

Amsterdam Hermitage ends “Russian avant-garde: Revolution in art” exhibit

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9 March 2022

Days after the Rotterdam Philharmonic broke its 35-year ties with orchestra conductor Valery Gergiev and sacked him, Amsterdam’s Hermitage Museum broke its 30-year ties with world’s largest art museum, the Hermitage of St. Petersburg. The Amsterdam Hermitage has called off its recently-premiered exhibition, “Russian Avant-garde: Revolution in Art.”

This marks a further, disgraceful assault on art, driven by European governments’ anti-Russian propaganda and the war fever driving the affluent middle class after Russian President Vladimir Putin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine.

The exhibition opened its doors on January 29, 2022, and was to run until January 8, 2023. In total, 500 works of art on canvas, paper, textile, porcelain, theatre set design, interiors, utensils, and books are exhibited for one-of-a-kind ensemble, notably featuring works of Kazimir Malevich and Vassily Kandinsky. It is an extraordinary cultural event organised in cooperation with the Hermitage in St Petersburg, Russia. After the exhibit was cancelled on February 27, agreements were hastily made to return the entire exhibit to St Petersburg.

Nationalist propaganda plays a central role in all imperialist wars. Since the Russian-Ukraine war, Dutch mainstream media have blared non-stop anti-Russian propaganda, working to legitimise a US-led NATO war drive against Russia. Virtually overnight, it has taken vast proportions, as singers, athletes, filmmakers, painters, and conductors are barred or banished solely on the basis of their “Russian origin” not only in the Netherlands but across all of Europe and America.

The official reasons the Hermitage of Amsterdam has given to cancel the exhibition are outrageous. It acknowledges that “Through our carefully built ties to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, we had

access to one of the world’s most famous collections of art from which to draw for our exhibitions.” It cites opposition among museum staff, noting: “Supervisors, the director, management and employees of the Hermitage Amsterdam are having a hard time breaking ties with the Hermitage Saint Petersburg.”

Nonetheless, the Hermitage of Amsterdam states: “The Board and the Supervisory Board have decided to sever ties with the State Hermitage Museum. A border has been crossed with the invasion of the Russian army in Ukraine. War destroys everything. So is 30 years of cooperation. The Hermitage Amsterdam currently has no other choice. Also we hope for changes in the future of Russia that will allow us to restore ties with the Hermitage Saint Petersburg.”

Hermitage Amsterdam director Annabelle Birnie told NRC Handelsblad that there are plans to rename the museum in order to break off any possible link with the Hermitage in St Petersburg. She said, “We can remove the ‘M.’ Then it says Heritage, Heritage on the Amstel [river]. Other variants are also conceivable, and perhaps the name will remain.”

Birnie went on to make clear that the decision to sever ties with the Hermitage St Petersburg was taken under direct threat of right-wing violence if the museum kept the Russian avant garde exhibit. She said, “threats of all kinds have come to us. I don’t want to say more about that. The safety of employees, visitors, the collection and the building is important. But that is not the reason for our decision.”

This is a staggering statement. Not only does one of the most prestigious Dutch museums face “all kind of threats” for holding an exhibition on Russian avant-garde art, but the director does not “want to say more about that.” The only conclusion one can draw is that the threats against the Hermitage in Amsterdam have

the tacit support of layers of the Dutch security forces and state machine.

Since the 2014 far-right coup in Kiev orchestrated by the US and its NATO allies brought to power a pro-NATO government in Ukraine, the Dutch government has played a significant role in inciting anti-Russian sentiment. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte played a leading role in Europe in the campaign to blame Russia for the still-unresolved crash over Ukraine of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 in July 2014. The crash killed 298 passengers and crew.

The cancellation of the Russian avant-garde exhibition today is an entirely reactionary decision, in line with NATO military propaganda and the prevailing anti-Russian hysteria. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not, in fact, destroyed “everything.” Russian art is imperishable testimony to the great cultural, aesthetic and intellectual heritage that humanity can muster to overcome social and historical problems such as inequality, pandemics and war.

The hypocrisy of the decision taken by—or, more accurately, forced upon—the Amsterdam Hermitage is staggering. In the thirty years since the Stalinist bureaucracy’s 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union removed the main military obstacle to NATO wars, the American and European imperialist powers, the leading forces for death and destruction internationally, have been on a bloody rampage. Invading or bombing Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, to name but a few, they caused millions of deaths and forced tens of millions to flee their homes.

What position did the Hermitage of Amsterdam take on these wars? Did it cancel exhibits of American or British art in response to the blatantly illegal and unprovoked invasion of Iraq in 2003? Closer to home, what did it say about the Dutch air strikes in Hawija, Iraq on June 2, 2015, in which 70 civilians were killed including 9 children?

The implications for artistic freedom of the Amsterdam Hermitage’s attempt to hold Russian art responsible for the actions of the Kremlin are chilling, however. Should the Hermitage-St Petersburg or other museums take down works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals or other Dutch masters because of Dutch colonial plunder and slave trade in the East and West Indies? Should Piet Mondrian’s works be banned because tens of thousands of Indonesians died in Dutch

imperialism’s failed attempt to keep Indonesia in colonial shackles after World War II?

The cancellation of the Russian avant-garde art exhibit in Amsterdam is doubtless welcomed in European ruling circles as a victory on the cultural front of the NATO war drive targeting Russia. The Dutch government itself, which is sending hundreds of anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine and fanning a chauvinist atmosphere, will try to use it against genuine anti-war sentiment at home.

In a decisive regard, however, the suppression of a Russian avant-garde art exhibit in Amsterdam echoes the Kremlin’s nationalistic and militaristic course that it hypocritically pretends to oppose.

As he launched the war in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin denounced the Bolsheviks who led the October 1917 revolution that led to the founding of the Soviet Union. Launching a war that is dividing Russian and Ukrainian workers, Putin criticized Lenin, Trotsky and the other great Russian Marxist revolutionaries for having made too many concessions to non-Russian nationalities in the old former Russian empire as they established the Soviet Union.

By calling-off the Russian avant-garde exhibition, the Dutch political establishment is censoring the flowering of Russian culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—within which the Bolsheviks emerged as the tendency oriented to the European and international working class. The attempt to silence anything that conflicts with the degraded anti-Russian propaganda in official media testifies to the anti-democratic nature of the European policy in the Ukraine war crisis.



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