

Research Notes

Cursed Days: The Getty Collection of Soviet Photographs from 1918

By Marina Khrustaleva

The Getty Research Institute's archive holds four thick folders titled "Soviet photos 1918." This vast collection contains 595 black and white photographs. The Getty acquired them in 1997. With translations and assistance from Katya Yudina and David Woodruff, Annette Leddy processed them in 1998. Russian-language photo captions written on the back of each photo in pencil were translated into English. Brief biographies of the main people shown in the photos were composed. The photographer remains unknown, but it has been established that the Photography and Film Committee of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) commissioned the photographs. Getty archivists suggested that some of these images might be stills from the Russian weekly newsreel *Kinonedelia* (*Film Week*), which famous documentary director Dziga Vertov edited. *Kinonedelia* was his first job in cinema.



Moscow, November 7, 1918. The first anniversary of the Communist revolution. Circus performers on the Red Square. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (97.R.36)

The collection is an invaluable historical source. The unknown photographer captured all the major events of 1918, the first year after the Bolshevik revolution. People on the streets still wear “bourgeois” coats and hats. Shop signs and slogans still have pre-revolutionary spelling. (The decree introducing a new spelling was published in October 1918, but the actual transition to the new simplified alphabet took longer.)

But life itself had changed noticeably. Many churches and monasteries in Moscow, Kiev, Yaroslavl, Kazan, and other places were damaged by artillery shells. Monuments to tsars and governors were taken down while huge crowds watched. Later, new ones were erected in their place.

The photographer carefully documented all signs of new life: rallies and demonstrations parodying religious processions, delegates to a socialist congress, trials of “people’s enemies”, solemn funerals, propaganda trains, and troop movements. The photos show the life of Moscow, which just recently had become the capital again, in great upheaval: fires, lines for overcrowded trams and for milk, meals being distributed to the homeless, and recruitment of soldiers. These pictures provoke feelings of helplessness and anxiety. You may clearly see how everything that was considered reliable, familiar, and correct before 1917 had to be demolished, redesigned, rethought, and as different from the old as possible. The whole political system was dismantled, social classes abolished, Orthodox churches destroyed, monuments demolished, and people’s lives shattered.



Moscow, May 1, 1918. Labor Day street rally. The posters say, “Let our future be bright and clear as a spring day,” and “Give way to children. We will build our own new world.” Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (97.R.36)

Attribution of these pictures raises many questions. They are indeed linked to *Kinonedelia*, but not all stories included there are present in the photos. The photographer might have accompanied one of the *Kinonedelia* crews (many of them could have worked simultaneously in different parts of Moscow or even in different cities). The chronology of *Kinonedelia*, typed by Dziga Vertov and available at the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI) in Moscow, allows very precise dating of these photographs and helps to clarify what is depicted in them.

The archivist's earlier assumption that some of these images are stills from *Kinonedelia* is not convincing. A comparison of the photographs and the newsreels reveals that they are shot from different angles. Many people in *Kinonedelia* are in motion, but in the photographs the same people are obviously posing. Furthermore, the photos were taken by a professional photographer with a good sense of composition, with an ability to create psychological portraits, and with a sharp critical eye. In *Kinonedelia*, events of 1918 appear cheerful and businesslike, while the Getty photos convey the collapse of a familiar world and the unsettling arrival of a strange, new life.

I found similar prints from the same negatives of some of the images in various Russian archives: the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow, the Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive in Krasnogorsk, archives of the Russian Informational Agency (RIA/Russia Today) and TASS News Agency. It is not clear if the largest of these collections, the one in Krasnogorsk, entirely duplicates the Getty's collection of 1918 Soviet photographs or only partially overlaps with it. However, in all collections, matching photographs dated 1918 are attributed as "unknown author." Further research could reveal this mystery and identify the photographer. This amazing collection, without doubt, has all the elements to become a richly illustrated book or an exhibition of one of the most dramatic years in Russian history.