

# A further comment on the death of David King, socialist and artist

**David Walsh**  
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It was very sad to hear of David King's death in London on May 11. As David North observed in his obituary on the *World Socialist Web Site*, for nearly half a century King "devoted his extraordinary gifts as an artist to salvaging the historical truth of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its aftermath."

King was a brilliant graphic designer, photographer, illustrator, archivist, researcher, editor, historian and art collector. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to suggest as I did in 2005 that King was "one of the more remarkable artistic-intellectual personalities of our time."

In works such as *Red Star Over Russia: A Visual History of the Soviet Union; Ordinary Citizens: The Victims of Stalin; The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia; Trotsky: A Photographic Biography; Russian Revolutionary Posters: From Civil War to Socialist Realism, from Bolshevism to the End of Stalinism and How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*, King exerted his immense skill to the most pressing issue of our time—setting the record straight in regard to the decisive events of the past century.

And this is not to diminish the significance of the works he designed or collaborated on that treated specifically artistic or cultural questions, including books on John Heartfield, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Mayakovsky, early Soviet photographers, applied arts in the USSR, Mexican revolutionary photography and anti-tsarist caricatures from the 1905 Revolution in Russia. All these too, in the end, involved the effort to provide a picture of the titanic struggles in the 20th century to liberate humanity from capitalist oppression. As he once observed, "My interest has never been academic."

The series of books issued forth, to a certain extent, as by-products of, or "interim reports" on, the central project of his adult life: the creation of a collection of 250,000 posters, photographs, illustrations and other items related to Russia, the Soviet Union and "Communist movements everywhere," which now belongs to the Tate Modern in London. The collection is unique. No museum or institution on the planet, let alone any other individual, worked so indefatigably to preserve this tumultuous history in images.

When Joanne Laurier and I visited King at his house-studio in London in November 2010, he briefly recounted some of his adventures in collecting—how he found irreplaceable copies of the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (where many photomontages by Weimarer German artist John Heartfield were published) lying ankle-deep, strewn about, in the basement of a Swiss bookshop; how a mysterious Russian telephoned one day and offered to sell him a priceless bust of Trotsky for \$800 (and how the bust then arrived in a small box by regular mail!), and so forth.

*The Commissar Vanishes*, King told the story of "Ten Years in Uzbekistan." This photo album was produced by Soviet artists Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova in 1934, and included portraits of Uzbek Communist Party officials. Three years later, most of the figures in the book had been arrested or murdered by Stalin, and the book itself was banned. Owning it became a crime. Rodchenko violently blacked out the faces in his own copy of the album, which King discovered in the artist's studio in 1984. It took King 12 years to track down a copy of the work with the faces intact.

It has been related numerous times how King, then art editor at the *Sunday Times*, went to Moscow in 1970 for several weeks to conduct research for a piece on the centenary of Lenin's birth. While there, King later wrote, "the one figure who I was most interested in finding out about 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?'"

James Woudhuysen, in a 1984 article on King, noted that the artist thereupon "began 18 months of fresh research, right down to photographs kept in manila envelopes by aged American Trotskyists and by Mexicans who had known the Old Man in the final years before his assassination. The result was a cover story for the *Sunday Times Magazine*, 'Trotsky: the Conscience of the Revolution.' Published on 19 September 1971; it ran to 16 colour pages."

That account is satisfying, but like so many neat and pleasing stories, it needs a corrective. As King pointed out in his introduction to *Red Star Over Russia*, while more than 1.5 million copies of the September 19, 1971 issue of the *Sunday Times Magazine* were printed, they never hit the streets because of a strike. "Most of them were pulped," explained King. However, the feature was then turned into a book, the famed Trotsky pictorial biography, designed by King and with a text by Francis Wyndham, which appeared in 1972 and sold 25,000 copies.

In his 1984 piece, Woudhuysen continued, "In terms of mass culture, he [King] had done more even than Trotsky's distinguished Polish biographer, Isaac Deutscher, to popularise the man who had been leader of the Petrograd Soviet at 26 and commander of the Red Army at 38." This may be an exaggeration, but it points to the critical role King played, especially in Britain.

An artist's development is a complex process, but it seems evident in King's case that two related conclusions he reached in the late 1960s—that the October Revolution was the decisive event in modern history and that Stalinism had done vast damage to the socialist movement—continued to drive his intellectual labors to the end of his life. It is hard to overestimate the centrality of these conceptions to his art and archival work. As David North commented, "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."

In conversations with Stefan Steinberg in 1998 and with me in 2008, both posted on the WSW, King reaffirmed his view that Stalin had been the gravedigger of the Russian Revolution and rejected the notion that the collapse of the USSR represented the "end of history." "Oh, I never believed any of that," he told me in the Tate Modern café.

I first encountered David King in 1970-71, at a time when the British Trotskyist movement, the Socialist Labour League, led by Gerry Healy, as part of a broad radicalization of the working class and intelligentsia in Britain, was attracting a considerable number of artists, writers and actors. We did not speak at that time, as far as I can recall, but his was not a face one was likely to forget. We met in person in London in 2008 and 2010 and corresponded from time to time over the past eight years.

I am not claiming a close friendship, but the few hours I spent in his company were an immense pleasure. David King was a lovely person, modest and soft-spoken, entirely without pretension. One was drawn to him immediately.

But it speaks to the depth of his historical and ideological commitment that this private modesty and understatement did not extend to his public artistic work. In other words, if the graphic content and design in his works is insistent, demanding and even *presumptuous*, in the best sense of the word, if it figuratively grasps the reader or viewer by the shoulders and shakes him or her, this does not flow organically from King's personality, but from his convictions and sense of social urgency. He knew that what he was doing was important.

And like many serious artists, he treated his own formal accomplishments, which others often highlighted and praised, with a certain amount of indifference. "I'm interested in content far more than I am in form. You develop a visual style as you would develop a handwriting one. And when you've done that, you can almost forget about it. The content of your work, assuming one has any interests at all, is what one should concentrate on," he told interviewer Christopher Wilson in 2003.

The artist thinks in images, asserted the 19th century Russian critic Belinsky. He or she does not prove the truth, but shows it, according to Belinsky. There is a profound grain of truth in this. However, what made King so exceptional was that he both showed *and* proved the truth, he both produced extraordinary imagery *and* explained its significance.

David King took upon himself the lifelong task of "showing" the truth of the Russian Revolution in visual imagery—as he explained to Woudhuysen in 1984: "I'm obviously obsessed with Soviet politics, but it all started with the need to disseminate information visually. There've been thousands of words written on the Soviet Union—E. H. Carr alone wrote 13 volumes on the subject. I wanted to visualise the words."

But he also wrote texts, polemicized, intervened verbally in the historical debate about the character of the Russian Revolution, an intervention that was made all the more powerful, almost inarguable, by the mass of imagery and other materials to which he could refer. Who could "debunk" the living, breathing picture of the Revolution that he drew?

There is a continuity in substance and form between King's early

and later work, which would not be the case with many figures in recent decades. Such repentant, ex-left intellectuals and artists, in André Breton's words, "radically change their opinions and renounce in a masochistic and exhibitionist manner their own testimony, becoming champions of a cause quite contrary to that which they began serving with great fanfare." Not so, David King.

Whether one opens the pages of the Trotsky pictorial biography from the early 1970s or *John Heartfield: Laughter is a Devastating Weapon*, published in 2015, one recognizes the intellectual and artistic universe: there is the same orientation to the problems of the social revolution in our time and the same effort to make complex historical issues accessible to a wide audience. These concerns find graphic form in bold headings, precisely cropped and arranged photographs, or artwork and "an easily recognizable mix of explosive sans serif typography, solid planes of vivid colour and emphatic rules" (Wilson).

Right-wing columnist Andrew Stuttaford, an individual bitterly opposed to King's socialist political sympathies, writing in the *New Criterion* in 2010, was obliged to acknowledge that "*The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (1997) remains one of the finest and most unusual pieces of Sovietology ever produced," and that "no page of *Red Star over Russia* is wasted."

In the same 1984 interview referred to above, King commented, "I'm probably the most hated designer in Britain. At least it feels that way sometimes." The British establishment's hostility toward King was rooted, above all, in his dedication to the principles and example of the 1917 revolution and his insistence that there was an alternative to Stalinism represented by Trotsky and his supporters.

It was very much like the man that our final email exchange, in late January, concerned a review of his Heartfield book posted on the WSW and a new project of his on which he had been "frantically busy":

"Thanks so much for sending me the link to the Heartfield review, and please thank him for writing such a terrific review. He writes very well and obviously has a great future ahead of him... [The new book is] called *Print and Revolution*. Everything in the book—400 pages, same format and printing—will be previously unused material from my collection. It's a tough project, sure hope I make it! All the best, David."

His death is an immense loss.

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To order *Commissar Vanishes* from Mehring Books click [here](#).

To order *John Heartfield: Laughter is a Devastating Weapon* click [here](#).



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