

Post-Mortem Photography in the Russian Historiography

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Abstract: From beginning of the 2000s, the interest to the problem of functioning post-mortem photography in the urban and rural culture has become more active. The study analyzes the Russian historiography of post-mortem photography via the method of historiographic analysis and synthesis. The results have shown that the Russian investigators have studied the photographic experience relating to funeral photos including the circumstances of their emergence, the development of iconographic subjects, the evolution of their meaning, the conversion of post-mortem photography from public sphere of society into private. In historiography, it is observed a particular path of development of post-mortem photography in Russia, for which, as distinct from the occidental culture, it is not characteristic to depict the deceased as “living persons”. The specialists correlated the post-mortem photos with the phenomenon of memory and reminiscences, analyzed the mechanism of their interaction; also elicited the evolution of attitude toward the post-mortem photography in Russia during XX century and the central tendency of its contemporary perception in society. In conclusion, the study represents the perspectives of investigating the phenomenon of post-mortem photography in the Russian historiography.

Key words: Post-mortem photography, memory, family photo album, the Russian historiography, tendency

INTRODUCTION

In the Russian, historiography one has begun to study post-mortem photos from family photoarchives (also known as “photography of mourning rituals”, funeral photography, mourning photography) only for the last decade. Within this period, there have appeared the works in which the reseachers do not only restrict their attention to this phenomenon (I.A. Rasumova, G.A. Vlasova, M.V. Golubkova, G.A. Orlova, A.L. Yurgeneva) but also offer its being analyzed (V.A. Podoroga, V.V. Nurkova, V.L. Krutkin, L.S. Lavrentyeva, Ye.B. Tolmacheva, O.Yu. Boytsova, A.A. Petrova).

A photograph is closely connected with the norms of inner value system of society: the thing that is beyond the norm that is not photographed (Bourdieu *et al.*, 2014). The post-mortem photos are not a kind of indicator of death concept, the main constituent of any culture. The home investigations focus on the problems of functioning the post-mortem photography in sociocultural space. The study of social space private and public, comprises the characteristics of access restriction to interaction of people (Krutkin, 2006) and disclosure of the cultural essence, the content (the meanings of objects and images for research people) and context constituents of the photography (the meanings of objects and images for people of the target culture) (Krutkin, 2006). All the listed aspects are relative to the photographic experience: “to

photograph, to be photographed, to examine pictures” (Bart, 1997). Krutkin (2006) pointed that in Russia the change of canons of photographic experience had occurred several times during XX century. These changes had influence on the postmortem photography as well.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study analyzes historiographic sources, the researches of the Russian researches on postmortem photography V.A. Podoroga, O.Yu. Boytsova, V.V. Nurkova, V.L. Krutkin, L.S. Lavrentyeva, Ye.B. Tolmacheva, etc. The prevailing methods of study except general scientific became historical and comparative, historical and systemic, historical and typological and the principles of historicism and integrity that allowed to define the common, single and special in the domestic historiography of postmortem photography. The basic methods became the historiographic analysis that allowed to reveal the author’s conception in every single case and historiographic synthesis directed to comparison of the conceptions, revelation of tendencies and regularities in the development of the Russian historiography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The origin of the tradition to photograph the deceased is called by the researchers the post-mortem

pictorial portraits Nurkova (2006) and Boytsova (2010). The funeral photographs existed in the Russian and in the Soviet culture and were available to look through: “one could see them in the cinema, newspaper, one could buy and hang them up the wall”. Their prototype could be the tradition of icon-painting. This idea was described in the study by Krutkin (Bart, 1997) and then developed in the work Boytsova (2010). The updating of production techniques of photographs and its simplification furthered post-mortem photography becoming customary for the men in the street. Spreading the mourning pictures in the Russian culture is attributed by the researchers to the peasant world. The specialists refer the average date of appearance of the post-mortem photography to the pre-war period, the 1930s (though in the research work by Boytsova (2010) on photographs of private funerals in the urban and rural culture to the years 1896 and 1904). They became one of the first photographs in the rural environment. Besides, Podoroga (2001) called them the main in the photoarchive as one resorted to the services of a photographer as rarely as to the services of a priest or a dentist. The photograph fixed a funeral ceremony, a ritual of solidarity of all nearest and distant relatives against death: “The photography automatically captured this triumph over decease but it did not have any private, existential personal aspect”.

Vlasova (2015) elaborates on Podoroga (2001)’s thesis and tries to find an answer to the question: “what is transcendental sense of photographing funerals?”. In her judgment, making of postmortem photography did not concentrate on the very funeral ceremony and performing family duty and even not on the dead but rather on the mourners. The similar stand point found its reflection in the study by Lavrentyeva and Tolmacheva (2009) where it was noted that the postmortem photography changed not only into the funeral but also family and rural. Vlasova (2015) pointed out that the postmortem photography became for society one of the ways of transcendency out of death. The similar idea was suggested in the monograph by Nurkova (2006), she regarded the mourning photographs as a fighter against death, the form of victory over bereavement. These considerations have not found the further spreading in the domestic investigation.

The scholars identify the photography as one of the parts of funeral ceremony Boytsova (2010) and Petrova (2015): “photographing funerals finalizes the transition of the deceased into the new status once and for all: it transits him from the living into the dead not only in reality but in memory as well”. Postmortem photography is considered as the life continuity of the deceased: “In this case, the photographs represent the artifact of life, the illustration of that the life had place and was spent to

the end”. Having studied the mechanisms of interaction of a photograph and memory, Nurkova (2006) came to the conclusion of the appeal of postmortem photo to the last backbone level of autobiographic memory that is more appropriate to be called alter-biographic. It is the question of reminder of mortality in the memory of the living (Vlasova, 2015). The photographs of funerals also became a criterion of rightness and incorrectness of death. Availability of photographs confirms the rightness of the end of life, death is normalized (Krutkin, 2006; Podoroga, 2001). Since, the 1950-60s the mass availability of photography enabled sending funeral pictures to relatives as an evidence of observance of mourning rite (Lavrentyeva and Tolmacheva, 2009). Besides, the practice of posting these photographs made it possible to attract more participants honouring the memory of the deceased (Vlasova, 2015). It is noted in the research by Boytsova (2010) that the postmortem photos “require” exchange-sending for messages about the changes to happen. The investigators also attempted to compare the postmortem photographs with cemetery attributes of memory of the deceased: the photographs of funerals with the inscription of dates on the underside gravestone or posthumous photos (including photos capturing the last moment of life) “visual epitaph” as the last word of the deceased (Yurgeneva, 2011).

Iconography of the post-mortem photography has been changed for all period of its existence. Among the peculiarities of iconography of post-mortem photography in the Russian culture the investigators distinguish the absence of the tradition to represent the deceased as alive among the living (Boytsova, 2010), so called “resuscitation of the dead”: “we see the deceased with his eyes open, in his everyday clothes but not in his posthumous vestment” (Nurkova, 2006). Basing on the subjects of photos the following stages of funeral ceremony have been differentiated:

- Paying last respects to the dead in his house
- Parting outdoors near the house
- Funeral procession
- Photos, taken at the grave immediately after funeral

The detailed analysis of the iconographic canon is represented in the research by Boytsova (2010). There it has been analyzed the angles of still photography, the attributes of composition, poses, facial expression. Especially interesting is Boytsova (2010)’s characteristic of the evolution of “look” in the photo: “Concerning the direction of looks belonging to the relatives of the deceased in the funeral photos taken in Russia in early XX century, it is characteristic the look towards the object

glass. In this regard, the funeral photo follows the general practice of the time: one should look at a still photographer when he is taking a picture. With time, the look towards the object glass according to the funeral photographic canon gives place to another direction of the look. Judging by our materials, already by the 1930s people, being photographed around the coffin, did not look towards the camera and since the middle of XX century in the canon of the funeral photography the look not to the object glass but towards the face of the deceased has become firmly established once and for all. Such direction of the look of the depicted people shows the onlooker who exactly is the main personage of the ritual" (Boytsova, 2010). Before, this idea was expressed in the research by Vlasova (2015) who pointed out that since the 1960s, the postmortem photographs has become more official, in the focus of shooting is the death of a person but not of the community. In this photographic canon, there is absent "a demonstrative expression of grief", so that it would destroy "normalization" of death (Boytsova, 2010). On the contrary, in Podoroga (2001)'s judgment, they are "the photographs of grand sorrow" which eliminate "the work of sorrow".

The analysis of the photographic experience of modern society, concerning "looking" at the post-mortem photograph becomes one of the key problems in investigations. It is connected with the change of the photographic canon which is, in its turn, the result of the change of attitude to death. The process of "medicalization of death" played here an important role. It is question of becoming a doctor as the intermediary between a man and death, doctors were summoned to survey the death. One more part of death medicalization is connected by the researchers with hospital, a place where a man loses his life. In the age of progress of high technologies a human life is prolonged depending on the actions of a doctor that is indicative of an immediate involvement of doctors into the questions of people's life and death. Medicalization of death has led to that a modern man tries to apply different psychotechnics to suppress the thoughts about his own death (Yudin, 2013). Picturing death began to be considered as manifestation of "an element of obscenity": "every representation of occurrence of death exactly shows the impossibility of representation" (Aronson, 2013). A private nature of sorrow becomes firmly established and a photography attaches the event a private character. All these influenced on another canon change of photographic experience including functioning of the postmortem photograph in "the society of asymbolic death" (Bart, 1997).

Nurkova (2006) paid her attention to exclusion of a post-mortem photograph from family photo albums and contemporary photographic practice, to its loss of social and communicative significance in the culture. The postmortem photo is ranked as "concealed" picture": it is kept in a special folder apart and not shown to "the strange". Krutkin (2006) pointed out that for the years 1970-90s, the funeral photographs considerably changed and then disappeared from the culture. Boytsova (2010) accepts this point of view but adds that this photographic tradition has been kept in the rural tradition longer than in the urban one: "In our collection the latest picture refers to 2002 and in one of the interviews it was going about the photography of funeral in 2009". The results of field studies indicate the contrary tendency. So, in the rural culture of the Northwest region of the country the specialists revealed the presence of post-mortem photos in the family photo albums and in "photoiconostasis" as well (Boytsova, 2010; Lavrentyeva and Tolmacheva, 2009; Petrova, 2015). At the same time, the fact about existence of the ban on photographing, the deceased and keeping such photos is mentioned in the works (Lavrentyeva and Tolmacheva, 2009; Razumova, 2015): "it is not good to take pictures of the deceased and there is no point in keeping the sad events in mind". And in the urban culture post-mortem photographs are kept singly owing to the straight "frightening" relation to death.

Of principal importance is the observation of Boytsova (2010) about the fact that the cultural differences become apparent in the post-mortem photos. This thesis is important as the results of researches in the other countries are different. For example, Golubkova (2007) studied the conception of photography in the East-Slavonic and Finno-Ugric peoples of Priural'ye and Western Siberia (including the Hansi, the Mansi, the Komi, the Komi-izhemtsy, the Mordvins, the Byelorussians). She has found the negative attitude to the process of photographing, associations with a sin because of perception of a photo as the reflection of a man, his soul-shadow. The replication by a man in such a way is not permissible, in connection with the possibility "to activate his soul-shadow, the appearance of which is treated as omen of death in the environment of both Finno-Ugric and East-Slavonic peoples". O.V. Golubkova also revealed the idea of negative influence of the photographs of the deceased: "it is supposed that their photos expose the living to danger as they may become the guides from "the world beyond" for the soul-shadow, especially if it has not found a rest and is wandering about the world". At the same time, Golubkova (2007) pointed out the presence of the

tradition in the rural homes to placing the photos of the living and the dead in the red corner of the room during XX century: "sometimes the pictures were put in front next to the icons: the photos of the deceased for memory, the living for protection. They were probably to believe that the sainted (depicted in the icons), protecting the image of a man, simultaneously protected him as well". It is important to note that during conduction by one of the researchers of this study of the field study on family photo albums among the Tatar rural inhabitants it was found none of postmortem photographs. It is indicative of the absence of the tradition of funeral photography, that, in its turn, corroborates the thesis of Boytsova (2010) about close interrelation between the mourning photographs and the specific character of the cultures of different peoples.

CONCLUSION

Thus, for the last decade the Russian researchers have begun to actively study the photographic experience connected with postmortem photograph functioning in the socio-cultural space. The specialists consider the particular way of development of this photographic phenomenon in Russia for which it is not characteristic to picture the deceased as "alive" as opposed to the west culture. For the Russian post-mortem photography, it is characteristic rather manifestation of the icon-painting tradition.

The important is the correlation of post-mortem photographs with the phenomenon of memory and recollection. In big centers of population all the inhabitants cannot attend at a funeral, therefore, the circle of the attendants is limited to kindred, colleagues, intimate friends. Photography broadens the circle of participants, it can be presented to those who did not attend the funeral but looking at the photo, they are taking part in the work of collective memory, revering the memory of the deceased. If in the local community all the attendants are participating in the collective memory owing to the direct presence and participation in the ritual then in the society where there is the practice of photography one cannot take part in the events of such ritual character, keeping at that involvement in the components of the collective memory.

Particular attention in the researches of the Russian researchers is paid to the evolution of the attitude to the post-mortem photography. During XX century, it has been considerably changed, the photographs has changed the sphere of publicity into the private sphere and are available for "looking at" only for very close circles of people. The researchers confirm, that

photography is no longer a part of funeral ceremony and being spread in the peasant world, prolonged there. However, can one assert for sure that if post-mortem photography has disappeared from family photo albums has not displayed any more, then the still cameras do not take pictures of this mourning ritual? This question does still require being studied in future.

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