

# How to Look Natural in Photos: An interview with Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica

an interview by David Crowley

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## ABSTRACT

In this interview with the authors of *How to Look Natural In Photos*, a 2021 photobook featuring images from archives containing secret police records from Poland before 1989, Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica outline their approach to the republication of this material. They reflect on the nature of images which represent violence or trauma alongside the seemingly banal photographs of mundane scenes and objects recorded by the security forces, as well as the ethics of reproducing portraits of secret police officers. The material on which the book is based is in the possession of *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* (The Institute of National Remembrance), an organization created in 1998 by act of the Polish parliament that has been subject of heated debate in the country. Critics have accused it of producing an overly simple view of modern Polish history, one populated by heroes, victims and villains. Bartecka and Rusznica reflect on their relations with this institution and the potential for open interpretations of such material.

## KEYWORDS

Photography; Archives; Secret Police; Trauma; Memory; Photobook.



In winter 2021 Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica published a book called *How to Look Natural in Photos*.<sup>1</sup> The handsome volume features many dozens of photographs selected from the archives of the Polish Secret Police now in the possession of *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* (IPN / The Institute of National Remembrance), an organization that was created in 1998 by act of the Polish parliament to function as *Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu* (a "Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation"). The archives of the security apparatus which operated in Poland from 1944 to 1989, first as *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* (Department of Security), and then from 1956 as *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*

(Security Service), have been collected by the Institute as part of its remit to both promote public understanding of the effects of communist rule on Polish society as well as to investigate crimes conducted by the authorities against the people during the forty years of communist rule. Its activities have been controversial, with liberal voices in Poland viewing it as an ally of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS / Law and Justice), the national-conservative political party which led a coalition government in Poland between 2005 and 2007 and, in 2015, took full power. Over these years, PiS has mounted a ruthless campaign to consolidate its hold on the country and marginalise those who don't fit into its conservative, Christian and

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family-orientated view of the nation. At the same time, history, and in particular the dark events of the Second World War and four decades of communist rule have become highly politicised fields in Poland with PiS and its allies emphasising the victimhood of the nation as well as deep pride in Poland's "national" traditions of resistance. In this Manichean worldview, modern history is populated by victims and villains.

Bartecka and Rusznica are not employees of the Institute, nor indeed professional historians. Bartecka is curator, critic and script writer; and Rusznica is an artist and curator, whose photographic practice has explored the sensual and ineffable. [One project—a 2018 photobook called *Subterranean River* (Rusznica 2018)—explores the world of supernatural beings at the fringes of the human realm]. Bartecka and Rusznica's book—produced after reviewing many thousands of photographs in the archives of the IPN, including Polish Secret Police—is unlike any volume which has been produced in recent years. Studies like *Praha Objektivem Tajné Policie* [Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police] set out to pin down the *modus operandi* of the Czechoslovak security forces in their attempts to surveil what it regarded as potential enemies (Vitvar et al. 2008). Detailed descriptions of hidden camera techniques, surveillance plans and maps as well as report from agents are accompanied by clumsily composed photographs taken during operations against "suspicious" characters, many of whom were Charter 77 signatories. Other projects like Simon Menner's 2013 book *Top Secret: Images from the Stasi Archives* seem infected with kitsch, finding amusement in the ill-fitting disguises and unsophisticated surveillance techniques in the manuals of the East German state security apparatus (Menner 2013).

By contrast, *How to Look Natural in Photos* defies easy comprehension: the images selected often seem enigmatic or mysterious, particularly in the order by

which they unfold. The book opens with an image of a man midway through dressing in a chaotic and shabby interior (Figure 1). Two or maybe three prone figures seem to lie on a make-shift bed nearby: are they dead or perhaps just sleeping? The image itself seems to be on the edge of disappearance, with white clouds of billowing decay breaking the surface of the print and obscuring the scene. Turn the page, and the next image is of a bouquet of flowers (Figure 2), and then the next is of a boy framed by Coca-Cola crates. Elsewhere, different images of the same event – a parade of officers lining up like a Busby Berkeley dance line or the arrival of a group of men at Katowice station – are reproduced but not in sequence. None of these images or, in fact, any of the photographs crisply reproduced on high-quality paper are captioned on the pages on which they appear. In fact, the captions make a delayed appearance as an "Index" much later in the book and only then in the form of the laconic information which appears in the IPN files accompanying these images. The boy with the Coke crates is "guarding" them at an event marking the death of Cardinal Wyszyński in 1981; the flowers are "Freesias"; and the man dressing is a soldier in a village hut in 1942.

In its unsettling and discontinuous sequences ordered by what might be called "aesthetic" judgments, and in its refusal to adopt devices which allow for easy understanding (like captions or chronology), Bartecka and Rusznica's book looks much more like the kind of lyrical photobook created by the artist than the precise dissections of events and actions favoured by historians of "totalitarianism." With unexplained and yet close proximity of unlike and disconnected scenes, the mood of the book is much closer to surrealism than forensic science. Bartecka and Rusznica seem to be interested in the "optical unconscious" of state surveillance finding an order of beauty in its photographic records that the poet André Breton called "convulsive"





Figure 1. "A room in a village hut", an image taken between 1939 and 1941 in the archives of IPN and reproduced in Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.



Figure 2. "Freesias", an undated image in the archives of IPN and reproduced in Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.

because, like a spasm, it is violent or uncontrollable. Even those images which look like "evidence"—photographs of wounds, mugshots, and, in one section, hundreds of shots of people coming and going through the same entrance (of the American embassy in Warsaw) and crime scenes—seem to eschew their documentary function as visual "facts." And for the reader of *How to Look Natural in Photos*, the experience is unsettling, because many of these photographs seem to point to trauma (whether in the events

leading up to their making or in their uses by the security forces in their attempts to coerce the citizens of the People's Republic). Yet, they are not "resolved" by narrative or explicit interpretation. Bartecka and Rusznica pull back from explanation, relying on the laconic catalogue descriptions of the IPN archivist and in the final pages of the book a short matter-of-fact essay by historian, Tomasz Stempowski, cataloguing the techniques of Security Service in Poland before 1989.



**David Crowley:** *What were the origins of the project?*

**Łukasz Rusznica:** One of the starting points of the book is an exhibition I made in 2014—*How to Photograph*<sup>2</sup>—using the same archive of photographs, and with a similar concept. But the exhibition was much more theatrical than the book. Viewers looked at a wall of many photos and then were led into a room containing a single photograph. This second room was rather dramatic, with red light and an old fancy frame. After that they were given the full information about the photograph that they had just seen. They had no choice about how to view the images. And this choice is the difference between the exhibition and the book.

After the show, I had a very strong sense of what the book should be like, even down to the design of the cover. But then I made a huge mistake by inviting Beata to work with me on it (laughing). Working together, I realized that I had to kill my fantasy of the book. This is really where the book began.

**Beata Bartecka:** I found Łukasz's approach to the exhibition to be quite liberating. Frankly, I was too conservative to make the kind of exhibition of that kind but, seeing it, I was inspired to think—how can these photographs be used without treating them as simply historical artefacts? I should say here that I value history—I like reading historical narratives, I like texts and I am not a visual artist. But respect for this material can act as a restraint too. Working together, I came to understand that photographs do not have to be *only* approached as historical evidence: they can also be experienced as a visual story if one works with, for instance, sequence and structure.

**David Crowley:** *How did you approach the selection of images and the structure the book?*

**Łukasz Rusznica:** We made this book in what you might call an “open studio” in

that we printed a lot of photos and then we worked every day for about six weeks on the selection and sequence. It was “open” in a literal sense because people could come and talk to us about the project. During this time, we might, for instance, say “let’s make a sequence about looking.” Or there is a sequence which is like a cabaret dance sequence because we knew that we wanted to make it very dynamic with policemen changing poses. So the book has sections like cars where we look from the car’s perspective. Then we started working on the book as a whole and it became more like working on a movie or a montage. Like a movie, images appear faster, faster, faster to have a kind of climax, often a rather brutal one in fact. And then the images slow down.

**David Crowley:** *Was there a governing principle?*

**Beata Bartecka:** Our main approach was to be open to everything. Sometimes we were led by visual principles, sometimes by emotional ones when we put two photographs together.

**Łukasz Rusznica:** When we talk about the book, some people seem to think that we are claiming that the photographs from the archive are “art” and that means that we think that some of the photos are beautiful images, and are indifferent to the fact that they feature people who are just moments away from being killed.

This is not our intention. But we do think that it is possible to “grab” viewers, to make them invest emotionally and visually, and to encourage them later to engage with the historical events that the images record. We don’t ignore history. In fact, visibility is the key to unlock the viewer to engage with the past. Viewers need to be “tricked” to make that investment.

**Beata Bartecka:** We’ve always described this as a kind of “trap.”

**David Crowley:** *That's an interesting word, but one with negative associations, certainly in English.*

**Łukasz Rusznica:** It carries negative connotations in Polish too, even with violence. But it is always best to try to make a nasty pill easier to digest. If you have a dog or cat, you hide the medicine in a nice bowl of meat to make it easy to digest. This is a feature of the design of the book: its cover is bright sunny yellow and red – but these are also the colours that say “danger, danger.”

We do give the reader information in the Index (*a catalogue of captions written by IPN archivists—D.C.*) and an accompanying text from a historian, Tomasz Stempowski. But if the reader wants to know the “truth,” they have to work hard for it. They can engage with the book at the visual level or they can turn to the Index but, even then, the Index can deliver uncertainty. I particularly like those statements that say “We don’t know where this photograph was taken, who is depicted or why it was taken.” This is both information and not information at the same time. And then if the reader wishes, they can read Stempowski’s detailed essay at the end of the book. In other words, the reader chooses the level of their engagement.

**Beata Bartecka:** We “say our piece” through the entire object: in our selection of images, in working with texts from IPN, in commissioning Stempowski and working with a graphic designer Joanna Jopkiewicz who we were talking with about the layout, typography, paper—all elements which influence on the visual and tactile reception of the book. The point is the whole.

We know that the material can be mesmerizing, particularly those images where we don’t know why, when and who. And sometimes the picture is very graphic and dramatic and yet the archive description seems very naïve and simplified. This can be such a contrast. For instance, the book features a photograph of a corpse from the early 1950s but the archive text focuses its



Figure 3. An image from the “Album concerning the spy Joachim Schach and Aleksander Popiak, 1951-1956” in the archives of IPN and reproduced in Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica’s 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.

attention on a print pinned to the wall above the dead man’s head (Figure 3). It was a kind of folkloric poem.

**David Crowley:** *So in some ways the book points attention not only to the interests of the secret police in photographs but also the interests of archivists in recent years. What is your relationship to IPN?*

**Beata Bartecka:** You cannot live in Poland and not have an opinion about IPN. It has deep roots because of the political context here. After 30 years or more, we have all seen it engage in different actions. So, when people know that we have worked with IPN’s photos, there are always questions: how did you co-operate with IPN? Was it easy or difficult? Did the organisation control your activities or not? I think that it is important to see our decision to work with the archive as a curatorial decision. It archives material not only from the communist period but also from the Second World War and even before. This is important because we want to draw attention to the archive as a symbol of power. Power uses the archive for its own purposes.

**Łukasz Rusznica:** Yes, we are interested in using the archive in a way which is not



necessarily that for which it was intended. We work completely within the “rules” of IPN and yet we’ve been able to create a book which extends to the reader the power of interpretation when that power seems mostly to be in the hands of the government through IPN, when power passes judgements about who or what is good and bad in Polish history. And to do this, we assumed the role of naïve young curators who like to “play” with photos. But I don’t want to exaggerate our role too much: the government does not care about photobooks. But queering, or going against the grain or working against the “oppressor,” or against power is good, however small.

There is another observation to be made too. Making this book allowed us to see two IPNs: one that is used by politicians in the game of politics—for instance, to smear Lech Wałęsa by inferring that he was Bolek (*an informant who was discovered in the Security Service files—D.C.*). And another—employees of the institution who have human responses and, as historians, welcome our interest in history.

**David Crowley:** *Exhibiting images is something that IPN has done before. A few years ago it was responsible for an exhibition of photographs called Twarze bezpieki 1944-1990 (The Faces of The Security Services 1944-1990). Mugshots of secret police from the Polish People’s Republic were mounted on panels with descriptions of their activities during the communist era on the streets of cities like Wrocław, where you are based, and Warsaw too. This was a kind of public indictment of these figures who had, I suppose, hoped to disappear, to be forgotten after 1989. What do you feel is your responsibility to the people who appear on the pages of How to Look Natural in Photos?*

**Beata Bartecka:** We have had a lot of discussion of the use of portraits and names. At the same time, you can go to the

bookstore and see the publications issued by IPN. In them, all this information is public, everything.

I think that we’ve acted reasonably in terms of being respectful to our subjects because we don’t pass judgment on who is bad and who is good, or announce victim and the oppressor. In fact, there is a sense in which “we are all victims.” When we made the decision to feature the portrait of one of the secret policemen, we show how he changes over the years, how his face shows signs of stress that comes from fear, oppression, violence and so on. From our perspective, the book is about the human being in the context of power, whether that is a communist or Nazi system, as well as the exercise of power during the present day, say, by corporations—the connection between surveillance and capitalism.

**Łukasz Rusznica:** When Beata refers to this secret policeman, of course we don’t know this guy, we don’t know his history. You look at his face and the image is of a tired man. We include three photographs of him and he gets younger in each. You see him for the first time right after “the burned cars” sequence, his face seems shaken and tired. Here, for us, is a story of how being a person “in power” is not a fairy tale. These faces are documents. I know that it is perhaps shitty that the people in the book have a double life as a human being and as a document, but this is precisely the theme of the book: how we can become intertwined with history. How history becomes part of a life or how a life becomes part of history, and not necessarily in ways that we might desire.

And at the level of images, it is also important that this is also a face that draws an empathetic response from the viewer. This is something that we’ve worked very hard on, to structure the book to generate what we call an “innocent eye.” The first look at these faces is made by an innocent eye. This is the moment when the face is not or not yet a document. And only when you read what happened, or what that subject did,





Figure 4. Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos* featuring images in the archives of IPN.

Figure 5. Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos* featuring an image in the archives of IPN.

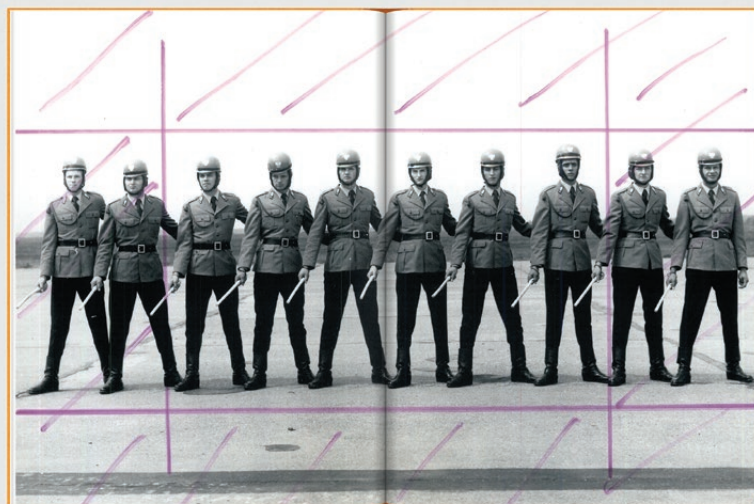


Figure 6. Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos* featuring different "Operational" photographs in the archives of IPN.

does he or she then become a document. But in that first moment, they are human—they are handsome or not handsome, tired or whatever. This is the aspect that makes feel that we are not monsters ... Maybe we are. But we try not to be.



**David Crowley:** *Were there kinds of images that you chose to draw a line and not to reproduce?*

**Beata Bartecka:** Yes, we drew lines but not, or not only, for ethical reasons, but also to serve the construction of the book and to impact the impressions of the viewer. Of course, there were many images which were very dramatic, even drastic, that we considered using. But when we laid out the structure of the book we could see that these images would “kill” the others. For similar reasons, we did not want to use images of famous people like Mazowiecki and Wałęsa (*leaders of Solidarność, the anti-communist trade union which was forced underground in the early 1980s—D.C.*).

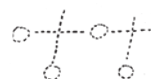
**David Crowley:** *What has the critical response been to your book in Poland?*

**Beata Bartecka:** Working with a small publisher means that we have been involved in the promotion of the book. We’ve sent material to the right-wing and left-wing media and there is no response from either side. Perhaps the book is “boring” to them because it does not feature famous people of the kind I’ve just described. Maybe it is because they don’t know what to do with a book which does not take a clear line or offer a distinct interpretation of the past. It is like some kind of “hot potato.”

**Łukasz Rusznica:** Perhaps they don’t know what kind of “take” to have on our book. They did not bite because they weren’t sure what we’d taste like. But *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*a Roman Catholic weekly—D.C.*)

did publish a long text about the book, a publication which might seem like a weird medium for politics.<sup>3</sup> Although it is a magazine for religious believers, it is also one which is not necessarily right or left wing either. They are in the weird middle ground, perhaps a little like us—in a place of left-right purgatory.

Far more interesting was the reception from the non-Polish or Western media. Why? Because we were concerned that a book which uses Polish history to talk about the system and power might be reduced to “simply” Polish history by commentators from the UK or France; that they would not see in our book something that might touch them because as a country from Eastern Europe, our history does not have the power to be “universal.” That our story could not be understood as a story about the state of the world. That was our biggest concern. But we need not have worried: the reception has been fantastic, and it was understood by critics and readers abroad that this book about Poland could be about them too.



## NOTES

1. Beata Bartecka, and Łukasz Rusznica. 2021. *How to Look Natural in Photos*. Wrocław: Ośrodek Postaw Twórczych & Palm\* Studios.

2. *Jak fotografować – wystawa zdjęć z archiwum IPN*, curated by Łukasz Rusznica with Beata Bartecka, Hubert Kielan, Miejsce przy Miejsce Gallery, Wrocław October-December 2014.

3. Topolski, Maciej. 2021. “W stanie podejrzenia”. *Tygodnik Powszechny* (May 2021). [Available online at: <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/>]

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