

# David King 1943-2016: Revolutionary socialist, artist and defender of historical truth

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David King, who devoted his extraordinary gifts as an artist to salvaging the historical truth of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its aftermath from beneath the vast and now wrecked edifice of Stalinist crimes and lies, died at his home in Islington on the morning of May 11.

Although he suffered from heart disease for many years, David remained immensely productive until the very end of his life. There is an element of tragic irony in the fact that his most recent and final book—published this past autumn—was devoted to the life of the Weimar-era German revolutionary artist, John Heartfield, whose work exerted such a profound influence on King himself.

As an artist, David's life work was concentrated on the research, design and writing of books that chronicled the history of the greatest event of the 20th century, the Russian Revolution. It is precisely the extraordinarily appropriate fusion of artistic form and historical content that endows his work with lasting significance. So rare among contemporary artists, it was guided by a historically oriented consciousness. Moreover, David's knowledge of the Russian Revolution—the events, controversies, personages and social context—was nothing less than encyclopedic. He did not labor to subjectively impose a striking and eccentric form that would call attention to himself as an artist. What imparted to his book design such a powerful and genuinely original character was the degree to which the historical events reflected in the pictorial images guided the author's presentation.

Tireless historical research underlay all of David's major published books over the past 45 years. Every volume for which he selected the pictorial images, designed the layout and frequently wrote all or substantial portions of the text, was based on years of work. He was among the greatest archivists and historical detectives of our time. He traveled throughout the world in search of artifacts of the Russian Revolution and collected everything from photographs, posters and government documents to coffee mugs. David estimated that his collection contained approximately 250,000 items. Had the assembling of this collection been his only achievement, he would have deserved an honored place among historians of the Russian Revolution.

But David not only collected items. He sought to understand their significance, that is, their objective place in the vast historical drama of the Russian Revolution. In the examination of an artifact, David moved from its appearance to the discovery of its historical essence—the relationship of the fragmentary part to the whole. This process of discovery determined the form of artistic recreation. The problem of selection and presentation frequently proves to be overwhelming. Remarkably, despite the large number of images assembled by David in each of his books, nothing seems to be lost. Every image, even the smallest, captures the reader's attention. There is no question that David possessed an acute visual sensitivity. But if he understood so perfectly

what needed to go where, and in what size images were to be reproduced, it was because the artistic judgment was always disciplined by a powerful sense of the objective historical narrative.

David King's intellectual and artistic involvement with the Russian Revolution was grounded in his personal experiences and political convictions. In 2009 David completed work on *Red Star Over Russia: A Visual history Of The Soviet Union From 1917 To The Death Of Stalin*. In the introduction to this invaluable and authoritative volume, which includes images drawn from The David King Collection, he explained:

Even as a child I detested capitalism. I thought it was unfair. I also loathed religion and the monarchy. I found the clothes they dressed up in sinister and frightening. When my uncle, who was a socialist, taught me about the true nature of the ruling class I agreed with him that it clearly had to be overthrown. I used to dream, like all children, how life would be in the 21st century. If anyone had told me that there would still be inequality, racism, kings, queens and religious maniacs stalking the planet I would have considered them crazy.

David first traveled to the Soviet Union in the bitterly cold winter of 1970. He had been sent there by the London *Sunday Times* to research and photograph features that were to be published on the centenary of Lenin's birth. King visited many museums that were devoted to the commemoration of the revolution. Lenin's life was exhaustively documented. But there was one major actor in the Bolshevik revolution missing from the many exhibitions. King recalled:

The one figure who I was most interested in finding out about, however, was nowhere to be seen. So I spent a lot of time asking, "Yes, but where's Trotsky?" or "That's very interesting, but what about Trotsky?" Feeble attempts were made in the official photo archives to drag out even one picture of the co-leader of the Russian Revolution. There was nothing. They had totally wiped him out, and as I was soon to find out, legions of others too.

King collected a huge amount of material on the Russian Revolution during his visit to the Soviet Union. But he was not satisfied with the results of his research. He could not remove from his mind the image of the forgotten titan of the Revolution:

I had a new plan; to search for Trotsky, to document his life in pictures. I wanted to show that no amount of political falsification, no amount of photographic retouching, could extinguish the memory of the twentieth century's inspirational revolutionary genius. Much had been written about Trotsky in the West, but as a designer/photographer I wanted his story to reach out to a much wider audience.

Traveling throughout Europe, North America and to Coyoacán in Mexico, where Trotsky had been assassinated in 1940, David began assembling his collection of photographs, posters, documents and artifacts related to the life of the revolutionary leader. Working with Francis Wyndham, a colleague at the *Sunday Times*, he coauthored a biography of Trotsky. Though Wyndham wrote most of the text, it was the large collection of photos, assembled and presented by King, that made the volume an important and influential historical work. It was published to great acclaim in 1972.

The next major project undertaken by David was in collaboration with the International Committee of the Fourth International. Though not a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party, which was then the British section of the ICFI, David greatly respected its theoretical work and political activity in the working class. He followed with enormous interest the investigation initiated by the International Committee in 1975 into the assassination of Leon Trotsky. He contributed his time and many photographs in his private collection to the design of *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*, published in 1977.

In 2009, during a visit to London, I spoke with David at length about his collaboration with the International Committee in the production of *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*. He explained that he viewed the International Committee's research into Trotsky's assassination as an important contribution to the exposure of Stalinist crimes. He said that he was surprised by the hostile reaction of so many on the British left to the investigation. In relation to the International Committee's discovery of documents that exposed contacts between Joseph Hansen, the long-time leader of the Socialist Workers Party in the US, and both the FBI and the Soviet secret police, King recalled his own strange encounter with Hansen.

During the early 1970s, in the course of his research on the Trotsky biography, David traveled to New York in search of photos and documents. He contacted the Socialist Workers Party and asked for an appointment with Hansen, who had served as Trotsky's secretary in Mexico between 1937 and 1940. David imagined that the meeting would yield a wealth of information and insights into Trotsky's personality. But the interview had hardly begun before Hansen asked: "Why do you want to write about Trotsky?"

Taken aback by the tone with which the question had been asked, King began to explain why he thought that Trotsky was a major historical figure whose legacy was a critical part of the fight for the future victory of socialism. "The future?" Hansen replied. "Given the state of the environment, the planet probably won't exist in 20 years." The interview was quickly ended. As David recalled this exchange, nearly 50 years later, his amazement at Hansen's remark had still not worn off.

The exposure of the crimes committed by Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy against the October Revolution and the Soviet people emerged as a central focus of David's work during the last 35 years of his life. In 1982, he collaborated with Tamara Deutscher, the widow of Isaac Deutscher (the author of the famous Trotsky biographical trilogy) in the writing and design of *The Great Purges*. In 1997 David produced another major historical volume, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia*. In this work King illustrated how Stalin and his criminal accomplices in the Soviet leadership and

bureaucracy systematically falsified history by "retouching" photographs. Explaining the subject of *The Commissar Vanishes*, David wrote:

So much falsification took place during the Stalin years that it is possible to tell the story of the Soviet era through retouched photographs. That is the purpose of this book. The photographs are displayed chronologically, at the time they were taken, rather than when they were doctored. The altered versions are usually shown alongside the originals, or on the following pages. A number of key unfalsified photographs and documents are also included to explain important moments in the story. Paintings, graphics, and other examples of Stalinist hero worship appear, as well. Only the most interesting and varied images from a political, cultural, and of course visual point of view are presented here. New examples of falsification are always coming to light. A photograph might appear strange, as a result of heavy retouching. To find the original might take years—and often does. The search continues.

In 2003 King published *Ordinary Citizens: The Victims of Stalin*. The volume consists of approximately 150 mugshots of Soviet citizens during their incarceration in Lyubianka, the Moscow headquarters of the secret police. Among the photographed individuals are major figures in Soviet history, such as Grigory Zinoviev, and literature, such as Isaak Babel. But most of the mugshots are of unknown "ordinary" citizens. What all the subjects had in common is that they were soon to be murdered by Stalin's executioners. Many of the photographs were taken days and, in some cases, only a few hours before these human beings were deprived of their lives. The images of the doomed are profoundly disturbing. But what imparts to those images selected by King such a psychologically haunting impact is the unexpected quality of the photographs. In a remarkable commentary, David noted:

It is a dreadful irony that the deadly eyes of Stalin's secret police could have created such sensitive portraits of their hapless victims. Unlike police mugshots in the West, the NKVD's photographs were not taken using artificial light. The longer time exposure needed to photograph in natural light allowed the subjects to face the camera and display a whole range of expressions. None of the ordinary citizens here have been surprised or "caught" by the flash bulb. The faces are haunting, the expressions often heart-breaking. They stare straight back into the lens with defiance, disdain, fear or sometimes just terrible sadness. Quizzical looks give way to pain, pride and honesty. There is fury on the faces of one or two. Some show signs of torture. Some show signs of sickness, ill health. Some look mad. Most shockingly, a few look back at the camera, or attempt the hint of a smile.

In 2009 David completed his monumental pictorial overview of Russian-Soviet history, *Red Star Over Russia*, which was published in conjunction with the opening of a new section at the Tate Museum in London, devoted to a display of photos and posters from the David King Collection. He offered me a personal tour of the exhibition, of which he was justifiably proud. Every item in the exhibit was part of the great and tragic historical narrative of the October Revolution.

The death of David King deprives the world of a great artist and historian. The sense of loss is increased by the fact that it has come on the eve of the centenary of the Russian Revolution of 1917. How much David would have had to show and say during the coming year! But there can be

no doubt the work of David King—artist, revolutionary socialist and defender of historical truth—will, in the centenary year and beyond, contribute mightily to the understanding of the seminal event of modern history and, therefore, provide enduring inspiration for the cause of human liberation.



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