

# A Hard, Merciless Light

## The Worker Photography Movement, 1926–1939

This exhibition is devoted to the history of amateur, proletarian documentary photography, a movement that dates back to March 1926 when the German communist magazine *AIZ* (*Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*) called on amateur photographers to send in their contributions. It was structurally linked to the Comintern's propaganda strategy resulting from its 1921 Congress, and in particular to Willi Münzenberg's media conglomerate, which published the magazines *AIZ* and *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, the organ of the German worker photographers. In the Soviet Union the movement's principal promoter was Mikhail Kol'tsov, an innovative journalist in the illustrated press and from 1926 editor of the magazine *Sovetskoe foto*, the mouthpiece of Soviet photojournalism and of the organized amateur photographer movement. The nucleus of an international audiovisual network can thus be located in the Soviet-German exchanges between Münzenberg's and Kol'tsov's publishing and media groups.

Proletarian documentary photography generated two principal discourses. On the one hand, it proposed an alliance between photographers and the revolutionary workers' movement, resulting in a choreographed image of the working classes as protagonists of a new political hegemony and in the characteristically epic tone of the Soviet images. On the other, its programmatic mission of presenting the ugliness and horror of poverty and exploitation led it to depict the indignity of the working classes under capitalism, in particular under the conditions brought about by the economic crisis of the Weimar period. The result was the declamatory tone characteristic of German worker photography, which found its most effective and fervent ideologue in Edwin Hoernle, a regular contributor to *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*. In a programmatic text of 1930, Hoernle had defined the "proletarian eye" as being completely antagonistic to bourgeois humanism, the compassion of which was an expression of class superiority. Hoernle wrote: "We must proclaim proletarian reality in all its disgusting ugliness, with its indictment of society and its demand for revenge ... We must present things as they are, in a hard, merciless light."

#### From Worker to Proletarian Photography

Regular exchanges took place between German and Soviet organizations and publications. Soviet photographs and articles began to appear regularly in both *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* and *AIZ* and vice versa. From 1927 on, the German group set up trips to the USSR for its members. In turn, notable names among the Soviet photographers included Semen Fridliand, Maks Al'pert, and Arkadii Shaikhet, contributors to the magazine *Ogönek* founded by Kol'tsov and promoters of the Russian Association of Proletarian Photo Reporters (ROPF), founded in 1931. Among the more prominent members of the German organization were Eugen



Heilig, who was also editor of *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, Ernst Thormann, and Erich Rinka. In the East there were active groups in Dresden, with Hans Bresler and Peter Zimmermann, and in Leipzig with Albert Hennig. Most of them were middle-class or working-class amateur photographers. Not all were active communists and various political tendencies overlapped, as in the case of Walter Reuter, an independent photographer who published various features in *AIZ*, or that of the Social Democrat Walter Ballhause.

Eugen Heilig  
*The Cinema Comes  
to the Village: Father  
and Son at the  
Cinema*, 1927  
Silver-gelatin print  
18 x 24 cm  
Sorbisches Institut  
Bautzen/Sorbisches  
Kulturarchiv; Erich  
Rinka Legacy

Tina Modotti was one of the most prominent photographers working for German magazines, but it was the arrival at *AIZ* of John Heartfield in 1930 that marked a turning point. Photomontage had previously been considered a bourgeois artistic practice that was antagonistic to the principles of social reporting but from then on it was accepted as a “weapon in the class struggle.”

September 1931 saw the publication in *AIZ* of a photographic essay on the Filippov family entitled “24 Hours in the Life of a Moscow Worker Family,” a survey that can be considered to embody the approach to photoreportage promoted among worker photographers. The feature, with images by Al'pert, Shaikhet, and Semen Tules, depicted the normal activities of the family's members during a single day. It was published in the December 1931 issue of *Proletarskoe foto* in a different format and accompanied by a debate on its reception in Germany.

The worker photographer group in Berlin produced a version of this feature entitled “The German Filippovs” that was published in *AIZ* in December 1931. It focused on the Fournes, the family of a Berlin construction worker, and copied the approach and structure of the Russian photo-essay. However, while the reportage on the Filippov family in Moscow showed the achievements of socialism in the improvement of the living conditions of the working classes and in the battle

against exploitation, the photo-essay on the Fournes revealed quite the opposite: the poverty and indignity of the workers under capitalism, particularly during the economic crisis of the Weimar period.

The worker photography movement in the USSR and Germany was a short-lived one. With the end of the Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union, the year 1932 saw the dismantling of the ROPF and the end of the period of the so-called Cultural Revolution during which a proletarian cultural structure had been established within the State. In Germany, Hitler's rise to power in January 1933 resulted in the demise of the German organization. Münzenberg moved to Paris where he re-established his publishing and organizational activities. Many of the German worker photographers were arrested and some emigrated, such as Walter Reuter who arrived in Spain in May 1933. *AIZ* moved to Prague, together with Heartfield.

### Social Photography

A nucleus of photographic activity emerged in Prague around the Film-foto skupina levé fronty [Film and Photography Section of the Left Front], with the critic Karel Teige as its principal spokesman, soon followed by Lubomír Linhart. Teige championed documentary photography over other modernist tendencies. Linhart organized two social photography exhibitions in Prague in 1933 and 1934 and published the first monographic book on the subject, *Sociální fotografie*, which was clearly inspired by Soviet and German worker photography.

By that date the offshoots of the movement had become more extensive and complex. From 1929 onwards, worker photography groups were founded in Switzerland, the United States, France, Holland, and England. Illustrated magazines inspired by *AIZ* and associated with the networks of the Communist and Socialist parties had appeared in those countries and in Austria and Czechoslovakia. In addition, various relatively organized groups of documentary filmmaking or politicized social photography were established in Budapest, Bratislava, Vienna, Prague, and Mexico City.

In Hungary, social documentation developed around three different groups: the Sarló movement in Slovakia, with which the Bratislava-based Szociofotó group (with Irena Blühová and Karol Aufricht among others) was associated; the group linked to the avant-garde publisher and writer Lajos Kassák and the magazine *Munka* in Budapest, involving Ferenc Haár, Lajos Lengyel, Tibor Bass, Sándor Fröhof, and Lajos Tabák, in addition to the critic Lajos Gró; and the group established in the city of Szeged, of which Judit Kárász was a member. In the Netherlands, one of the most prominent promoters of the Union of Worker Photographers was Joris Ivens. Famous at that date for his poetic documentaries on industrial labor, Ivens brought together names such as John Fernhout, Mark

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Kolthoff, and Hans Wolff, as well as the Hungarian émigré Eva Besnyő. Also close to Ivens were various central-European photographers who had settled in Paris such as Germaine Krull and Eli Lotar. Ivens made his film *Komsomol* [Song of the Heroes] in the Soviet Union in 1932, followed soon after by *Misère au Borinage*, made in collaboration with Henri Storck and filmed in a mining region in Belgium.

The Austrian Edith Suschitzky escaped from Vienna in 1933 and settled in England, where she became Edith Tudor-Hart. John Maltby was another leading photographer in the British Workers' Film and Photo League. The League was notably less energetic than its American counterpart of the same name, founded in 1930 and from which the Photo League broke away in 1936. Paul Strand played the role of mentor to the Photo League in New York as a member of the advisory committee and a lecturer. He was also seen as an ethical model for politicized photographers, although the exquisite, highly crafted nature of his work went against the functionalism inherent to documentary discourse. The Photo League was an educational institution of which Sid Grossman's documentary photography studio was the active core. It encouraged collective methods based on feature groups that focused on different projects. The most ambitious of these was *Harlem Document*, in which Aaron Siskind, Morris Engel, and Harold Corsini participated between 1936 and 1939.

Arkadii Shaikhet  
*A Komsomol Youth  
at the Wheel,  
Balakhna, 1931*  
Silver-gelatin print  
11,4 x 8,6 cm  
The Museum of Fine  
Arts, Houston. Manfred  
Heiting Collection

### Documentary Strategies in the Period of the Popular Front



In July 1935 the Seventh Congress of the Comintern approved a change in its political tactics. The discourse on class confrontation, adopted at the 1928 Congress, was replaced by strategies of alliance in the face of the growing rise of fascism, signaling the start of the period of the Popular Front.

The first government of the Popular Front took power in France in June 1936, following a series of strikes and protests that had started two years earlier. This period saw a notable flourishing of photojournalism in France in the form of an alliance between photographers and social movements that paralleled Soviet photography during the period of the Cultural Revolution. The Front's iconography was characteristically festive in tone and reinvented the myth of Paris as the modern capital of popular life and culture. At that point Paris became the chosen destination for photographers who had emigrated from Central Europe such as Robert



**Foto Mayo**  
*Victims of the  
Bombing, Tetuán de  
las Victorias  
(Madrid), n.d.*  
Silver-gelatin print  
29,7 x 23 cm  
Ministerio de Cultura.  
AGA, Archivo Rojo,  
photograph  
no. F-04043-53602

Capa, Kertész and Brassai from Hungary, David Seymour (Chim) from Poland, the Germans Gerda Taro and Germaine Krull, and the Romanian Eli Lotar.

Although Münzenberg was also in Paris, his role in the Comintern declined. Nonetheless, his model of public participation through the figures of prestigious intellectuals inspired the First Conference of Writers in Defense of Culture in 1935, which marked a high point in the activities of the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR) founded two years before and connected with the French Communist Party (PCF). The photographic section of the AEAR was organized by Louis Aragon and Eli Lotar. In 1935 it presented *Documents de la vie sociale*, a programmatic exhibition that included the work of photographers such as Capa, Chim, Lotar, Krull, Brassai, Kertész, Boiffard, Cartier-Bresson, Willy Ronis, and André Papillon, as well as photomontage artists César Domela and Heartfield,

and filmmakers Ivens, Storck, and Yves Allégret. The festive revolution of the French Popular Front was short-lived. July 1936 saw the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, which would be the last episode in the production of a proletarian iconography in the 1930s.

Many of the participants in the worker photography experiment in Europe were to be found in Spain during these years. Walter Reuter was active as a photographer for the Republic and worked for various Spanish and international publications; Ivens and Fernhout filmed *The Spanish Earth* in 1937; Roman Karmen (one of the signatories of the ROPF manifesto) and Boris Makasseiev filmed news reports on the Civil War between August 1936 and July 1937, accompanied by Kol'tsov who was also a war advisor to the Republic and a *Pravda* correspondent; photomontages by Heartfield on the war in Spain were regularly published in *AIZ* between 1936 and 1938, based on images circulated by photographic agencies such as Hans Namuth and Foto Mayo; Tina Modotti was in Spain throughout the conflict and participated as a representative of the Socorro Rojo [Red Aid] in the Second Conference of Anti-Fascist Writers in Valencia in 1937; Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz made *Heart of Spain* in 1938; and Capa, Taro, Chim, and Papillon photographed the front and daily life during the war for the international press. In Spain, the epic iconography of the Popular Front was transmuted into an image of the defeat and death of the revolutionary proletariat.

## ACTIVITIES

### **Jorge Ribalta.**

A Guided Visit to the Exhibition

#### **Curator's talk**

April 6, 2011. 7:00 p.m.

### **A Hard, Merciless Light.**

The Worker Photography Movement, 1926–1939

#### **Guided Tours**

Thursdays at 7:15 p.m. at the Meeting Point

Free activity, prior enrolment not required

### **The Forgotten Space.**

A Film Essay by Allan Sekula and Noel Burch

Screening and colloquium

May 4, 2011. 7:30 p.m. Sabatini Building,  
Auditorium

### **Global Work and Commodity. Talk.**

Colloquium between Allan Sekula and Noel Burch

May 5, 2011. 7:30 p.m. Sabatini Building,  
Auditorium

### **Proletarian Documentary**

#### **Film series**

May 11–19, 2011. 7:30 p.m. Sabatini Building,  
Auditorium

## **Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía**

### **Sabatini Building**

Santa Isabel, 52

### **Nouvel Building**

Ronda de Atocha

(corner plaza Emperador Carlos V)

28012 Madrid

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### **Museum hours**

Monday to Saturday

from 10.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m.

Sundays from 10.00 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Closed Tuesdays

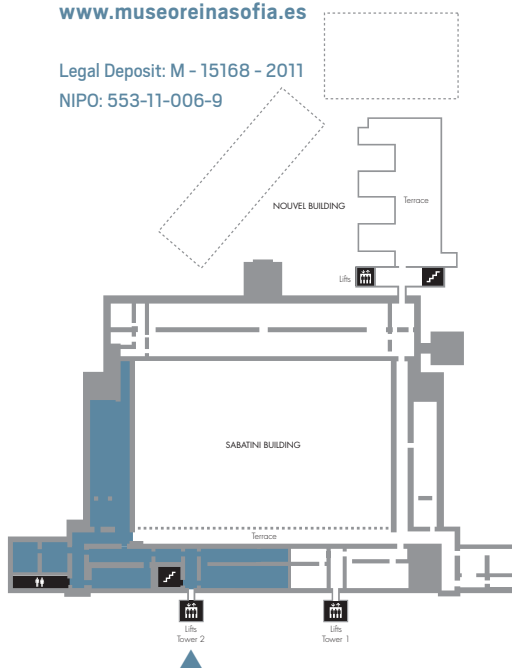
Galleries close 15 minutes

prior to Museum closing

**[www.museoreinasofia.es](http://www.museoreinasofia.es)**

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