

Artists on the Tate Modern's David King exhibition, *Red Star over Russia*: “In essence the exhibition was anti-Trotsky”

Our reporters
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The Tate Modern in London held an exhibition, *Red Star Over Russia: A Revolution in Visual Culture 1905-55*, from November 8, 2017 to February 18, 2018. The show marked 100 years since the October Revolution.

The items on display came from the unique, 250,000-piece collection of the extraordinary photographer, designer and archivist David King (1943-2016). During his lifetime King sought to uncover the historical truth about the 1917 Russian Revolution and, above all, the role of Leon Trotsky. King always insisted that Trotsky represented an alternative to Stalinism and dictatorship.

The Tate Modern exhibition abandoned this orientation, falsifying King's life and work. Gallery director Frances Morris shamelessly declared about King, “Had he lived this would have been a very different project, but early on we made the decision to respect his spirit without imitating it.” In reality, there was neither imitation *nor* respect in the Tate Modern's presentation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* review of the exhibition concluded, “One hundred years after the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and the coming to power of the Bolshevik Party, the Tate and other artistic institutions continue to wage a concerted campaign to denigrate the Russian Revolution and insist it has no relevance in the 21st century. This only testifies to its enduring impact and intense political relevance.”

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) published the review and other material on King in *The Falsification of David King's Work*.

The WSWS spoke to a number of artists about the Tate Modern exhibition, the WSWS review and related matters. We post their comments below.

Roger Hopkinson, architect and sculptor:

The first reference to the commemoration of the 1917 Russian Revolution appeared on my Facebook one day. I think seeing the written words *Red Star Over Russia* triggered my immediate interest.

I have been inspired by El Lissitzky's “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge” [1919] and have spent the last few years doing a series of paintings based on it. El Lissitzky shows the Bolsheviks fighting back against the White Army and I have tried to rework it to show global relations today, the way the global elite has inflicted suffering and brought us to the edge with the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Should an artist speak out now and warn others? I think so, it is a duty of care. It is time to say, “Enough is enough.” We need a resurgence of people power and we need a voice. When I found the WSWS last year I realised it was a voice.

I read Paul Mitchell's article and I was not disappointed. My immediate thoughts were, that anyone who was or is seriously challenging the Tate, “the establishment” and one of the key “official gatekeepers to cultural/artistic history” in the UK (or any other country), needs to be

heard.

“The Falsification of David King's Work” was a reminder to me that even the Tate can attempt to conceal (or deliberately misinterpret) genuine historic photographic evidence.

It came as no surprise to me that Trotsky was being sidelined by the exhibition curators. I was disturbed by the curator's approach to David King's work, first, by allowing previously unseen imagery to be exhibited in the UK without any comments or accompanying text. Second, and most important, allowing history to be distorted over the coverage of the Revolution itself—where Trotsky and Marxism are not given a platform so that people realise what potential they had to deliver an alternative to Stalinism.

Peter Sylveire is an artist based in London where he has exhibited over many years, as well as in Paris.

I would recommend anyone to see any exhibition from David King's archive. It is a marvellous collection. There's a revealing passage in Paul Mitchell's review, which recalls King's visit to the Soviet Union in 1970, on an assignment for the London *Sunday Times*, to research material for a forthcoming feature on the centenary of Lenin's birth.

King said, “The one figure who I was most interested in finding out about was nowhere to be seen. I spent a lot of time asking ‘Yes, but where is 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.”

The Tate Modern exhibition in no way remedied this tragic falsification. Why is it that Leon Trotsky remains the one leading Bolshevik who has not been rehabilitated in Russia?

In the Gorbachev period they rehabilitated Zinoviev, Kamenev and many others, but not Trotsky. He faces an absolute, continuous and fierce silencing which is being redoubled everywhere, including in the Tate exhibition.

Trotsky was the inheritor of Lenin and Leninism. The ice pick driven into Trotsky's skull by a Stalinist agent in 1940 was not only the assassination of one individual, but the attempted destruction of an entire understanding of history.

With his collection David King sought to shed light on that history. It is not that there were no images of Trotsky on display in the exhibition. Rather that they were presented devoid of any real political meaning. The Stalin/Trotsky conflict is presented as a “power struggle” between two individuals.

In the Tate exhibition Trotskyism and the class struggle nature of the period were in the background. In essence, the exhibition was anti-Trotsky.

I used to run an art gallery in London called The Young Unknowns. One of its slogans was, “For the What over the Who.”

We wanted to counter the culture of celebrity by curating exhibitions around a theme as opposed to an individual artist. The Tate exhibition was curated in such a way that it teaches us nothing about what drove Stalin or Trotsky, or the other figures in that greatest event of recent time. They are mere names.

I remember how the work of Dave King contributed, in the 1970s, to the renewed investigation by the International Committee of the Fourth International into the circumstances surrounding Trotsky's assassination in Mexico and the exposure of [US Socialist Workers Party leader] Joseph Hansen's role in it, particularly in the pamphlet *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*.

King devoted his life to uncovering the crimes of Stalinism. He has provided a tremendous service to history and to future generations. His work should be presented in the way he collected it and understood it.

We live in renewed revolutionary times and the old lies are being warmed up to convince people that there is no escape from capitalism, that it's "human nature," that there are always going to be "greedy people," and so on. The Tate exhibition was designed to convince people that to try and build a working-class movement and overthrow capitalism is going to end in tyranny "as you can see in Russia."

Future exhibitions should be curated by someone who understands the real nature of King's archive. I am sure he would agree.

Jarmila Izova is a Goldsmith College Fine Arts graduate working in London.

I went to see the Tate exhibition after reading Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. As I was reading his account of those historic events, I was really moved. There are no images in the book, but it grows in your mind and you feel that you are really there. When I finished, I wished I had images to make it visual.

As I was walking through the King exhibition I wanted to see how Trotsky was depicted, in cartoons, pictures and books. Coming out the exhibition I felt there was a lack of his presence. I expected to see more of Trotsky, knowing that he was the main enemy of Stalin.

The room where Trotsky was shown speaking was so refreshing—to see him on the screen and the whole atmosphere of the time. That was in one room, but it was not there in all the other rooms. So the exhibition came very close to the British Library exhibition—just another way of having a go at Soviet art and culture. This exhibition was not about understanding what happened in Russia.

David King dedicated his life to collecting the art and memorabilia of the period but the exhibition, because of the way it was curated, did not amount to much.

When I go to see a Cézanne exhibition, I want to weep because of the way it is put together. It vibrates! The Tate exhibition was a real opportunity to inspire people with the great ideas of the Russian Revolution, but it was bland and had no high point.

In my country, the Czech Republic, there is a lack of understanding of this history. They associate Communism with the great purges. But there is at least a recognition of Trotsky and his name.

Many families in the Czech Republic are connected to the mining industry. After 1989 they closed the mines causing joblessness, homelessness and alcoholism. Like many other questions, there are dark holes that need to be opened up and explained.

I was ready to weep when I was presented with this exhibition. They want to bury the truth about 1917 deeper and deeper because they see it as dangerous to the capitalists. They do not want to unearth these beautiful ideas because it is revolutionary material that will help people to fight to bring down capitalism. The exhibition felt almost like burying someone alive, hermetically sealing them off somewhere so as not to affect future generations.

David Cowan, a graduate of Fine Art Sculpture who taught Design & Make projects in north-west England before moving into Special

Educational Needs teaching in south London:

Last year I went to the centenary exhibition of the Russian Revolution at the Royal Academy [RA] and was disgusted at the anti-Bolshevik, anti-revolutionary propaganda there. Then I visited the Tate website video for the *Red Star Over Russia* exhibition and thought it was quite decent with some truthful statements being made. I thought the Tate's exhibition, based on the archive of David King, has got to be better than the RA's and hoped that events would be placed in their context.

King's archive is unique and historically important. He defended the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and was supportive of the Trotskyist movement. His whole life was spent gathering information and imagery on 1917, Trotsky and the Stalinist Moscow Trials. I hoped that the Tate exhibition would be in the spirit, passion and dedication to the truth that animated King in pursuit of his collection. I was looking forward to seeing images I had only seen in books, learning about the events surrounding the images and at what stage of the revolution they were produced.

While I thought the images exhibited were great, I was astonished as I progressed through the exhibition. There were images I had not seen before with virtually no explanation to place them in context. I came across the room of photographs of those who "disappeared" under Stalin's show trials. There was no serious explanation of who these individuals were, apart from their names.

From my own knowledge I recognised members of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky. With prior knowledge of King's work, you could do that to some extent, but without such knowledge it was impossible.

I was very disappointed, not in the images shown, but in the distorted account of the Russian working class taking power under a Marxist leadership. The archive needs to be put into the hands of people who don't reject this out of hand.

I totally agree with the review of the exhibition by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Truth is everything. King's archive should be presented truthfully otherwise it can be used as bourgeois propaganda, attacking Trotsky, 1917 and King's own beliefs.

King's approach to his work is formulated in his publications, including *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs & Art in Stalin's Russia* and *Trotsky: A Photographic Biography*. In them he provides a clear historical and political background needed to understand the graphic material that he rescued from oblivion. In the accompanying text, King seeks to reveal the historical truth about the 1917 Russian Revolution and above all, about Trotsky, whom he always insisted represented an alternative to Stalinism and dictatorship.

The curators of the Tate exhibition were attempting to offset the thoughts of masses of people who want revolutionary change and believe that everyone should be equal. It was part of a massive ideological brake being applied to this political development.

Barry Bliss has been making feature films for over 30 years. He wrote and directed Fords on Water (1984), Poppies (2006), Voices from Afar (2007), Godard and Others (2010), Notes from the Underground (2012) and Art Is... (2013). His novel Hand Upon Heart—The Last Templars was published in 2006.

I saw the Tate exhibition and wasn't very impressed by the curatorship of it, although it was thrilling to see some of the original material that I hadn't seen before. I found it ironic that the exhibition along the corridors of the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg that I went to last year had a far more accurate representation of Trotsky's role in the October Revolution than did the Tate.

The paradox was that although the local government of St. Petersburg was by no means pro-Bolshevik, they were very proud of their history and, against the climate emanating from Moscow, were very pro-active in celebrating the October Revolution in some of their official buildings. They have even had an official portrait of Trotsky painted (he was the first head of the St. Petersburg Soviet) and it also hangs along the corridor, in

premier position, with other heads of the St. Petersburg Soviet/Council.

The portrait of Trotsky didn't reach the artistic standards of former portraits by Annenkov or Diego Rivera, but the fact that it had been commissioned at all is a remarkable development in reclaiming a once suppressed history.

Along this corridor, that ran for over 100 metres (I was proudly informed), were photographs from the revolution—some of the building, and some more general. The photos were laid out in chronological order and through them I was able to see the development of mass protest to organised opposition and ultimately armed insurrection.

There were many images I had not seen before and this was a thrill for me. But more importantly these images returned Trotsky to his rightful place, along with Lenin at the epicentre of the struggle. To be able to see un-doctored photos of the October events, in the building where many of them occurred, was a once in a lifetime honour.

I also saw a centenary exhibition at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg [The Winter Palace and the Hermitage in 1917]. The first things that impressed you when you entered the exhibition were the huge banners hanging from the ceilings on which were images of the October Revolution. But they were not the usual shots of the restaged storming of the Winter Palace, etc. These were photos of the ordinary people of Petrograd—workers from the factories, peasants arrived from the country, women demanding peace and bread.

All these countless faces, names lost to time, staring at the camera, their expressions revealing hope for a better future. All were participants in this historic moment, a moment that changed history. With just these simple images the curators at the Winter Palace gave a lie to the idea that October was somehow a coup by a small, elitist group of people. These frozen moments captured the great movement of the many as they swept away the old regime.

However, the Tate exhibition, like those at the Royal Academy and British Library, was a travesty in terms of misrepresentation, not only of Trotsky's role, but of the revolution itself. It seems to me that by trying to marginalise these historic events, they hope they will just "go away" and new generations will not gain inspiration from the seminal event of the 20th century.

I think it is instructive to compare the Tate's exhibition of Kazimir Malevich in 2014 with that of David King's archive. The Malevich exhibition was far richer and more comprehensive. One can only assume that this reflects the Tate's attempt to separate the artist from his or her historical context.

They still seem to believe in the theory of "artist as superman/woman" and you can almost get away with this when dealing with the artist as an individual. But once you confront a broader perspective, a movement of the tectonic plates of history where that great tide sweeps up all in its path, your creative parochialism is exposed.

Just as in the British Library's final exhibit, where the faces of those purged by Stalin filled the screen in a darkened room, so it was with David King's exhibition. Through the curatorship one sees the faces of those purged and is left in no doubt that the destruction of the revolution was inevitable.

Presumably the curators believe there's a moral here; don't try this again as the same fate awaits you. This of course flies in the face of the evidence, evidence that David King spent a lifetime accumulating to put the record straight. As with so much history if a lie remains unchallenged it will, in time, be treated as "fact."



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