

Donbas in Family Photo Albums: Interview with Vadim Lurie

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Vadim Lurie is a photographer and visual anthropologist from St. Petersburg, Russia. He has exhibited his photographs in Russia and Ukraine. His work has explored the visibility of protest activity in Moscow and St. Petersburg since 2012. He is also a collector of family photo archives, now working on a database consisting of nearly 50,000 pictures taken throughout the 20th century in different locations of the USSR and the post-Soviet area. The foundational collection of this database are the photo archives of residents of the Donbas region in Ukraine, where Lurie conducted three expeditions with local art activists after 2014.

VL: My trips to Donbas were a sort of continuation of the conversations I'd started with Ukrainian friends and colleagues, begun in Kyiv mostly. I found myself on the Maidan in March 2014, when the conflict in Donbas was in its early days. I started talking to internally displaced people who had left either because of the shooting and military actions, or because they feared for their own lives because they were activists. Not necessarily political activists, but, for example, art activists, who have their own position on things.

Their world had obviously just fallen apart. So, the project connected with photography grew out of my friends' efforts and my discussion with them about somehow reconstructing this world. Well, if not reconstructing it, at least showing somehow what kind of world it was.

When I talked to people in Kyiv, very often I heard the following story: I managed to leave Donetsk or Luhansk or some other place and took only a family photo album with me. Or instead—I didn't manage to take a photo album with me, I left it in my parents' apartment and was only able to take my passport and other documents. So, when Kateryna Siryk [art curator, "Plus/Minus" art residency in Sievierodonetsk] and I began to think about what specifically can be done in order to represent this region, we came up with the idea to visit people and take a look at their photo archives.

This is how the project "Donbas Family Photo Archive" was created. Its goals were to find a balance between the global and the local, the private and the public, the identification of visual subjects that are specific to Donbas; an attempt to determine what comprises the visual memory of the families living in one small region.

During the first expedition of this kind in 2018 I went to Donbas. There were altogether three expeditions. In the government-controlled Luhansk region (Sievierodonetsk, Rubizhne, Lysychansk) and a couple of small towns nearby (Zolote, Stanytsia Luhanska, and Shchastia).

There was the third person in our team—Oleksiy Khodyko, I am very grateful to him for his support. He is native to the region. He was born in a suburb of Sievierodonetsk. He knew the local reality very well, and he knew lots of people. It was mostly down to him, particularly on the first expedition, that we were able to establish this network of contacts.

Over the course of the three expeditions, 50 archives were digitized (in total, just over 14,000 files). My task as compiler was to make copies of everything, including poor quality photos. After processing and deleting some repeats, all files were entered into a specialized database in which they were tagged. I catalogued them according to subjects, stories, and content. The family archives are of different sizes: ranging from a little over two dozen to 700 pictures. Most of the photos date back to the 1960–80s—the golden age of amateur photography. However, it should be noted that the digitized archives represent the entirety of the 20th century; among them there are prerevolutionary portraits and photos taken before the mid-1990s. Family archives reflect the entire life journey of a person: birth registration; portraits of parents with their child; first haircuts; kindergarten holidays; school photos; high school graduation; student photos or (boys’) photos from the army (often formatted into demob albums, *dembelskii al'bom*); weddings; funeral photos.



Figure 1. Photo from the family archive of Olena Vynokurova from Zolote, 1950. The inscription reads “Happy New Year 1950!”

In addition to this, we copied three institutional collections: the personal archive of the professional (studio) photographer Ivan Shursha, a school archive (Rubizhne), and the archive of the Children and Youth Center of Technical Creativity (Lysychansk). The latter two archives present visual images of childhood, school, and pioneer years, official social practices from the viewpoint of these institutions themselves, so the “official” view, but from within the community itself.

Could you tell us a bit more about the regional peculiarities, the specific features of the photos you collected? How familiar were you with traditions of photographing and visualizing Donbas before the project started? As someone who grew up in the Soviet period, do you know how far official Soviet representations of the region dominated the local imaginary? How did Soviet practices influence the family archives you were working with?

VL: I don't want to go too deeply into the theory of how exactly the private interacted with official discursive practices—whether this was a relationship of exteriority [*pozitsiia vnenakhodimosti*] (to use Alexei Yurchak's term), or if it existed in parallel, independently, or vice versa—the private was completely under control of the public.

I had never been to Donbas before that. I had a very vague idea of what the place was like from Soviet discourse: the exploitation of the Donbas coal basin, some feats of labor, a general impression that people moved to this place where no one lived and there was nothing there. People performed feats of labor and in this way made some kind of life for themselves. In actual fact, the idea of Donbas as a huge construction site is already outdated. The places we were working in are cases in point.

Sievierodonetsk is a city which was in fact built from nothing in the early 1930s. Well, it was the so-called Wild Fields [*Dikoe Pole*], right, which was a border zone. There was nothing out there except for the barracks of prisoners who were building the huge Azot chemical plant, and the town attached to it. But apart from Sievierodonetsk there were also some villages nearby, and just half an hour away there's the city of Lysychansk which was founded in the late-18th century, a city with its own history and traditions, traditions that relate both to Ukraine and to the Soviet industrialization of the 1930s. This kind of synthesis of different traditions, rather than just traditions connected with industry, is also a peculiarity of the region.

One more feature, characteristic for the entire Soviet area, but especially for this region, is the close connection between industry and photography. This is something that can be remarked in the case of Ivan Ivanovych Shursha, a professional photographer from Sievierodonetsk, whose archive we also digitized. I think he is already over 98 years old now. He was active in the last year of the Great Patriotic War, he was drafted and flew on planes making aerial photography. He also took photos of the territory of Korea, before the

war in 1950–53, and he visited those places, in the Far East. And when he was discharged in the late 1940s—early 1950s and went back to Sievierodonetsk, he received a license for private business. This was something they did in the Soviet Union—a sort of a small business—photographers who were not employees of a major works received licenses and had the opportunity to work and have fairly good incomes.

And, of course, Sievierodonetsk is a city of chemists, so there were plenty of chemicals around to work with. Ivan Ivanovych had a very successful business. He was happy to tell us about his photo studio, about the “backgrounds” [*zadniki*] he constructed in his studio, and the settings that people liked so much when they were having their photos taken.

Playing on the contrast of Sievierodonetsk being an industrial, chemical city, Ivan Ivanovych constructed, you know, some birch trees, a small fence, and a small bench in his studio, and that was the setting. For children, of course, there were dolls, some toy rockets and teddy bears. And, of course, he showed us his works: photos he had taken both in the studio and for his family.



Figure 2. A girl poses in a rustic ethnic Ukrainian setting recreated in a photo studio in Sievierodonetsk. Photo from the family archive of Svitlana Rudko, late 1970s.



Figure 3. A toddler poses in an idealized natural landscape with birches in a photo studio in Sievierodonetsk. Photo from the family archive of Svitlana Rudko, late 1970s.

Another feature that is particular to the region and is represented in family archives, and also related to industry, is the experience of migration and high levels of mobility. The owners of family archives were sometimes from another part of Ukraine, or another part of the Soviet Union, they sometimes came to the region looking for work or fleeing repression in Western Ukraine and ended up staying here, where there were jobs. And people were keen to move there too. Because there's a special border culture there, where people have connections from all over. And there are no problems crossing borders, mental or otherwise. This goes for the nearby rural and urban settlements too.

The high levels of mobility and migration are connected to a specific visual genre: the souvenir photo. People would go to a photo studio and have a lot of portraits taken in order to give them away as presents. These presents were often made when someone was leaving, as a farewell gift. The important thing here is the fact that the photo is made especially for someone, but copies were also kept in the subject's own family albums. As a result, photos taken "as mementos" capture the biographical moments that hold particular importance for a person, his or her own "commemorative dates." It could be the moment of relocation to another (often remote) place, and relocation, in turn, might be connected with getting a new job. The relocation from village to city was very important, it was a practical means for a person to move from one social category to another giving them much more freedom to choose a profession. Such

events are pivotal in a person's biography and capturing them was necessary for maintaining relations with friends and relatives, and it was an essential part of creating one's own personal archive.

For example, there is a wonderful photo of a girl in miner's clothes from 1955. And on the back she writes in *surzhyk* (a Ukrainian-Russian language mixture) to her mother: "Look at the nature all around me. And I am fed up with these trousers."



Figure 4. Portrait of a girl in miner's clothes, 1955. Photo from the archive of Maria Danilkina, town of Shchastia.

The materials we collected suggest that people didn't think about the Soviet Union as something alien to them. There were some stories that stood out: for example, one old man from Western Ukraine fought against those who supported the independence of Ukraine in the late 1940s. Meanwhile another older man was being attacked, or his relatives were, right in the same place. I didn't have a direct confrontation with anyone. There was rather a kind of resignation about our shared past, what a complicated and difficult history it was: "Well, that was the way it was."

This is a very important point: where does the Soviet end and the private begin, or are they entangled with each other? As far as I could tell, nobody emphasized that these were "Soviet" photos and thus some kind of a distinct part of their lives, like, oh, here's our normal family life, while over here, well, this is rather something "Soviet." It was all one single layer. There was no contradiction, there was rather a mixture of local identities, Ukrainian and Soviet.

Take, for example, Soviet wedding photos: people are standing on a rug. Across the whole territory of the Soviet Union, a rug was always a generic symbol. But in the Ukrainian case, we see that they lay a *rushnik* [a traditional embroidered towel—eds.] in front of a couple, and they step on it. And the fact that it is laid over the rug is some kind of a combination of these cultures, where the local culture inevitably comes out on top, just because it is the most relevant.



Figure 5. Wedding, 1970s. Photo from the archive of Maksym Trunov, Lysychansk.

People would register their marriages according to the official rules. But the next day they would go to their villages where the ceremony would be performed again according to local folk customs.

But ethnographic details should not always be taken as expressions of authenticity: like, for example, when girls and boys dressed in traditional Ukrainian costume for demonstrations. In this case, it makes more sense to talk about the colonial representation of local culture, than about “authentic” identities. But this just goes to show that the material needs to be considered in context and properly analyzed.



Figure 6. Girls demonstrate the “friendship of the nations” concept through different ethnographic costumes (Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian in the foreground). Photo from the archive of the Chernov family, Sievierodonetsk, 1960s.

Who were the owners of the archives and how did your relationship with them inform the project’s results?

VL: Some generations don’t care that much about traditions, and there were some cases when, for example, a grandson or a great-grandson of the archive’s original owner said something like: “Well, I was left this by my grandmother or great-grandfather, do whatever you want with it.” But the opposite was also true. There were intelligentsia types that carefully compiled these archives and made ideal versions of history from them in album form. But as well as these idealized collections, there were also candy or shoe boxes filled with things that people didn’t want to throw away, that went far beyond standard, idealized versions of history.

And when a family’s entire photographic history falls into your hands, in its messy entirety, without any preselection, that’s a totally different story, a whole other level. Or an archive of an amateur or a professional, starting from their school experiments in photography right up until the very last images, this is the very definition of that person’s photographic life. What they understood as worthy of being photographed, where they took their camera, why they were taking pictures of this or that, and what they left outside of the frame. This process constitutes a fundamentally different approach to the public archives available today in which photos are carefully selected according to some criteria. In my experience, there were, I think, only three cases when I was not allowed to copy some particular photos from family archives—one was a photo of a relative who the owner described as not a very nice person,

another was a personal photo which the owner vetoed because they didn't think that they looked very nice, and the last was a small set of modestly erotic photos from the 1970s.

How did you manage to establish a dialogue with people during your first meetings with them?

VL: I visited people with Kateryna and Oleksiy, the locals, and did not have any difficulties. It was enough that I just showed an interest in these people, their family, and their history. Besides, before I came there for the first time, Kateryna sent me a photo which transformed my feelings about the whole situation and made this project much more personal. She sent me a photo with a signature: Lysychansk, studio of Solomon Ionovich Lurie, my namesake. As far as I know, he is not my relative. But my ancestors also lived in Kyiv, Belarus, and Kharkiv in the early 20th century. He was working in Lysychansk from around the 1910s, probably, up until the late 1920s. His photos can be found both in the Local History Museum of Lysychansk and at auctions. When I showed these photos to someone during an interview in Lysychansk, I was taken for this person's descendant, even if only metaphorically.

Did your status as a researcher or the perception of you as Russian influence your work?

VL: I must say I never encountered any difficulties because of being Russian. After all, this is a Ukrainian project. And if and when it did come up that I was from St. Petersburg, people were usually pleased or delighted. It was in 2014 on the Maidan when I realized that people react positively when you tell them where you come from. If you're here, that means you're at least interested in us and you want to understand. You have come here to see it all with your own eyes rather than watch it on the TV.

The important thing for my own understanding was visiting places occupied by terrorists and later liberated by the Ukrainian army, like the cities of Lysychansk, Rubizhne, and Sievierodonetsk. These three places were not occupied for long, around three months in all. But residents of the places nevertheless have completely different versions of what happened.

It didn't come up every time, but probably with every second family, we talked about the past few years, about the ongoing difficulties facing these places and these families. Naturally, everyone had relatives in different parts of Ukraine. And everyone had friends or some old contacts in Russia. And all of this was of course all very difficult to process. And it's really hard to get your head around all of these things and to make some kind of modern narrative out of all this history.

And right now this is still a very painful topic for the residents of these cities. Some places were occupied by pro-Russian rebels, but some people

said during the interview that they hadn't ever seen and heard anything from them: "We just carried on going to work every day. Well, yes, they changed the flags, but we did not feel any difference at all. As long as our paint and varnish production plant carried on working, everything was fine." Other people talked about instances of violence and looting by rebels. And others again about instances of violence on the part of the pro-Ukrainian forces who were the first to come to these places, before the Ukrainian regular troops even got there, they were looking for the pro-Russian rebels, their enemies. This period of political upheaval was of course very dramatic. For example, someone who fully supported the Ukrainian authorities might become a victim of violence by pro-Ukrainian forces. And someone who felt sympathy for Russia might witness displacement or violence by separatists. And again, this kind of kaleidoscope of events significantly impacted on people's personal stories.

How did the current situation affect your interpretation of the family photo archives and the ways that people represented them in interviews? How did you deal with risk of re-traumatization when speaking to people about their experiences of military activities, shooting, and the loss of close ones? Did you work at all with internally displaced persons (IDPs), and, if so, how did you discuss photos of places that are now no longer accessible to them?

VL: When we discussed current events, war, and refugees, I was as careful with my words as possible and tried to listen more than speak. The photos I was shown by internally displaced people became a kind of an additional proof of those people's right to live where and how they used to live, both the speakers themselves and their parents. When I knew that I was talking to people who had lost someone close to them, or whose relatives had gone through imprisonment and torture, of course, I did not ask them anything. But they often started talking themselves about the things they had gone through, and it seemed to me that it was important for them to narrate these experiences, not only because I was a friendly collector of old photos, but because I came from Russia and I needed to hear their accounts of events in Donbas. Old and young people had different reactions. For older people, it seemed, recent events constituted a collapse of established friendships and good-neighborly relations, and many of them broke off relationships with old friends and relatives from Russia who did not believe them but rather the official propaganda. Young people, who were more mobile, made the pragmatic choice to move away from the fighting, but still hoped to return some day. Some of the people we talked to about their archives said that they had left them "there" — at homes which they had to leave very abruptly.

To what extent did the family photo archives reflect the difficult history that residents of the region are still living through today?

VL: As a result of recent events, a new corpus of photographs of the region is emerging. Photos from the ongoing war are being collected, you can find them in public places. The Local History Museum in Lysychansk, for example, has a room dedicated to the history of 2014–15. There are a lot of artifacts there: mortar fragments, objects related both to the occupation and to the military



Figure 7. A room dedicated to the events of 2014–15 at the Local History Museum of Lysychansk. Photo by Vadim Lurie, 2018.

garrison that was stationed there, gifts from military personnel. They collect lots of different things including photos.

Among the digital photos I was shown by families of IDPs (on a computer or a phone screen, for the most part) there were photos from checkpoints, evidence of mortar attacks in the cities, portraits of acquaintances holding weapons. There were lots of pictures taken in the last days before the person's forced departure which showed confrontations with people with anti-Ukrainian sentiments, both locals and non-locals. People's stories about their last days in their hometowns are very important parts of personal and family memory for internally displaced people. Because it was often unsafe to take photographs, there are only very few images of that period and they are stored very carefully.

On 8 and 9 May 2019, I attended two Ukrainian (still official) public holidays in Sievierodonetsk: the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation and Victory Day. [At these events] photos of those who died in 2014 were displayed everywhere. So, as you can see, this recent history of war is being written into a longer history of other wars.



Figure 8. In a display at the Shchastia school museum, photos of those killed in the ongoing war in Donbas were placed next to artefacts from the Second World War and the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89). Photo by Vadim Lurie, 2018.

Soviet family photos of the 1960–80s often seem to be a reservoir of pro-Soviet nostalgia. These attitudes are perceived very negatively in the context of today’s military conflict, during which the Soviet heritage has been manipulated in many different ways. To what extent are these photos a source of Soviet nostalgia for your interlocutors?

VL: Among the 50 archives that I consulted, I encountered only one person who was nostalgic about the Soviet past. And even then, he was nostalgic in particular about his youth in the 1970s. At the same time, I did not encounter any direct rejection or condemnation of the Soviet past either. For the people we spoke to this past seemed to be an inseparable part of their personal histories, just regular, everyday life.

As one of the older women who shared with me her archive put it when showing me her photos of official Soviet demonstrations and other Soviet events: “That was what life was like back then.” These simple words seemed wise to me; she was not rejecting the past, which is of course perceived very differently now. She was accepting it and she was also admitting that outwardly people had to adapt to their circumstances, and, most likely, the abundance of photos of everyday family life proves that people remained true to themselves with all their usual worries and pleasures. This desire to protect one’s world from externally imposed ideologies—whichever direction these come from—seems to me a significant part of local identity.

There are many local history clubs and public initiatives active in the region today, a number of which are engaged in collecting and curatorial projects. How do you position the Donbas Family Photo Archive within the more general context of the work currently ongoing around Donbas history and identities? What impact do these collecting practices have on local cultural memory? And how accessible are the outcomes of these projects to local audiences?

VL: Today, an important role is being played in the region's transformation by those people who were forced to leave their homes and who have become instigators of cultural change: super activists. It's true that local history experts have been collecting materials for decades, but now some activists have joined in and this activity has acquired a new impetus.

Our project emerged in response to the question: "What exactly is Donbas?" When the war started, the press was full of different opinions on the matter which were used both to justify Donbas's separation from Ukraine and the military activities themselves. These discussions resulted in the complex identity of local residents (and whose identity isn't complex?) being reduced to primitive simplifications: "they're all Russians over there," "they're all Russian-speaking," "everyone went there to work, there are no locals there"; there's no point in reiterating all of these, often offensive, stereotypes that evolved over the years. And these stereotypes are widespread not only to the east of Ukraine; there are also people in Ukraine itself who think the same way. As for me, I came to the Luhansk region knowing little about Donbas, hoping to understand the way people lived here, their history, what is particular about them.

The conclusion of this project is very simple: it is the same history that unites us all. It unites people from both the government-controlled and non-government-controlled sides of Donbas. It unites people from Donbas and Ukraine in general, as well as the post-Soviet space. And, even more broadly, it unites people through the common format of the family archive. When people ask me what the difference is between a photo archive of someone from Donbas and an archive of someone from Moscow, my answer is "not much." But if you gather the most distinctive photos together, you notice straight away visual differences in everyday life, certain important themes and traditions. And, for me, this is the most important thing about studying any culture: to find the similarities with what we already know, and to identify the differences that make it unique. And it is just as important to understand this within and outside of Donbas. I hope that our project will be able to contribute to this process.

Interview conducted by Victoria Donovan and Iryna Sklokina on Zoom on 2 March 2021. Translated from Russian by Paolo Hrytsak.