

# Imperial Mindset:

Russia in Ukraine, in the footsteps of Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky  
*A Subversion of the Russian Lens on Empire*



ферма Басета недалеко от коуден // La ferme du Basset, sous le gel, près de Cowden.

*A test shot using Prokudin-Gorsky's process for colour photography.*

# Imperial Mindset

## Modern-day imperialism in Ukraine, through the lens of pre-revolution photography

Emulating the distinctive early colour process of an Imperial Russian photographer, I intend to visually link the modern-day Imperialist attempted expansion of Russia into Ukraine to the long history of Imperial occupation, cooperation and domination of the region.

A friend and I were talking recently about the Ukrainian war. He had started to question the truth and extent of propaganda in Western reporting about the war. A dog-walker recently expressed the same, but stronger views. The Kremlin's false narratives are starting to creep into our consciences and the lack of explanation of the Russian perspective makes people question the validity of the mainstream Western view.

I propose to draw a long view of Russian ambitions in Ukraine and its former Empire by emulating the style and colour process of a photographer who worked in Ukraine in 1904-5 and was later funded by the Tsar to record life and new Empire-building projects across the Empire in colour.

The process leaves distinctive visual artefacts in the final image, bringing those times closer and drawing relevance to the modern day.

I intend to revisit the region where Prokudin-Gorsky photographed in 1905, but also cover subjects which are in the vein of his Imperial interests., including the war memorials which have served as propaganda tools since the Patriotic war.

My style will slightly diverge from Prokudin-Gorsky's. I will modernise the gaze to include more humanity: P-G travelled as an ethnographer and subjects are often sterile and almost dehumanised, specimens to be studied back in Moscow or St. Petersburg institutions.



# Imperial Mindset

Prokudin-Gorsky—the Tsar’s colour photographer; work in Ukraine (Malorossia)



Who?

Prokudin-Gorsky developed an early colour photography process. He started on a project to document the constituent nations of the Russian Empire, a project later backed personally by the enthusiastic Tsar until 1915.

His subjects can be seen as Imperialistic in nature, focussing on:

- Infrastructure: the Russian Empire was fast developing from a backwards rural economy, building railways and electrical systems (partly in reaction to the defeat in the Crimean War) and industrialising fast,
- Architecture: often Russian churches,
- Ethnographic and rural subjects: especially farms and peasants
- A long series on sites of the ‘Patriotic War’ of 1812: Napoleon’s invasion of Russia—a classic example of Russia’s continuous ‘cult of war’ [<link at 6:35>](#). (Photographs shot in 1912, on the centenary of the war).

These subjects are highly relevant to the modern-day conflict in Ukraine. P-G visited Ukraine in 1905.



Photographs from 1905 in ‘Malorossia’ - modern-day northern Ukraine. Notice the region’s contemporary name translates as ‘Little Russia’.

View of Putivl and the Sejm River.

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Prokudin-Gorsky— selected work from elsewhere

“Dagestani Types”

Typical example of formal portraiture and sterile, ethnographical caption.



Barracks for Prisoners of War along the Murmansk Railway, 1915  
These prisoners were Austro-Hungarians from the front in modern-day Ukraine. [US Librarty of Congress caption](#) mentions that his more politically sensitive negatives were confiscated.



Trinity Cathedral and the electric station. A side view.  
[Solovetskii Monastery, Solovetski Islands] The old and new religions – two stamps of Russia on its subjects, and a move from divine protection to military logistical protection.



Smolensk. Monument to 1812 and Vessels and vozdukhi [sacramental cloth cover] from 1793. During the war they were buried in a grave, Borodino.  
In effect, holy relics of a re-birth of the Russian Empire as a European Great Power



# Imperial Mindset

## Test photography and the process – tests from the UK

The process: three-colour separation, black and white images

Prokudin-Gorsky was originally a chemist. He travelled to Germany to learn this colour process from Adolf Miethe, inventor of the process and of red-sensitive, panchromatic photographic emulsion.

P-G used a special camera which took a tall glass plate. It would be raised up in the holder and drop down between three exposures, each with a coloured filter.

These black and white photographs could then be projected or printed using similar colour filters\*. Since there is a time delay between each exposure, moving objects show bright colour fringes and water or clouds can produce unusual results. This is also the effect seen in the misaligned frame borders.

Panchromatic glass plates are no longer available. While P-G made his own, I am using sheet film to the same effect.

This allows me to use a view camera similar to P-G's—the interaction with subjects is quite a different experience compared to a handheld or even a medium format camera and leads to a different approach to the photograph. I am combining in Photoshop for a digital result (as the P-G originals shown here have been by the Library of Congress).

In the future they could be printed with carbonyl printing, as P-G himself did for selected images, however this is a very difficult technical process.\*\*



\* For projection, a positive would have been made and projected with RGB filters. For printing, complimentary coloured gelatine layers are used in a carbon or carbonyl print.

\*\* But seen in the current [Yevonde exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery](#).

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Test photography and the process – tests from the UK & Georgia



# Imperial Mindset

Example of presentation of images together\*



რუსილი ტიპები // Russian Types

*Russian exiles/expats evading war in Tbilisi, a former Imperial possession.*



Типи Дагестана // Dagestani Types

*Dagestan was annexed to Russia in the 19th Century and was ravaged by war against its unwelcome imperial conquerors throughout the century, as recently to P-G as the 1870s; in modern times in 1999.*

\* Commercial reproduction of these images is permitted. [Contact details are available](#) as a courtesy to the photographer's descendents.