

Nationalist frenzy mounts to seize art of Russia's Morozov Collection on exhibit in Paris

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The Morozov Collection of Russian and European impressionist and post-impressionist art is on exhibit at the Louis Vuitton Foundation (LVF) in Paris. It includes masterworks by dozens of artists including Repin, Korovin, Larionov, Goncharova and Malevitch from Russia, and Monet, Rodin, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso from Europe. Over 1 million people have visited it; by its scheduled end on April 3, it is set to be the most widely visited art exhibit ever in Paris.

The exhibit revives the profound, imperishable link established between Russian and European culture as they flowered in the decades before the 1917 October Revolution. The collection itself was nationalized and made available to the public by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution.

As such, the Morozov Collection cuts across the nationalist media campaign that has been whipped up in France since Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, in order to legitimize the NATO war drive against Russia. The exhibit has become the target of an outpouring of hatred in the French media and cultural establishment.

There are mounting calls for the art to be seized by the French state or the LVF, which is owned by Europe's richest man, multi-billionaire luxury magnate Bernard Arnault (net worth: \$159 billion). The loan agreement, made privately between Arnault and Putin at the Kremlin in 2016, requires that the works be returned to Russia by April 6.

The morning after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a coordinated campaign began in the French press debating the possibility of seizing the Morozov Collection. *Le Monde* wrote that "after the Russian army's offensive," keeping the exhibit open "is bound to raise questions." *Le Figaro* raised the possibility of selling it off to wealthy

collectors "to buy useful weapons for the Ukrainian resistance."

These proposals testify to the debased character of the anti-Russian campaign whipped up in France, which amounts to an assault on art and human culture. The seizure of the 200 works of this priceless collection would arguably be the biggest single theft of art in Europe since the Nazi plunder of the continent during World War II.

Yet this is precisely what powerful voices in the media and what passes for the French intelligentsia are proposing. This month, Gilles Hertzog, the editor of *La Règle du Jeu* magazine, penned an editorial demanding that the Morozov Collection "stay in Paris until the end of hostilities in Ukraine and the withdrawal of Russian invaders."

Referring to Picasso's painting of the fascist bombing of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War, Hertzog claims that it would now be a moral insult to Picasso and to art as a whole for the exhibit to return to Russia. He wrote, "To be exposed under the patronage of Vladimir Putin, for the creator of Guernica, has become an intolerable insult."

The hypocrisy of this argument is staggering. In the 30 years since the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union eliminated their main military rival, the American and European imperialist powers rampaged across the world. Invading or bombing countries including Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Mali, they killed millions and turned tens of millions into refugees. If one accepted Hertzog's reactionary claim that art cannot be exhibited in a country at war, one would have to close down virtually every art museum in Europe and North America.

Hertzog does not, however, denounce the exhibiting of the Guernica painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as an affront to Picasso. Nor does he

claim that the French bombing last year of a wedding in northern Mali, killing at least 19 civilians, made Paris unworthy of greeting the Morozov Collection.

Self-interested hypocrisy is an inherent feature of the affluent and corrupt milieu around Hertzog, a grandson of Stalinist Senator Marcel Cachin and friend of post-1968 “New Philosopher” Bernard-Henri Lévy. Lévy and Hertzog are infamous for justifying wars based on selective invocations of human rights. Hertzog has called for NATO to invade Syria and end its policy of “No troops on the ground” and denounced the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, which this milieu sees as an intolerable threat to NATO’s monopoly on the use of military force, has driven it into a war frenzy. Lévy, who led the promotion of the 2011 war in Libya, long backed the anti-Russian provocations that incited Putin to invade Ukraine. Lévy has repeatedly toured the Donbass with far-right Ukrainian nationalist militias and is currently in Odessa, campaigning for more NATO involvement in Ukraine—despite the danger that this could provoke a Third World War between nuclear armed powers.

In *La Règle du Jeu*, Hertzog tries to give a somewhat polished expression to his anti-Russian bile. He admits that in this exhibit, “another face of eternal Russia is offered to us, open to the world, a friend of the arts, passionate about culture and nourished by exchange with Europe.”

After his brief nod to the artistic achievements of the Russian people, Hertzog denounces it for being supposedly unworthy of Russian art. He calls for the Morozov Collection to be confiscated, only to “return to the walls of Russian state museums when Russia ... is once again worthy of welcoming back the best of French and Russian art.”

Hertzog’s reactionary calls to punish the Russian people for the actions of their government has dire implications for artistic freedom. During the careers of Monet and Rodin, France was engaged in the bloody conquest of Indochina, Syria, and Morocco and the pillage of Algeria and West Africa. During the careers of Matisse and of Hertzog’s mother, Stalinist lawmaker Marcelle Hertzog-Cachin, France waged and lost bloody colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria that claimed over a half million lives and sent millions to internment camps.

Does Hertzog consider the French people “worthy” of Monet, Rodin or Matisse? Should they have been denied the right to exhibit their works in France because of France’s colonial crimes? Should museums in Hanoi,

Damascus, Casablanca, Algiers or Dakar confiscate French art exhibited there, arguing, as Hertzog does in Russia, that the French people should suffer collective punishment for the crimes of their government?

The petty-bourgeois supporters of “humanitarian imperialism” are no doubt too busy for such questions, hard at work on their press campaign for war with Russia. However, their campaign against Russia has no legitimate artistic, political or, one might add, moral basis.

Indeed, for all their denunciations of Putin and Russia, they share a key element of Putin’s Russian nationalism. As he invaded Ukraine and launched a war dividing Russian and Ukrainian workers, Putin, the heir of the Stalinist restoration of capitalism, denounced the October Revolution. He attacked Lenin, Trotsky and the other great Marxists for making too many concessions to non-Russian nationalities in the founding of the Soviet Union.

The anti-communist underpinnings of the forces targeting the Morozov Collection were spelled out in the *National Review*, the right-wing US publication founded by ex-CIA agent William F. Buckley, Jr. It raises the “Morozov Collection stash in Paris, which the French should keep until Putin gets out of Ukraine.” Denouncing the Soviet Union, it concludes: “Keep the art in Paris. It’s a fitting way to draw a line under the utopian hell that started in 1917.”

Such threats to steal the artistic heritage of the Russian people expose the utterly anti-democratic character of the ongoing NATO war drive against Russia.



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