Exposing Stalin’s “retouching”

The Commissar Vanishes: The falsification of photographs and art in Stalin's Russia, an exhibition based on documents from the Collection of David King--Berlin, Haus am Waldsee, Argentinische Allee 30

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Following successful stops in Vienna and Milan, David King’s extraordinary exhibition on the history of Stalin’s photographic falsifications is on display at the Haus am Waldsee in Berlin until 7 February.

The exhibition in Berlin, *The Commissar Vanishes*, features much of the original material upon which King based his book of the same name (Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1997). In the introduction to his book the author writes: “In Stalin’s times there was so much manipulation of pictorial material that it is possible to reconstruct the history of the Soviet Union on the basis of retouched photographs.”

The politics of the October Revolution and the early years of the Soviet state stood in sharp opposition to the policies of the bureaucracy under Stalin. To the extent that the latter came to power as a parasitic caste based on the property relations established by October, it was necessary for Stalin to liquidate his opponents inside the Bolshevik party. King’s exhibition reveals and records above all the ruthlessness and brutality with which the emerging bureaucracy secured its power. It was not enough that Stalin’s victims were physically wiped off the face of the earth; it was also necessary to obliterate them from history and memory altogether.

One of the first displays that one sees on entering the exhibition is a series of four photos/portraits. The first photo shows Stalin in the middle of a group of three leading members of the Communist Party (Antipov, Kirov and Schwernik) in 1926. For the pictorial history of the USSR printed in 1940, Antipov can no longer be seen. Nine years later in a pictorial biography of Stalin Schwernik has also disappeared. The last in the series of four exhibits is a painting of Stalin based on the original photo, but now Stalin stands alone.

The crudity with which various “retouchings” were made gives the impression that those responsible sought to intimidate and horrify the viewer during the years of the terror. In some of the pictures faces have simply been cut out or pasted over. In other pictures, large groups of persons have been whittled away to leave one or two behind (see accompanying interview with David King discussing the Lenin/Gorky picture). In portraits and pictures Stalin’s facial pockmarks vanish and instead the dictator is shown in warm pastel colours with his secret police henchmen surrounded by children and brightly coloured balloons.

Naturally there was no place in Stalin’s new order for Trotsky, the bureaucracy’s number one enemy, who, together with Lenin, played the leading role in the October Revolution. This applied not only to photos and pictures featuring Trotsky in public life. Even casual snapshots came under the scissors of Stalin’s police. The exhibition includes a photo of Trotsky and his wife in the backseat of a car during the former’s convalescence in Georgia in the winter of 1924. In a reproduction of the photo from 1936 Trotsky and his wife have been obliterated by a figure who has been crudely superimposed.

Authentic photos from the time of the revolution and of the Bolshevik leaders were extremely difficult to find after Stalin’s terror began. This was due not

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merely to the gigantic apparatus devoted to falsification under Stalin. The threat of reprisal meant that many collectors and artists exercised a form of self-censorship. As King writes in the introduction to his book, in the 1930s those found in possession of a picture or reproduction of Trotsky could anticipate immediate arrest, imprisonment and probable execution.

One of those who preferred to keep his “suspicious” material hidden was the celebrated Soviet artist Aleksandr Rodchenko. At the end of the 1980s King found a treasure trove of material in the attic of the long-dead painter. Amongst the material he found was the picture book *Ten Years of Uzbekistan*. In the book the faces of local party functionaries who were executed by Stalin in 1937 were simply blacked out. The result is a sort of gruesome, unintentional tribute to the fallen victims.

Finally, in one room of the Haus am Waldsee King has made an attempt to set the record straight. He has filled all four walls with the police mug shots of a small number of the hundreds of thousands of nameless, innocent victims of Stalin’s terror. Everyone genuinely interested in understanding Stalinism and its repercussions for the twentieth century should make an attempt to see this exhibition.

Footnote: King’s work indicates that the deliberate falsification of Soviet history did not end with Stalin. Following the dictator’s death in 1953, and Khruschev’s secret speech of 1956 outlining Stalin’s crimes, the forgers in the Kremlin received fresh orders, i.e., the selective obliteration of Stalin from a number of important pictures and publications. He who lives by the razor dies by the razor!

David King’s book in English: *The Commissar Vanishes: The falsification of photographs and art in Stalin’s Russia*, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1997.

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