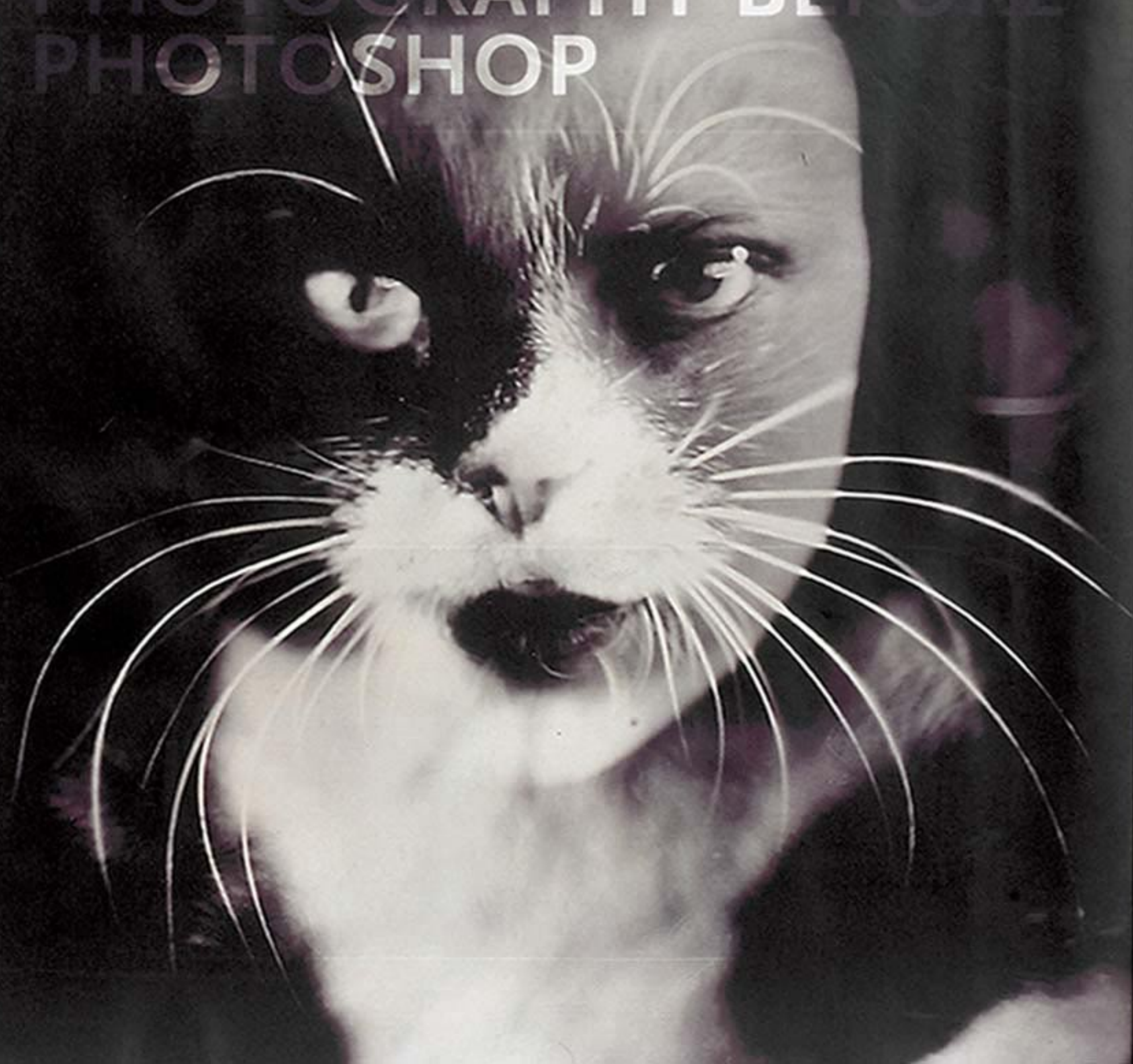# FAKING IT MANIPULATED PHOTOGRAPHY BEFORE PHOTOSHOP

by the secret police or dispatched to Gulag labor camps, where they slowly perished. Year by year, decade by decade—Stalin remained in power until his death in 1953—picture editors at newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses used scissors, ink, and airbrushes to excise purged party officials from photographs in a compulsory process of forgetting that recalls the ancient Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae*—the destruction of images by government decree.[2] As David King notes in his book *The Commissar Vanishes*, photographic manipulation in Soviet Russia was not centralized in "some glowering Ministry of Falsification"; rather, it was happening everywhere, all the time. King writes, "Orders were followed, quietly. A word in an editor's ear or a discreet telephone conversation from a 'higher authority' was sufficient to eliminate all further reference—visual or literal—to a victim, no matter how famous she or he had been."[3] In a photograph taken in 1926 (CAT 61), Stalin poses at a worktable with four party functionaries, one of whom has just been appointed to a government post in Leningrad. When the picture was published in 1936, the comrade at the far right was cropped out; when it was published again, in 1948, the comrade at the far left had been excised from it; and by 1949 yet another official had vanished (SEE CATS 62–64). Even Stalin's top henchman, Nikolay Yezhov, who oversaw the arrest, imprisonment, and murder of

millions of citizens as head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD)—the state's secret police force—ultimately suffered the same fate as his victims. Stalin, threatened by the growing power of this man who knew too much, ordered Yezhov's execution in 1940, and the security chief's image was summarily erased from the public record (SEE CATS 65, 66).
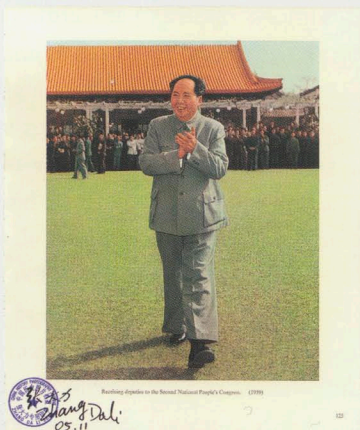
The falsification of photographs was notoriously widespread in the Soviet Union, but it was hardly unique to that country or that political system. The temptation to "rectify" photographic documents has proved irresistible to modern demagogues of all stripes, from Adolf Hitler to Mao Zedong to Joseph McCarthy. In a relatively benign example discovered in the files of Hitler's official photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels was excised from a publicity photograph taken at the Berlin home of the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl in 1937, possibly to combat rumors that Goebbels and Riefenstahl were having an affair (SEE CATS 67, 68). In Maoist China, the alteration of photographs by the state-controlled media was rampant, as the artist Zhang Dali has demonstrated in his ongoing project *A Second History*. In 2003 Zhang began culling manipulated photographs from news archives and publishing houses throughout China and juxtaposing multiple iterations of the same images to reveal countless cosmetic and
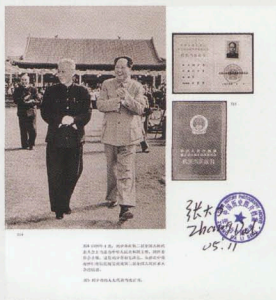
CAT 65
Unidentified Russian artist. [Kliment Voroshilov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Joseph Stalin, and Nikolay Yezhov on the Moscow-Volga Canal, Moscow], 1937; printed later. Gelatin silver print

CAT 66
Unidentified Russian artist. [Kliment Voroshilov, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Joseph Stalin on the Moscow-Volga Canal, Moscow], 1937; published in *Stalin* (Moscow, 1940). Photogravure

FIG 27

Faked photograph of Earl Browder
with Senator Millard Tydings, 1950
(top), and the two photographs from
which it was composed: a 1938 shot
of Tydings listening to the radio and
a 1940 shot of Browder delivering
a speech

FIG 26

Zhang Dali (Chinese, born 1963).
*Mao at the Second Meeting of
the People's Assembly, April 1959,*
from *A Second History,* 2005.
Photomechanical reproductions

substantive "improvements," including excised figures, altered
backgrounds, and enhanced colors (SEE FIG 26). During his
thirty-three-year reign, Mao's personality cult was also forti-
fied by a series of omnipresent official portraits, in which the
aging visage of the Great Leader was painstakingly retouched
to project an image of flawless benevolence (SEE CAT 69).[4] In
the United States, the rabidly anti-Communist Wisconsin sena-
tor Joseph McCarthy borrowed a page from his enemies' play-
book in 1950, when he distributed a doctored photograph of his
political nemesis, Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland, appar-
ently chatting companionably with Earl Browder, the head of
the U.S. Communist Party (SEE FIG 27).

As familiar or unsurprising as these examples may be, the
manipulation of photographs for political and ideological
ends did not, in fact, begin with the rise of totalitarianism in
the twentieth century. The earliest significant use of doctored
photographs to convey a politically tendentious version of
recent events was carried out by the successful French portrait
photographer Ernest Eugène Appert in 1871. Following the
country's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of
Napoleon III, more than two hundred thousand Parisians
revolted against the new royalist-leaning government, based in