

Russian Performances

Word, Object, Action

Edited by

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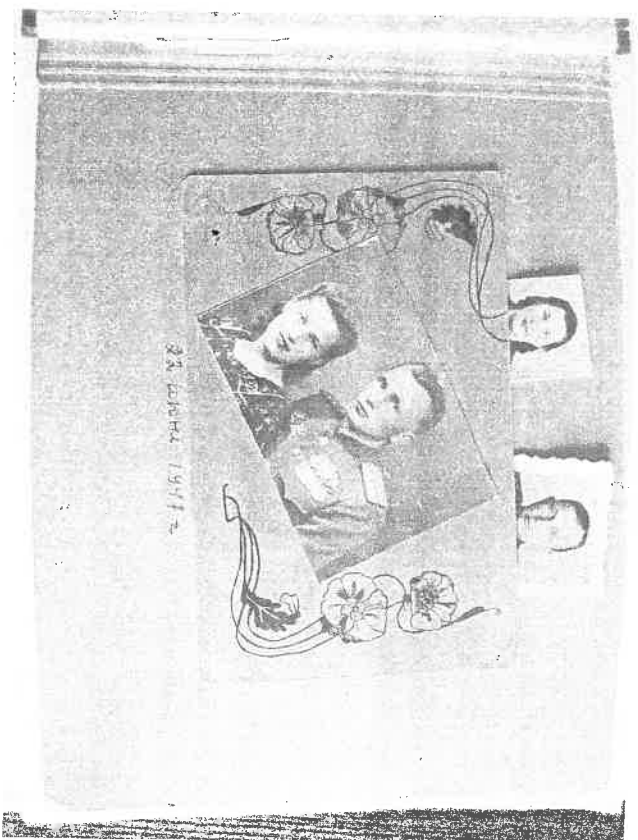
The Album as Performance

Notes on the Limits of the Visible

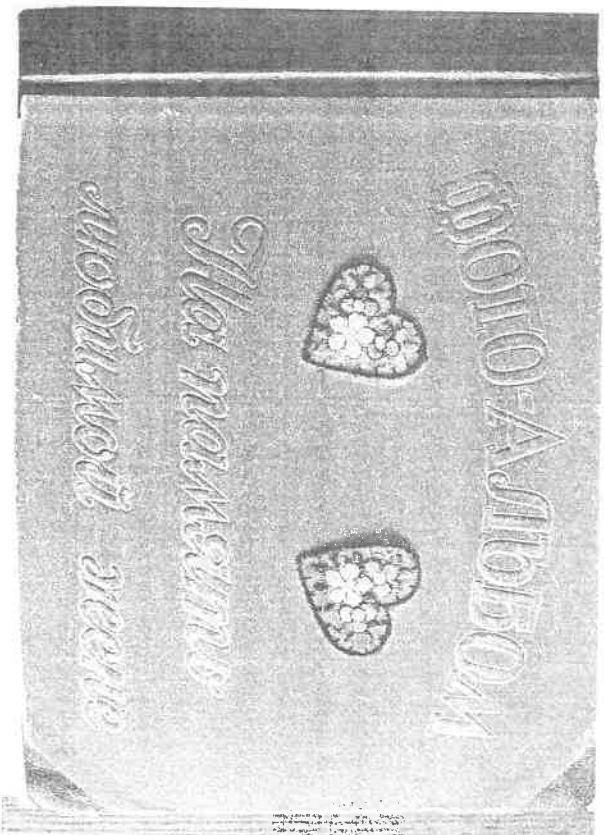
OKSANA SARKISOVA AND
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Elvira Semenovna's photo album opens on an image of a newly married couple, Elvira and her husband, taken in 1947 on their wedding day.¹ The picture is mounted on an ornamented colorful background. Placed on the first page of the album by her husband, a career military man, this image advances a conventional family frame for understanding Elvira's history as that of a happily married woman and a proud mother of two, and it implicitly sets the stage for a further patriarchal visual narrative of fulfilled family life. The same framing is supported by the material qualities of this little red album. The album's cover carries the inscription "A token of memory to a beloved wife" (in Russian) and two ornamental hearts. Elvira's husband ordered it while he was stationed in Germany at a Soviet military base in the early 1950s and brought it to Russia as a birthday gift at a time when photo albums for domestic use were not yet readily available in the Soviet Union.

The retro look of the cover and the historical range covered by the photographs in the album suggested that Elvira's story had considerable depth. The visual shape of that story, however, was relatively recent, and it departed from the expectations communicated by the cover. A few years prior to our visit and several years after the untimely passing of her son and her husband, Elvira subjected her family archive to close scrutiny. She took stock of all photographs in her possession, selecting the narrow range of images that she felt were still relevant and systematically tearing up and burning the rest on the balcony of her small apartment. Not many images survived the purge, because she dispensed with all the photographs that she did not expect to be meaningful to her daughter and grandchildren. This was an act of selection in the face of history and of shaping a story not for oneself but for posterity.



The opening page of Elvira Semenovna's album. Author's collection.



The cover of Elvira's album. Author's collection.

This small album, along with the rest of the family photo archive, was the focal point of the conversation we had with Elvira, her daughter Galina, and her grandson Sergey in May 2008. Part of a larger project, this and other interviews aimed to explore the stories and interactions that happen around family photographs in Russia today with an eye to how these interactions participate in the production of knowledge about the Soviet past in Russian multigenerational families.² While the larger project explored the relationship between biographical and collective memory, in this essay we wish to tackle one particular paradox: that between the familial and domestic appearance of this album and the performative uses to which it was put by Elvira.

Indeed, it did not take too long before it became obvious that the idyllic familial framing suggested by the cover and the opening page of the album sat somewhat at odds with Elvira's autobiographical project. This paradox necessitated questions that will animate this essay: How do family photographs as images and as material objects enable particular kinds of performances of self, identity, and memory? What do domestic photo collections make visible, and, by contrast, what do they obfuscate? And how do people use performative opportunities that arise from photographs to put forth and pass on their visions of themselves and their pasts?

From the first minutes of our conversation, Elvira offered us a well-rehearsed and tightly woven version of her history, one that started earlier and focused exclusively on herself. This verbal narrative required the introduction of photographs that visualized the story of Elvira as an orphaned child who went on to become an independent, self-made woman. Her reedited album, while still opening with an image of a young married couple, portrays a young woman's coming-of-age story, visualizing her social and career advancement from an apprentice in a local butter factory; to a lieutenant in the state security services, working in the 1940s for the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and later for its successor, the KGB, in Azerbaijan; and finally, to a respected mother of two children married to a distinguished Soviet military man.

The role of Elvira's album as a performative medium is all the more interesting because it enabled the performance of an identity that was, in the Soviet context, heavily loaded and entangled with a regime of closely managed *invisibility*—that of a career secret police operative. In this, her album is unusual. While nothing was supposed to escape the gaze of the vigilant KGB operative, his or her own life and work activities were not supposed to be open to the gaze of others. As a result, these identities typically leave few if any visible traces in family albums. By contrast, Elvira's album is explicitly centered around her

work within the organs of state security. In what follows, we explore the visual narrative, as well as the oral commentary that accompanied it, seeking to understand the gendered position from which the experience of work in the secret service can be given both verbal and visual form.

Performance studies treats performance as a form of mimesis, an act of imitation that implies both a repetition and a transfiguration. "Beginning only with a memory and ending in a wish," Joseph Roach suggests, performance "embodies both fulfillment and retrospection" (2010, 1081–82). Posted as domestic photographs are between looking back and moving forward, between memory and imagination, between "repetition" and "difference" (Pollack 1998), they exemplify this spirit of performance on a number of levels.

The first level is the photographic situation itself, where the act of photography is embedded in performances of multiple types, whether that performance is a tourist performance, as discussed by Jonathan Larsen (2005), or a ramble through the countryside by a group of nineteenth-century British preservationists (Edwards 2014). In this way, images both trigger and preserve traces of the performances that produced them.

On the second level, there is the performative occasion that is generated by the act of being photographed—the possibility of defining the moment, choosing the setting and a way of self-presentation that belongs partly to the photographer and partly to the model, an uneasy combination that gave Roland Barthes such a persistent feeling of inauthenticity when being photographed.³ This performance is subsequently supplemented by the performative nature of the album itself, since the editorial choices that go into arranging and sequencing images offer multiple opportunities to control the arc of the visual narrative, highlighting specific moments while eliminating other, undesirable ones (Strasler 2010). Subsequent viewing of the album initiates a call to a new performance, as the dynamically changing commentary (re)defines the meaning of the images each time a photograph is encountered. In the process of this viewing, both individual photographs and the album itself turn into props as viewers move the images, touching and rearranging them in the process of storytelling.

While album viewing is a form of "oral-photographic performance" (Langford 2001, 20), the interviews we held with the owners of the albums differed from the more casual conversations that typically happened over the same photographs. The very occasion of an interview generates a new set of performative potentialities, foregrounded by the situation of an intersubjective interaction that is both "anonymous" (following the agreement not to identify the participants) and "historically meaningful" (most of our respondents took our

conversation as an invitation to compose an authoritative “family chronicle”). The interview was thus, potentially, a performance for multiple audiences, both visible (the interviewers) and imagined (posterity; you, the reader of this essay).

Finally, the performative effect of photographs is palpable in yet another, more narrowly linguistic sense of “doing things with words” (and pictures). Indeed, in *Doing Family Photography*, Gillian Rose looks at the production and circulation of family photographs as a practice that “produces the family” by projecting idealized visions of the family unit and giving these visions tangible representational form. The traffic in photographs articulates and recreates the bounds of what is to be considered family, reaffirming and modifying existing configurations of kinship. In this sense, the practices of joint looking and shared ownership of family photographs are the currencies that bind the family together. They confirm existing family relationships, but, as Marianne Hirsch points out, photographs also create deeply felt affective connections to preceding generations and their traumatic experiences, enabling “inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experiences” (2008, 106).

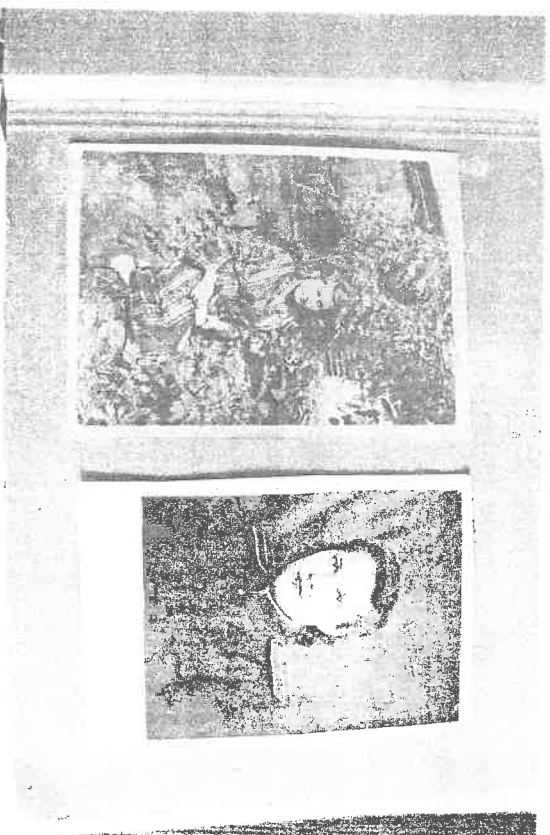
Elvira’s album exemplified the performative nature of the album genre on all these levels. Not only did it bear visible traces of its owner’s efforts to shape the telling of her story, it also emerged as the focal point for the exchanges she had with her children and grandchildren. The privileged status of this red album was impossible to miss. On the small table where our hosts had prepared the family archive to share with us, it sat separately from the rest of the pile, so that her daughter Galina and grandson Sergey could start their family narrative from what they considered the appropriate beginning. The images in the album were meticulously arranged, and the story we heard from Galina and Sergey closely resembled the one we heard a day prior from Elvira. It was clear that we were following in the footsteps of a designed and repeatedly rehearsed “oral-photographic performance.”

That story focused first and foremost on Elvira’s work in the security services. The tale of her “elevation” had the structure of a fairy tale, and her grandson described it most straightforwardly: “I imagine her as a kind of Cinderella.” Its basic outlines go as follows: a beautiful girl, growing up without a mother, loses her father when she is at the tender age of seventeen. She joins the Communist Party on the advice of her father’s friends and a year later receives an invitation to enter the ranks of the secret police, becoming the youngest operative in the unit: “I did not have anyone left by then, no relatives, no sisters or brothers, no one. And they probably decided to help me. . . . When I was sent to work for the state security and received a military rank, it was only then that

I started thinking: What would have happened to me had I not entered the party? I would have stayed in that village. My entire life was changed, profoundly changed. . . . I came there in December 1944. . . . I was eighteen, and I was the youngest.” Elvira’s story has an element of serendipity and benevolent interference by strangers, but this does not mean that her near-magical escape from poverty was undeserved: “You know, I caught on to things very fast, I had a phenomenal memory. . . . They even made fun of me. . . . They would say, Why do you need this? All data, all telephone numbers. I remembered everything.”

The geographical move from a butter factory in the countryside to the regional center was simultaneously a social and economic move of great contrast. Elvira moved from the largely barter-based economy of rural poverty to the world of limited-access special stores and high salaries. This move is reflected in the album: “We had a special closed-access store [*limityi magazin*], and we received 400 rubles in coupons each quarter, a special card. The first thing I bought with these coupons was this coat here. It was very beautiful, dark blue, with a large fur collar. It cost 370 rubles. With the second month’s coupons I bought another coat, of light baize.”

It is this story of ambition and social mobility that Elvira had prepared to pass on to her immediate family. The ensuing performance spotlighted her



From peasant to operative. Author’s collection.



City fashions depicted in the album. Author's collection.

individual career, overshadowing (or at least rivaling) the story of her husband and concentrating on the same signs of distinction later in evidence in his story: military uniform, medals, the company of uniformed colleagues, and so on.

While for most of her married life Elvira was a “military wife” who dutifully relocated according to the military appointments of her husband, never staying in one place long enough to build a career of her own, the format of the album offered space for a symbolic compensation for these sacrifices by highlighting her own accomplishments. Elvira’s daughter seems to have picked up on and absorbed this subtext of the album, because she highlighted the overtones of rivalry when discussing her parents’ careers: “In 1947 Father was sent to serve in Azerbaijan. There [Mother] worked . . . for the secret services. She had a position . . . She even received a flat there [laughing], *Father did not get anything there, as she told me.*” The dual gendered tensions—between Elvira’s career and that of her husband and between Elvira’s career and her family—had a visual equivalent in the physical appearance of the album. The snapshots from her youth and later married life were combined with images of young Elvira as a career woman in uniform.



Elvira and her husband in military regalia. Author's collection.

While Elvira remained extremely careful about what was to be shown and told on record (she repeatedly asked us to switch off the camera before venturing into sensitive topics), her album does not make a secret out of her secret police work. On the contrary, she created a “highly visible spectacle of secrecy” (Vatulescu 2010, 2) by highlighting the combination of purposefulness, self-confidence, impenetrability, and the aura of mystery that started to accompany depictions of secret police work in Russian public discourse during the era of Putin’s presidency.

This is no small feat. Despite the “insidious aestheticization of policing” by literature and cinema, the representation of the secret services was highly gendered and lacked a female visual blueprint (Vatulescu 2010, 22). Elvira thus creatively combined the male-dominated representations of the secret services with the iconography of female officers that gained prominence during World War II. Modeling herself on the romanticized image of a “Cheka officer,” Elvira at the same time drew on visual references to female pilots or tank drivers that were repeatedly reproduced in the Soviet media, often decorated with medals

marking special distinctions. This medial context allowed Elvira to inscribe her NKVD years in the context of the war years, celebrated and honored and thus proudly featured in the pages of her family album.

Most strikingly, the contrast of gender tropes is visible on the page where a photo of a dreamy young girl in a polka-dot dress sitting at a table with police files is placed side by side with a female lieutenant in uniform inquisitively looking at the camera. In both images, Elvira is aware of being the object of a gaze, yet she takes on different roles: an innocent child on the left, an alluring femme fatale on the right. In the next image, young Elvira appears in her uniform decorated with a medal inscribed "За победу над Германией в Великой Отечественной войне 1941-1945 гг." (For the victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945), which features a profile of Stalin in a military uniform and the slogan "Наше дело правое. Мы победили" (Our cause is right. We have won). The award further emphasizes her professional status, although the head tilt and the averted gaze seem to recall the innocent girl in the polka-dot dress from the preceding page.⁴ (On the post-Soviet afterlives of the St. George medal and ribbon, see the essay by Serguei Alex. Oushakine in this volume.)



Elvira posing at her desk. Author's collection.



Gendered state security chic. Author's collection.

Oscillating between pride, fear, and moral hesitation, Elvira's evaluation of her early career underwent marked transformation within the short time frame of our interview. From an interesting job that implied understanding the mechanics of the secret police infrastructure, she later reframed it as a purely administrative position in a move that allowed her to foreclose any questions of individual responsibility or moral judgment:

ELVIRA: I was connected with the investigative department. I was monitoring the timing of the investigation, arranging the extension period, visiting the military and the district procurator to sign the documents. It was an interesting job. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember what kinds of investigations these were?
ELVIRA: Well, as you know, there were no criminal cases in the KGB. . . . [I] was a simple technical worker: they were bringing me decisions, and I was simply writing them down.

Elvira's evasiveness had a dual effect on her children: it both confirmed the credibility of the security operative's identity and precluded further investigation

that could dispel illusions about it. In this sense, the selectivity of her oral narrative could be seen as part and parcel of the performance.⁵ As a result, Elvira's daughter Galina and her grandson Sergey displayed a similar vagueness when discussing the possible activities of their mother and grandmother and lacked sufficient insight to judge her degree of involvement:

INTERVIEWER: And where did she work?

SERGEY: She was in the NKVD, I believe.

INTERVIEWER: Did she tell you anything about it?

SERGEY: No—[smiles] an old Cheka agent—military secret—⁶

INTERVIEWER: So you asked and she answered, "It's a 'military secret'?"

SERGEY: No, but she was simply some registrar there, I don't know. . . . She was neither an investigator nor. . . . She definitely was not involved in any repressions [smiles], I'm positive. . . . That's the kind of person she is, very kindhearted.

In the end, by virtue of the visual similarity between the uniformed shots of his grandparents, Sergey's vision of his grandmother's work merged almost seamlessly with his grandfather's military past:

INTERVIEWER: For you in your school years, to what extent did the profession of your grandmother and your grandfather have a romantic halo?

SERGEY: Of course, I liked his military uniform, his medals, it's so great—he came to my school, veterans used to be invited, and talked about his service, about the war.

Sergey seemed unaware that his grandmother's stint in the NKVD was followed by her work as a plainclothes operative in Azerbaijan, where she tracked civilian mail as an undercover agent at the postal service. For him, his grandmother's work for state security was metonymically represented by her uniform. While Galina was aware of the two chapters in her mother's secret police career, she, too, tended to frame her mother's work identity in terms of military duty to which she was "drafted": "Mother was already serving by then. She was in—the NKVD—when was she drafted? In 1943. In 1942 her father died, he was a Party member. . . . So she was drafted, she is a junior lieutenant in the NKVD." Thus, Elvira's commentary spotlighted her years at the security services, following the visual conventions of a military career but without venturing into evaluative statements beyond remarks about the material benefits that all NKVD

employees enjoyed. In this sense, the oral-photographic performance attained its goal. Arranged under the shiny red cover of the album, this photographic performance enabled Elvira to minimize moral ambiguity, reconcile biographical contradictions, control interpretation, and eliminate undesirable details, all the while fueling her children's and grandchildren's interest in and respect for her life.

This case of the visibility of the invisible, however, remains an exception in that it departs from the inconspicuousness that typically marks family albums of Soviet security operatives. In contrast, Elvira's album foregrounds this identity, all the while bringing to the fore the lack of both visual frames and discursive standards for discussing her involvement with the secret services. The photo album provided the framework for a performative reconciliation of the roles of a good housewife and a successful secret services professional, roles that become part of the foundational narrative for the coming generations, grounding their sense of pride and belonging in the images that create a powerful illusion (but only an illusion) of the visibility and transparency of the past.

NOTES

1. All names have been changed. We addressed our older respondents using the conventional Russian formal address that includes first name and patronymic. In this chapter, for the ease of the reader, we will refer to our interlocutors by first name only.
2. Our interviews were collected in 2006–8. We spoke with members of fifty-four Russian families in five different regions of the country (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vladimir, Rostov-on-Don/Novocherkassk, and Samara). This fieldwork was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Williams College, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.
3. "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture" (Barthes 1982, 13).
4. This medal was widely awarded in the USSR to all war veterans as well as the staff of the NKVD (*Sbornik* 1987, 336).
5. We thank Julie Buckler for this important point.
6. Cheka is the acronym of the first Soviet internal-security agency, the Extraordinary Commission (*Chrezvychainaiia komissia*) on Combating Counterrevolution.