

# Life before Photoshop: Erased from the Past

Łukasz Migniewicz

## Keywords

photograph manipulation, history manipulation, history falsification, propaganda, Great Purge (Great Terror), NKV, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Iron Curtain, Photoshop, George Orwell

## Introduction for the teacher

This lesson script is intended for students aged 14 years old and above. The subject matter discussed allows for its use in interdisciplinary classes in such subjects as history, culture, native language, media education as well as social sciences.

The material has been divided into three parts: the lesson scenario, a set of source materials and a worksheet with exercises to be done during the class, in a group or individually. Particular elements of the script can be modified to adjust them to the target audience.

## Instructions

The script contains seven pieces of source material and a worksheet with exercises. The suggested lesson structure can be modified, along with the sources and exercises. Internet access would be useful during the lessons as well as allowing the students to use telecommunication devices with internet access (smartphones, tablets, etc.).

## Operational goals

The student is able to:

- explain the meaning of the terms Great Terror (Great Purge), October Revolution, NKVD,
- define the usefulness of various sources (academic essays, press articles and photographs) for analysing the theme of history falsification, particularly in the context of new methods of manipulation – photograph alteration,
- analyse source texts and photographs, indicating the cause-and-effect links between them and historical events,

- analyse source texts and pictures, indicating links between them and particular historical events,
- characterize propaganda activities in the USSR related to photograph retouching and rewriting history,
- develop an independent argument and contribute to debate.

### **Teaching methods**

- teaching discussion,
- group work,
- brainstorm,
- analysis of source material, texts and illustrations,
- Phillips 66 method,<sup>1</sup>
- metaplan,<sup>2</sup>
- independent work with a set of exercises.

### **Teaching aids**

- board/flipcharts, felt pen/chalk,
- large paper sheets/Bristol board sheets,
- a computer with internet access and a projector/multimedia board.

### **Before the lesson**

Ask the students to read the essay titled '[Historical Fallacies in Communist Propaganda](#)'.

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<sup>1</sup> You can learn more about this method here: <https://www.theedadvocate.org/edupedia/content/what-is-phillips-66-brainstorming/> or here <https://studylib.net/doc/5848394/phillips-66> [accessed 27 April 2021].

<sup>2</sup> One of the activation method used during classes; it involves poster making by the discussion/debate participants. The poster represents a graphic summary of the debate (based on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaplan> [accessed 14 December 2020]).

## Lesson Scenario

### Introduction

1. Begin by asking the students whether they know what Photoshop is and whether they have come across the verb 'to photoshop'. You can most likely assume that nearly all of them will know what Photoshop is about. Ask them to provide examples they know and ask whether altering a photograph is easy to do now and why it is done. As most of the answers will be positive, write down together all the information giving the reasons for photograph manipulation and its goals. Through brainstorming, your list can be quite long after a few minutes, particularly with points relating to image enhancement, rejuvenation or aging, smoothing out facial imperfections, etc. During the brainstorming session, it is worth focusing on identifying areas where photograph manipulation is often used (modelling, advertising, conspiracy theories, etc.). Reflect together on the pros (benefitting whom?) and cons that photograph retouching brings.
2. During the exchange of ideas and thoughts, direct the discussion towards how an altered image has been used to create a new narrative relating to a particular event or person. Reflect on whether in the age of analogue photography, it was possible to alter photos and manipulate them freely.
3. Distribute the worksheets and sets of source material among the students. The script includes a single suggestion for using them, yet that can be adapted.
4. Inform the students that during the lesson they are going to work both individually and in groups, on the basis that their reflections will lead to a joint debate on the problems posed. What matters is freedom of expression as well as the ability to formulate arguments and counterarguments.

### Development

1. Falsifying photographs dates back to the mid-1900s. Ask the students to familiarize themselves with Sources A and B. Draw their attention to the differences between digital and analogue photography as well as the time needed to retouch or manipulate a print. While getting familiar with Source A, the students should do Exercise 1 in the worksheet. Once that is done, a volunteer will read the answers and the others will correct/approve them.

2. Divide the students into groups of four to six people and ask them to write on post-it notes<sup>1</sup>, their observations concerning the use of photograph retouching in pursuing expedient political goals or manipulating facts. To make it easier, write the following question on the board/flipchart: How is photograph retouching used for obtaining expedient political goals? Once the work is done, a member of each group will attach the comments they have developed onto the board. Successive groups will add their post-it notes. Should their comments/ideas be similar, group them together; if not, create a separate collection of ideas. Then together with the students formulate a definition of historical manipulation based on photographs. Write that definition down on the board or flipchart so that is visible (and can be used) until the end of the lesson.
3. In order to understand the notion of manipulation using photography, analyse with your students a fragment of the ever-relevant literary work by George Orwell *1984* – Source G. It is a splendid literary description of how history is falsified by totalitarian regimes. It is worth you working together to highlight all the features of history falsification, particularly photographs (Exercise 6). The students create a metaplan (working in the groups established at the start of the class). Explain what the method is about. A master metaplan can be found on the worksheet.
4. In the Soviet Union, manipulating history by regime-faithful propaganda was advanced and commonly applied. It reached its peak during the rule of Joseph Stalin. Not happy with just removing his political opponents (e.g. Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev and Nikolay Jezhov), who were often accomplices to the mass crimes committed within their own nation and neighbouring populations, he also resorted to propaganda, the aim of which was to denigrate all (often imaginary) enemies of the system. In the 1930s, however, methods of manipulating facts and history similar to those shown in Source H or similar were more frequently used. Joseph Stalin ordered the eradication of the memory of each person who according to him posed a threat to his dictatorial power and the totalitarian foundations of the Soviet state.

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<sup>1</sup> When working online, students can be split into groups/rooms (depending on the platform used). Instead of post-it notes, they use a teacher-enabled online board for their own comments.

5. During a brief teacher's talk or minilecture, explain to the students what the Great Purge in the USSR was about, and make them familiar with the number of victims and the names of the executioners. Draw their attention to the role of the state security service (NKVD) and commonly applied torture (adapt this aspect according to the students' age). Then, go on to discuss Sources C, D and E.
6. Split your students into groups again and tell them that the teams will work using the Phillips 66 technique, that is fast and intensive work on a given theme. At the first stage of the exercise, the task of the groups is to work for ten or so minutes with the source material (C, D and E) and the information found online. At the second stage, the groups meet up in order to debate the results of their discussions and exchange their ideas and note them down on the board/flipchart. In that way, the group members learn about their respective positions. At the third stage, each team works independently again, verifying its own ideas and consolidating them. There can be as many stages as you wish, but my suggestion is at least three. After the final one, the students take part in a discussion based on the principles of democracy and together attach two ideas per question – ones that in their opinion best illustrate the instruction. Having familiarized the students with the rules, ask them to have a look at Exercises 3, 4 and 5.
7. Once the work has been done, the students present the results in the form of a mindmap<sup>2</sup>, the main theme of which is 'erasures from the past'. When concluding, you can refer to the example of Nikolay Jezhov, head of the NKVD responsible for crimes and for murdering tens of thousands of Soviet citizens. It is also worth giving some other examples of erasures from history by communist propaganda, in particular of records relating to various crimes and nation resettlements.

Encourage your students to make their own searches, reminding them that in the countries behind the Iron Curtain similar methods were used to those practised in the USSR: doomed soldiers; the displacement of the Crimean Tatars; 1956 Budapest events (see the spot about [Péter Mansfeld](#), the youngest victim of the

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<sup>2</sup> For online classes, applications and dedicated websites for mindmap creation like Blumind and FreeMind can be successfully used.

Hungarian revolution on 1956) and the operations of the Államvédelmi Hatóság (Hungarian secret police); the infamous Sighet Prison in Romania; the examples of the arrest and execution of General Heliodor Píka and [Milada Horáková](#).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, present the case of the North-Korean Marshal Ri Yong-ho (Source F) to your students. Reflect together whether communist history manipulation by means of erasing people found inconvenient by the regime ended with the collapse of the USSR. Encourage your students to independently find examples of similar falsifications in the 21st century.

## **Homework**

Prominent members of the communist regime can never feel safe in the presence of tyrants. Discuss the matter (in the form of a brief written piece/essay), quoting examples from the 21st century.

## Answers

### Exercise 1

<b>Modern photo-editing software first appeared in the late 19th century.</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>In the 19th century, photo retouching was mainly the domain of artists, who were often photographers.</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>Initially, only members of the highest social strata could afford to improve their photographs.</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>Photography became mass entertainment available to almost all in the first half of the 20th century.</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>Rulers have never retouched their images.</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>Textbooks for retouchers came with contemporary digital photography.</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>Photographs were already manipulated in the 19th century, both in order to beautify the persons presented and for expedient political reasons.</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>Modern photo-editing software first appeared in the late 19th century.</b>	<b>F</b>

### Exercise 2

Possible answer:

Abraham Lincoln was one of the co-authors of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution abolishing slavery. Juxtaposing him with the senator, the main supporter of slavery, manipulated facts and could lead to falsifying the president's reputation. In turn, juxtaposing both figures and a clever photomontage could ridicule the ideas championed by John C. Calhoun.

### Exercise 3

Possible answers:

- they were collaborators of Vladimir Lenin,
- they held top state posts,

- they became political opponents of Joseph Stalin (for different reasons and in different circumstances),
- they died as ordered by Joseph Stalin.

#### **Exercise 4**

Answer: YES. Possible substantiation:

Trotsky and Kamenev were murdered on Stalin's orders and condemned to being erased from history, which is why they were removed from photographs representing the early stages of Bolshevik rule. Showing them together with Lenin, whom Stalin sought to present as his predecessor claiming that Lenin had anointed him as his successor, could have contradicted the legitimacy of the dictator's rule.

#### **Exercise 5**

Possible substantiation:

In the course of their careers, Kamenev and Trotsky clashed with Joseph Stalin. On his orders, they were sentenced to death (by a court ruling or as a political assassination). Erasing them from history was a necessity for Stalin since photographs and documents pointed out to their 'primacy' in the line of power (before Stalin) after Lenin's death. Before Trotsky and Kamenev fell from grace, Soviet propaganda had presented them together with Stalin as close collaborators, which did not fit in with the later narrative in which they were cast as traitors. The retouching served to strengthen the legitimacy of Stalin's rule.

#### **Exercise 6**

Possible answer:

What is the situation? – Falsification of all documents/censorship.

How should it be? – No censorship. Why is it not as it should be? – A totalitarian system; state control over each aspect of life; falsification aimed at retaining the party's/an individual's grip on power, etc.

What should you do? – Find non-manipulated material; seek the truth.