviet propaganda distributed abroad and among the Party and bureaucratic elite—where defects are routinely retouched away, giving its reproductions, as Tret’iakov suggests, a static and monumental quality.

In the affirmative rhetoric of the Plans, the only waste, the only defect, the only flaw is the class enemy—capitalists, kulaks, industrial saboteurs, bourgeois intellectuals, and foreign imperialists. So what does it mean for Tret’iakov to valorize waste, the defective, and the flawed in referring to a photo-essay that celebrates a newly minted “Bolshevik victory” in the realm of science and technology, wherein the Soviets surpassed the record of the balloon’s inventor (the Swiss scientist Auguste Picard), with the first-ever ascent of some nineteen thousand meters? At first glance, it might seem that Tret’iakov broaches a kind of surrealism, which could perhaps be set against Socialist Realism. But there are stakes that are much closer to home: If Tret’iakov’s response to the *Sovetskoe foto* survey is implicitly a repudiation of operativism, with its emphasis on the production of *product*—the collective farmer socially engineered out of the peasant—then his valorization of photographic *waste* represents a stunning return to, and defense of, the notational, the provisional, and the partial quality of the factographic document, whether note, sketch, diary entry, rough draft, or photograph. What makes the Stratostat photograph factographic is its blur.