

Russian revolutionary art exhibition in London excises Trotsky—and, more generally, historical truth

Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932

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“We are not celebrating revolution here ... I don’t think there is much to celebrate. Quite the contrary as you will see from the exhibition...” —Natalia Murray, co-curator, on the eve of the opening of the Royal Academy’s “Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932” exhibition.

Such a comment is fair warning to anyone planning to visit the current exhibition at the Royal Academy in London.

Prior to the opening of “Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932”, *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones expressed concern that the exhibition’s curators would fail to portray art under Bolshevism as “brutal propaganda”, equivalent to that of the Nazis. He need not have worried. (For our reply to Jones’s article see [here](#))

Murray’s aim as curator of the Royal Academy exhibition is to pour scorn on and discredit the 1917 October Revolution and to combat the contemporary impact of the works it inspired, such as the depiction of liberation in Boris Kustodiev’s “Demonstration on Uritsky Square on the day of the opening of the Second Comintern Congress in July 1920.”

To that end, Murray serves up bitter doses of anti-communism and relentless denunciations of everything “Bolshevik”. Her essay in the catalogue, “Cultural Heroes”, is a rant against supposedly disenchanted and jaded artists, while a final sentence grudgingly admits that the Revolution “produced some of the most remarkably talented people in the history of Russia, or indeed of Europe.”

Murray’s premise is that art was flourishing in Russia before the Bolshevik “coup” in 1917—her characterisation of the revolution is telling in itself, denying the mass popular support for the Bolsheviks during 1917 and its aftermath. Under the new regime, according to Murray, most artists were forced to flee or became disillusioned, whilst others—Malevich, El Lissitzky, Tatlin and Rodchenko et al—foolishly embraced the revolution or allowed themselves to be coerced by the “all-powerful” Bolsheviks. As a result, they became mere propaganda tools and dupes.

For Murray, there is a direct line from the immediate post-revolutionary period under the “ruthless” and supposedly culturally backward Lenin, to the dictatorship of Stalin and the Gulag—expressed in the mug shots of Stalin’s victims displayed in a small cinema in the Room of Memory, which concludes the exhibition.

Thankfully, Murray tells us, the values of “Eternal Russia” survived.

Her dishonest narrative will be music to the ears of the contemporary billionaires—Len Blavatnik, Dr Leonard Polonsky, Mikhail Fridman and Petr Aven—who sponsored the exhibition and wrote the preface to the catalogue. They made their fortunes largely from the carve-up of the state assets of the former Soviet Union.

Blavatnik pocketed \$7 billion from the sale of Russian oil company TNK-BP—somewhat more than Fridman who used his proceeds to set up Russia’s largest commercial bank, Alfa-Bank, now headed by Aven. Fridman’s latest venture, LetterOne Group investment business, operates from the tax haven of Luxembourg and Polonsky’s Hansard Global PLC exploits the low tax regime on the Isle of Man.

Should anyone be terribly surprised that an institution such as the “Royal Academy” and a gang of tycoons have pronounced an unfavorable verdict on the greatest and most progressive event in modern times? How could it be otherwise?

In order to establish a historical continuity between the revolution led by Lenin and the political counterrevolution that resulted in the ascendancy of the bureaucracy under Stalin, the curators had to perform one crucial task: the omission, or rather excision, of virtually any reference to Leon Trotsky.

Just a handful of throwaway lines about Trotsky are to be found in the exhibition’s catalogue. This of the man who led the October insurrection, formed the Red Army and founded the Left Opposition and subsequently the Fourth International against Stalinism.

In the exhibition one is lucky to spot two small images—on a tea-cup by Mikhail Adamovich and in Kliment Redko’s 1925 painting “Insurrection”—and one “non-image”—a handkerchief in which Trotsky’s face has been cut out.

The curators offer no examination of what Trotsky did or said. There is not a single reference to *Literature and Revolution*, *Class and Art*, *Problems of Everyday Life*, *Art and Politics in Our Epoch* or any other of his incisive writings published during the period under review.

Trotsky’s public interventions and polemics of the time provide an indispensable aid to understanding the cultural problems the fledgling workers state encountered—the uneasy relationship between a workers’ government and a bohemian avant garde; the need to safeguard the art of the past and reject efforts by artistic and petty bourgeois groups to proclaim their work the officially sanctioned “Communist art”; and the impossibility of creating a distinct

“proletarian culture”. The new human culture would be classless, Trotsky insisted, and all attempts to create it prematurely by artificial, laboratory means, particularly in the conditions of backward, isolated Russia, were bound to fail.

These conceptions were elaborated in the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art”, again ignored in the exhibition, written by Trotsky, André Breton and Diego Rivera in 1938. In it the authors opposed the “totalitarian regime of the USSR”, which had “spread over the entire world a deep twilight hostile to every sort of spiritual value.”

They continued, “If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralized control, to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks.”

In their attempt to blame the “all powerful” Bolsheviks for the difficulties that befell the new workers’ state, the curators all but ignore the fact that the revolution took place in the midst of the mass slaughter of the imperialist First World War, which resulted in 17 million deaths, a third of them in Russia.

A civil war, which, according to Murray, was all the fault of the Bolsheviks, then devastated the country. No mention is made of the great powers that invaded the Soviet Union, rebuilding the remnants of the tsarist armies in order to install a military dictatorship. The poverty and backwardness of tsarist Russia, which the first workers’ state inherited, are likewise brushed aside.

These factors first brought to the fore a privileged bureaucratic caste personified and led by Stalin. It was the misleadership of the Comintern by the Stalinist faction that led to a series of defeated revolutionary struggles internationally, ensuring the isolation of the Soviet Union and the terrible bureaucratic degeneration this produced. Stalin proclaimed that the task at hand was to build “socialism in one country”, rejecting the fundamental programme of socialist internationalism and world revolution that led the Bolsheviks to power under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky. Decades later the bureaucracy ultimately liquidated the USSR in the interests of global capitalism.

To promulgate its own “Leninism led to Stalinism” narrative, the exhibition imitates, in much reduced form, a 1932 exhibition held in Russia to commemorate 15 years of the revolution. That exhibition displayed 2,640 works by 423 artists in 35 galleries. The first gallery was arranged to bestow Lenin’s supposed seal of approval on the Stalinist regime and the last one to glorify Stalin himself and the Socialist Realist art that dominated under his dictatorship.

The 1932 exhibition was organised by a government committee headed by Commissar of Enlightenment Andrei Bubnov. Its main political function was to pave the way for the closing down of the plethora of independent artistic groups and state institutions, which Anatoly Lunacharsky, first Soviet People’s Commissar of Education had nurtured, replacing them with a monolithic Union of Artists. The 1932 exhibition committee cut out the proposed “War Communism” gallery, effectively excluding abstract and Constructivist Art, with curator Nikolai Punin declaring it was better to “look ahead rather than to pedantically count every step of our historical past”. (Bubnov, who had flirted with the Left Opposition in 1923, was shot in 1938; Punin died in a Stalinist labor camp in 1953.)

Only two galleries in the 1932 exhibition were set aside for those

regarded as “leftist”—Kazimir Malevich, reproduced at the Royal Academy, and Pavel Filonov—but these were presented in such a way as to show them as a “deviation”. In fact, Bubnov’s committee only allowed their inclusion at the last minute, with Malevich describing how, “[t]he arts administrators’ attitude towards me took a very malicious form”. They “isolated our brothers... like enemies.”

The current exhibition’s first gallery, “Salute the Leader”, is used to excoriate the “philistine” Lenin. Isaak Brodsky’s 1919 small painting, “Vladimir Lenin and a Demonstration”, which simply and subtly expresses Lenin’s role in opening the way for the masses, is reinterpreted as the work of a court painter paying homage to the new monarch.

The “Philosophers’ Ships” episode, in which some 160 religious and intellectual figures, including the Russian Orthodox Christian theologian Sergei Bulgakov (whose picture is hung in the exhibition), were deported from Russia in 1922, just prior to the official end of the Civil War, is produced as evidence of Lenin’s burgeoning dictatorship. Nothing is said of the hostility of these idealist mystical charlatans towards the new workers’ state and their support for its overthrow.

As Trotsky explained, “These elements we send away and will send away in future are nothing in a political sense. But they are a potential weapon in the hands of our enemies. In case of new military conflicts, that cannot be excluded in spite of our peaceful policies, these irreconcilable dissident elements will be military-political agents of the enemy. In that case, we will have to shoot them in accordance with the rules of war. This is why we prefer to deport them now, beforehand in the quiet period. I hope you will not refuse to recognise our prudent humanity.”

It is clear the sympathies of the Royal Academy organisers lie with such characters.

A rehabilitation of certain figurative artists, who were in the background in the early days of the revolution and found a new life and lucrative posts under the Stalinist regime, is taking place. A whole room is devoted to the works of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, whose earlier pro-Bolshevik works have something to them, but who ended up as the head of Stalin’s Union of Artists in Leningrad in 1932. The catalogue lavishes praise on him for his art, “untrammelled by overt political propaganda and didactic message.”

Stalin himself would be proud of the Royal Academy’s efforts.



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