

Interview with David King at the opening of his exhibition The Commissar Vanishes

"Stalin and his regime destroyed the revolution."

Stefan Steinberg
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First of all, I asked David King about the background to the exhibition.

You must understand there is not a lot of money around for staging such an exhibition. It has taken some time to get off the ground. This is the third venue. The first was in Vienna, the second in Milan. And the thing is sort of gathering momentum. The exhibition here in Berlin looks good and on the whole I am very pleased with it.

What is good about the exhibition is that it is a chance to see original material as well as reproductions from prints. Everything for example in the vitrine cabinets are originals and you have a real chance to see where the material came from, whether it's from newspapers, magazines or documents. The exhibition is spread over the whole house, in all 10 rooms, and up until now there has been a lot of media interest.

What sort of reactions has the exhibition provoked?

Well, there have been hardly any hostile reactions. Nobody can argue with the material I have collected. On the basis of what is exhibited here nobody can defend Stalin or Stalinism. There was, however, an amusing experience in Milan. Four visitors to the exhibition approached me there and complimented me on having done the retouching. [laughs] They thought it was some sort of art show—I find that very funny. But interestingly enough you sometimes get a similar reaction in Moscow as well because some of the pictures are so imprinted on people's minds, for example—the picture of Lenin and Gorky together. There is this very strange, very long, narrow print featuring Lenin and Gorky together, which everybody

has seen and knows—but no negative is such a shape. In fact, the picture has been cut and retouched from a group photo taken of delegates to the Second World Congress of the Communist International. When they see the whole original print featuring 25 people, then in Moscow I get quizzical looks; they are asking themselves—"Can this be the case?"

How and when did you begin your work?

I first started collecting material in 1970. I went to Russia and asked for material about Trotsky and there wasn't any. I was asked why I was interested in Trotsky. Stalin was important for the revolution, not Trotsky, they said. When I came back to London I was determined to do a visual history—as far as possible, a truthful, visual history of what happened in the Soviet Union. I have been collecting ever since and obviously from a socialist perspective, i.e., not like Richard Pipes and Robert Conquest [Cold War/anti-communist historians]. And another thing—at that time in the late sixties, an enormous amount of stuff was being written on politics, including Trotsky's ideas, but people were not exactly reading it all. However, when my co-worker Francis [Wyndham] and I did the first pictorial Trotsky biography in 1972, 25,000 copies were sold. You saw people reading the book on the tube train, it was a big thing at the time, with a paperback edition by Penguin, one of Britain's main publishers. Our thinking then was to communicate something of Trotsky's ideas and so encourage people to read more about and from him.

I asked King his opinion of the relevance of his work in light of the current campaign, accompanying the publication of the Blackbook of Communism, that

equates Lenin and the gains of the Russian Revolution with Stalin and Stalinism.

Well naturally I disagree with such a thesis. It is very difficult to do what I am doing at this period of time, but of course there was no political continuity between Lenin and Stalin. Stalin and his regime destroyed the revolution, he destroyed the hopes of communism. You only have to take a look at the pictures in room 3 of the exhibition. Featured there are the NKVD secret police photos of ordinary, completely innocent citizens who were taken away by Stalin's goons—men, women and children pulled out of their houses and shot. They didn't even go to the gulag.

Are there any plans for further venues, or perhaps taking the exhibition to Moscow?

Not at the moment. I know for a fact there would be great difficulties taking it to Moscow. Did you know they want to restore the monument of Felix Dzerzhinsky, which is *the* symbol for the power of the KGB apparatus? It used to stand directly before the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. The majority of Zyuganov's Communist Party deputies voted for the restoration of the statue. It's really frightening because in the chaos of the Soviet Union, these guys [the KGB] have been standing in the background. Now they say, "Our hands are clean, give us a chance to control things." It demonstrates perhaps that my exhibition isn't just a dry historical exercise. It raises and attempts to clarify questions which are of importance today.



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