

The Sovfoto/Eastfoto Archive Description

By the end of the 1920s, photographs had not only supplanted illustrations in most print media, but had become the primary means by which a story was told. This new type of photojournalism took the form of photographic essays in which series of images were used to engage a public eager for news. Faster cameras and films enabled photographers to respond to newsworthy events more quickly, to capture action sequences and photograph in situations such as war that brought a sense of immediacy and reality to the situation as never before experienced. Magazines such as *Illustrierte Beobachter* and *Aiz (Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* [Workers' Illustrated]), both associated with political parties, promoted a style of picture-making that set precedent and quickly spread throughout Europe and Russia. Wire services enabled the rapid dissemination of photographs, which fed a growing number of picture magazines and newspapers, which led to a proliferation of press and stock agencies to satisfy the demand for photographs.

Beginning in the late 1920s, leading up to and during World War II, and especially in the years that followed as the Soviet Union and the United States vied for dominance during the Cold War, the USSR sought to maintain its progressive image abroad. Through agencies such as the Soviet Information Bureau, one of the first Russian agencies responsible for worldwide distribution of propaganda, the Soviet Union was able to reach audiences in a variety of ways, one of the most effective being articles in international newspapers. In the U.S., the Sovfoto agency, established in 1932 in New York by the Soviet government to distribute Soviet photographs to the American press, was not only set to distribute Soviet photographs to newspapers, magazines, and various other publications, but it had also already established a reputation for the quality of the photojournalism it carried. Working directly with Soviet news agencies, such as TASS and the Novosti Press Agency, Sovfoto disseminated photographs from leading Soviet photojournalists and was soon recognized as the preeminent source of photojournalism from Russia. In subsequent years, Sovfoto became the exclusive source of photojournalism from China and the Eastern European nations, resulting in the agency's name change to Sovfoto/Eastfoto.

In a singular position to provide images of daily life and current events within the Communist Bloc, the Sovfoto/Eastfoto agency has long been a valuable resource for a variety of publications as well as U.S. government agencies, including the CIA and the U.S. Department of State. During the latter half of the 20th century, the U.S. government routinely reviewed the material being sent via mail to the Sovfoto agency, deemed an Agent of Foreign Powers, to scan for information that might be useful in tracking the Soviet Union, particularly the nation's scientific advancements, such as the pioneering of space exploration. In addition, the Sovfoto/Eastfoto Archive has been combed by various branches of the U.S. military, not only to research military encounters, but to identify personnel taken prisoner during World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam, and those still regarded as missing in action.

Unlike Soviet agencies, which had little need or regard for preserving original photographic prints, Sovfoto/Eastfoto implemented a system whereby the photographs it received were retained for posterity. Indeed, the agency was diligent about recovering photographs that were distributed to publications. Throughout its 78-year history, the Sovfoto/Eastfoto Archive underwent minimal culling and, as a result, remains surprisingly intact today.

Given the breadth and depth of the Archive, it exists as a valuable source of historical, political, social, and cultural information, significantly enhanced by the captions that accompany most of the prints.