'You're Taking Pictures, While We're Being Killed!'

On Materiality, Art, and the Civil Contract of the Partisan Photo Archive

Sanja Horvatinčić

Photography is much more than what is printed on photographic paper, transforming any event into a picture. The photograph bears the seal of the event itself, and reconstructing that event requires more than just identifying what is shown in the photograph. One needs to stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it.

Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*¹

Imagine three people. The first is a man in uniform with a rifle over his shoulder and the military insignia of his Partisan rank on his left sleeve. The second is a girl dressed in a modern, tailored, checked skirt and a low turtle-neck jumper – as if she had been walking along city streets a little while ago. Both are blindfolded. Holding them by the hand, taking bold steps forward while wearing a serene expression on his face, the third person, another uniformed man, is leading them through a dense pine forest. The scene is incredibly unusual, almost film-like. For a moment, as we imagine the scene, disquiet overwhelms us – is he leading them to be shot? (Those sentenced by fascist units to death by firing squad were blindfolded prior to execution.) Why would someone take photos of this scene in the middle of the woods during the war? Do the blindfolded pair know that their walk through the impossible was important, and that they were being captured on camera?²

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Research into Partisan photography is not only about grasping the factual history of the Second World War in the (post-)Yugoslav region. It is also about understanding the motives, aims, and social practices of the People's Liberation Movement. For many, this is a difficult task at present: generations, systems, and ideologies have changed; and grand narratives have been trivialised, vilified, or forgotten. For those who live in, or have a connection to the former Yugoslav region, this history might be something they think they know because they sometimes feel part of the same story. It might be something they know (or think they know) because the places, people, and events recorded in photographs are familiar to them.

1 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York 2008, p. 14.

2 A description of a photograph by the Slovenian artist and Partisan Božidar Jakac, shot in 1944 at Kočevski Rog in Slovenia. It has not been possible to reproduce this photograph in this publication due to copyright.

And the photos are indeed familiar to a regional audience. Yet what this same audience knows very little about are the conditions of these photographs’ making, the realities of their production: how Partisan photographers mixed chemicals together in food tins, how they developed photos while under fire, why some shots were staged, and some were entirely arbitrary and almost intimate.

The photograph depicting the secret guiding of a visitor to a Partisan hospital in the woods was taken by the well-known Slovenian artist and Partisan, Božidar Jakac, somewhere on the unbeaten path to Kočevski Rog. The path leads to a Partisan heterotopia, a secret hospital commune, one of the hotspots of the resistance, the combined site of cultural events, political courses, and humanitarian care for the sick, injured, and exiled. As the author of this book reveals, Partisan photographers had already been forbidden from filming secret Partisan bases and hospitals, because of the conspiratorial atmosphere present when this picture was taken. This is thus one of the rare surviving photographs depicting a visitor being led secretly to the hospital.

These two people are not visiting because they are injured, but rather because of a sense of collective struggle and solidarity. Their eyes are not blindfolded simply to avoid seeing the path taken; the endpoint could have been seen even with their eyes closed. Perhaps, similarly, photography speaks most of all to what we, today, *cannot* see.

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One of the key themes of this study is the materiality of photography and the material conditions of its production and development. Only by carefully researching and appreciating the significance of the circumstances in which Partisan photography emerged is it possible to understand the causes and long-term consequences of the radical shift in the medium’s boundaries, as well as the impact of this shift on the distribution of sensory material and the dichotomy between art and politics. Indeed, what makes Partisan photography so unusually close to the contemporary observer is its social significance and political content in today’s conditions, when there are almost unlimited possibilities for reproducing and distributing photographs. Perhaps it is through a desire to find ‘one’s own place’ among the photographed faces, or it may just be the motivation to get up close to the protagonists and to a time in which progressive social thinking was accompanied by immediate action. Recording that era was not ‘merely’ agitational and political work – it was also a deliberate mode of communicating with future generations. For this reason, we are thankful consumers of the black-and-white impressions of the past that are gathered in this publication. If drawing and poetry are the most immediate and sincere form of expression, then photography was surely the most loyal companion to the anti-fascist struggle and socialist revolution – and not only in the case of the Yugoslav Partisans.

Contemporary interest in Partisan photography is grounded in the sharing of a related civil political space, a concept that the theoretician of photography Ariela Azoullay describes as transcending the routine understanding of the photographer’s role as an ‘image creator’:

Over time, it became progressively clearer to me that not only is it impossible to reduce photography to its role as a producer of pictures, but that, in addition, its broad dissemination over the second half of the nineteenth century has created a space of political relations that are not mediated exclusively by the ruling power of the state and are not completely subject to the national logic that still overshadows the familiar political arena. This civil political space, which I invent theoretically in the present book, is one that the people using photography – photographers, spectators, and photographed people – imagine every day.³

Irrespective of whether this identification results from the political instrumentalisation of ideological conflicts from the Second World War or from a continuity of violence – the original, physical violence recorded in photographs, but also the contemporary, symbolic violence reflected in the erasing or falsifying of events and their causes – it is grounded in a kind of civil responsibility that Azoullay names 'the civil contract of photography'. She defines this as 'the civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven't stopped "being there", toward dispossessed citizens who, in turn, enable the rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship'.⁴ Azoullay uses the concept of a contract to 'shed terms such as "empathy", "shame", "pity", or "compassion" as organizers of this gaze', leading to the realisation that 'photographed persons are participant citizens, just the same as I am'.⁵

This study establishes a more complex and socially and politically aware relationship to photography, situating our civil contract with Partisan photography inside a wider spatio-temporal framework of the photographic recording of social movements. Yet it also makes a significant contribution to establishing and elaborating on a new model of archival practice. Gal Kirn uses the concept of the Partisan archive to describe a trend that has appeared in recent years as a result of the specific political conditions of Yugoslav post-socialism.⁶ This trend is strongly opposed to historical revisionism on the one hand, and to the apolitical romanticisation of the past on the other. As Kirn states, 'the creation of the Partisan archive thus demands not only critical methods of reading it, but rather the revival of an emancipatory past as a mechanism for intervening in the dominant discourse, finding fragments of emancipation in our present'.⁷

Despite the contemporary trend in museum digitisation, which has included working through a substantial corpus of war-related photographic heritage from the 20th century, it seems that the farthest-reaching shifts towards reaffirming Partisan photography and making it widely available are occurring outside of institutions, through actions that we might name the activist-guerrilla emancipation of the photo archive.

³ Azoullay 2008 (see note 1), p. 12.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 16–17.

⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶ Gal Kirn, 'Towards the Partisan Counter-Archive: Poetry, Sculpture and Film on/of the People's Liberation Struggle', in *Slavica Tergestina* (Yugoslav Partisan art issue), no. 17, 2016, p. 104.

⁷ Ibid.

One of the most prominent examples is the anonymous and self-financed online digital repository znaci.net, set up in 2005.⁸ Not only does this project's value lie in immersing the photos in an easily relatable and searchable historical context, often missing at present in photo exhibitions in historical museums; it also lies in saving them from difficult-to-access and often poorly maintained photo archives from the former museums of the revolution of Yugoslav peoples, that is, museums built in the socialist period to document the liberation struggle of the Second World War and the socialist revolution.⁹ New forms of dissemination in the digital sphere not only make the mass consumption of photographs possible; they also actualise the emancipatory potential of all signatories of the aforementioned social contract: from forgotten photographers, through to depicted subjects and contemporary viewers.

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Even during the war, Partisan photography was (and later continued to be) treated as an important historical document; its political and social function during the socialist period was largely that of representing events. Partisan cultural production has not been researched as a topic in its own right, and so it has often served to illustrate chosen historical narratives and universal ideas. This has resulted in certain side-effects, such as incorrect or imprecise attributions, and it has also contributed to the mythologisation of certain historical events, a mythologisation that arose from the emphasised iconicity of certain photographs. In this sense, the structural function of Partisan photography in Yugoslav memory politics can be compared with that of monuments. Yet at the same time, we are not dealing here with familiarity as concerns the representative function of these two media, but rather with the fact that the photographic medium, through its synthesised summary of complex historical events, has partly replaced the role that public monuments had in the 20th century.¹⁰ Iconic scenes such as the shots of Stjepan Filipović on the gallows took on the plastic quality of a monument. The design procedures themselves, such as in the work of the Slovenian sculptor Slavko Tihec, were based on examining the possibility of ‘translating’ photographs into the medium of sculpture and on photography serving the function of a public monument.

In this case, photography also contains a certain mnemonic function based on the material quality of original, analogue photography. However, ‘without the fundamental aspect of the [material] trace that secured the temporal specificity of the photographic image, the salient position of photography in visual memory would be seriously endangered’.¹¹ As the materiality of photography is neglected in its translation into a digital format, the specificity of its

⁸ See URL: <http://www.znaci.net/damjan/fotogalerija.php> (accessed 4 May 2017).

⁹ Hundreds of titles from the historiographic literature on the Second World War and on the People's Liberation Struggle, as well as thousands of historical documents by regional and foreign sources have been digitised as part of this project over many years. A total of 4,740 photographs have been scanned, most of which previously belonged to the Museum of the Revolution (now Museum of Yugoslavia) in Belgrade.

¹⁰ Jens Ruchatz, ‘The Photograph as Externalization and Trace’, in: *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), Berlin/New York 2008, p. 375.

¹¹ Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*, New York 1991, p. 135.

production in a given set of historical circumstances is slowly disappearing. Consequently, the focus on historical contextualisation in a book such as this takes on added significance. Taking a different view, a divergence from an artefactual approach to photography, achieved through the digital transformation of media and the unlimited distribution of images, places a greater emphasis and responsibility on content analysis and on raising an awareness of the political space of all included stakeholders. In contemporary conditions characterised by a complete disintegration in a structural reading of the historical context, or even by that context's direct falsification, the function of digitised Partisan photography nowadays lies closer to the educational and propaganda function that it had in the wartime circumstances in which it emerged, rather than the documentary and memorial function that it had during the socialist period.

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In studies and theoretical debates to date on the meaning of Partisan artistic and cultural production, there has been a dominant focus on poetry, art and dramatic works.¹² This study clearly shows, however, that photography has been a neglected component of cultural production, and that some of the most radical shifts towards emancipation and the democratisation of the medium occurred within photography itself, especially if we bear in mind the class exclusivity of photography before the Second World War. One question worth posing is why – even from a Marxist position – does a certain reservedness continue to exist in placing photographs on an equal footing with other forms of Partisan cultural output as a historical phenomenon?

Drawing on Adorno's thesis regarding the impossibility of transforming the real through fiction, the Slovenian philosopher Rastko Močnik describes Partisan cultural production as:

a transforming intervention in an aggressive and overly powerful reality. Granted, this was an intervention using representations, but representations that were produced from the perspective of another reality, one that first had to be won in a struggle – an armed struggle, but also a struggle with representations.¹³

Contemporary consumption of Partisan photography comprises the most direct or most literal gaze upon the circumstances in which such a 'second reality' was forged. These are not only shots or recordings used as historical documents in contemporary struggles 'in the field of representation' against historical revisionism and negationism, but also photo-

12 Besides the special issue of the magazine *Slavic Tergestina*, devoted to the topic of Yugoslav Partisan culture, several recent titles deal with the phenomenon of Partisan cultural production. See, for example, *Lekcije o odbrani: Prilozi za analizu kulturne delatnosti NOP-a*, Marko Miletić and Mirjana Radovanović (eds.), Belgrade 2016 (KURS & Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe); and *Lekcije o odbrani: Da li je moguće stvarati umetnost revolucionarno?*, idem., Belgrade 2017 (KURS & Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe).

13 Rastko Močnik, 'The Partisan Symbolic Politics', in: *Slavica Tergestina* (Yugoslav Partisan art issue), no. 17, 2016 (see note 6), p. 27.

graphs whose aesthetic quality opens up ‘accidental’ temporal cracks that relate to the intimate side of that same reality.

Debates over whether Partisan photography belongs to the wider field of Partisan cultural production are a kind of false dilemma originating from a limited understanding of the function of art within capitalist productive relations. If we throw out the assumption that the end goal of artistic work is to make the artistic field autonomous (the idea of ‘artistic licence’), we open up a different viewpoint on the motives of individuals who had an input into the collective struggle with cameras in their hands, taking pictures, and taking the side of the unprivileged, marginalised and far weaker, all the while changing camera-related regimes and ethical norms. Bearing in mind the significance of the organisational mechanisms that led to the necessary and indispensable centralisation of photographic production in the liberation effort and the control and coordination of photographic work on the ground, is it really acceptable to bemoan a lack of a more spontaneous, individual and aesthetically competent imagery? Such as the pictures that characterised the first phase of Partisan photographic activity which, after all, was relatively weak in its political impact? The necessity of formal limits speaks volumes of the conditions in which photographic work (or any kind of artwork for that matter) can generally be reviewed and valued. How can photography develop as a craft without an adequate supply of chemicals and photographic paper, and, moreover, in an atmosphere of danger, repression and fear? The overcoming of these production constraints through invention led to the establishment of a new relationship towards the artistic medium and how it related to the portrayed subject. The hierarchical relationship between photographer and subject was eliminated, thus satisfying a basic prerequisite for the avant-garde – the fusing of art and life and the elimination of its class-privileged status.

The numerous topics and problems that Davor Konjikušić touches on in this book (each worthy of separate studies in themselves) include the ephemerality of photographic media under conditions of guerrilla struggle, the Partisan network for distributing pictures and the movement’s dependency on the collective’s participation (for instance, channels for sending secret packages, hiding and burying photographs). Instructional, educational insights regarding formal rules on the use of light, shot-taking and composition – insights that were earlier unknown – take on an entirely new dimension and counter aesthetic formalism. A photography handbook produced during the war and the continued immediacy and universal appeal of the pictures resulting from that time are radical examples of the demystification of art and the image-making process. Insisting on the subjective expression and aesthetic responsibility of an auteur runs contrary to the propaganda-focused and engaged practice of Partisan photography. However, as Ariela Azoullay claims, that apparent contradiction can essentially be put down to the fact that:

Photography has come into the world with the wrong users’ manual. The existing common manual reduces photography to the photograph and to the gaze concentrated on it in an attempt to identify the subject. It takes part in the stabilization of what is seen, in making it distinct, acces-

sible, readily available, easy to capture, and open to ownership and exchange. The wrong users' manual hinders the spectator's understanding that the photograph – every photograph – belongs to no one, that she can become not only its addressee, but also its addresser, one who can produce a meaning for it and disseminate this meaning further.¹⁴

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The use of photography in the People's Liberation War, which this study highlights clearly in a well-argued manner for the first time, was not only a report-based method of documenting; rather it redefined the photographic medium itself, as well as its historical and political scope, and made it an inseparable part of the entire transformative experience of Partisan cultural production. The individuals behind the lens were participating in the same transformative socio-political process. They became its protagonists and its principal stakeholders. This makes the efforts by the author of this publication all the more significant, as these efforts reveal the personal biographies and revolutionary paths that led photographers, either professional or self-taught, to record and participate in the creation of a new social reality. They also radically reposition our own roles along the intersecting fault lines of society, politics and culture. Understanding the socio-political circumstances and material conditions that this radical turn equally enabled is therefore important, as is delving into the personal motivations of the photographer or noticing the visual talents they took with them into the forests while working undercover. As with Partisan culture and art, which Močnik warns can only be understood beyond its capitalist conceptualisation as an 'autonomous' social sphere, photography – insofar as we can understand it as an integral or synthetic part of that production – cannot be understood either as just an exclusively documentary or aesthetic medium. As with other aspects of Partisan creativity, photography 'is not a passive object, since it still affects us through its symbolic efficiency'.¹⁵

Within the contemporary conditions of the reception of Partisan photography mentioned earlier, which presently carries a fraught symbolic burden and political significance, the author's task here is not easy in the slightest. This makes his results and their effects even more relevant. This book is the first attempt to historicise this phenomenon, to situate it within a wider cross-section of the history of engaged war photography and the photography of social movements, precisely mapping out how it has been critically and analytically interpreted. The forgotten names of key photographers in the People's Liberation War are revealed or cited in this study all in one place for the first time. Practically unheard of topics are opened for discussion, such as women's authorship in photography, and the controversial topic of lost and destroyed photo archives. The organisational origins of the various photography units are also traced. The present publication also explores some of the key parameters for the development of the medium, such as the link between the centralisation of the People's Liberation Army and the material, formal and content-related features of the photography produced.

14 Azoullay 2008 (see note 1), p. 14.

15 Močnik 2016, p. 23.

In the complex, multidimensional story of Yugoslav Partisan photography, several key topics are outlined, while the author's approach balances between expeditiously relating to the reader the thorough archival research, and striving to raise the historical and aesthetic value of the photographs to a universal level, by analysing several exceptional case studies. These two approaches are equally important and complementary in striving to grasp the phenomenon of Partisan photography as fully as possible, and – of particular importance – making it relevant in the contemporary socio-political context. As with the recent debate surrounding the 'struggle over the past', we can turn to photography as a valuable historical source,¹⁶ and it seems that it can be understood once again as a medium for current social and political struggles. Opening a historical perspective not only aids a better understanding of the role of the photographic medium under certain circumstances – it also opens a perspective on how it is currently mobilised in the present. The described conditions of production in which Partisan photography emerged prompt the question of the individual responsibility of the photographer towards social movements.

¹⁶ See, for example, the recently published photo monograph that partly emerged as a response to the revisionist interpretation of the post-war function of the concentration camp of Jasenovac. Đorđe Mihovilović, *Jasenovac 1945.–1947. Fotomonografija*, Jasenovac 2016.