

But Live Here? No Thanks: Surrealism and Anti-fascism at the Lenbachhaus in Munich explores the political roots of the Surrealist movement

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17 April 2025

An exhibition at the Lenbachhaus art museum in Munich, which ran October 15, 2024 to March 30, 2025, was a notable contribution to the international series of exhibitions and gatherings surrounding the 100th anniversary of the publication of the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924.

A brief overview of the Munich exhibition is available in this English-language introduction on the Lenbachhaus website and via this video (in German).

A catalogue of over 600 pages, described as an Anthology, accompanied the exhibition. It features key texts, poems and declarations dealing with the political roots and nature of the Surrealist movement in combating fascism, colonialism and xenophobia. Included in the Anthology are documents and statements confirming the influence of Trotsky and Trotskyism on the evolution of the movement.

The introduction to the Anthology makes a telling point. Declaring that official presentations of Surrealism largely remain “trapped in narrow definitions,” aesthetically (as a style), geographically (in Paris), temporally (1920s to 1940s), “and concentrated on a small group of prominent protagonists (André Breton, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Salvador Dali),” the introduction notes that the movement was in fact far more extensive.

It continues:

Major exhibitions and coffee-table books propagate a version of Surrealism in which the cult of stardom goes hand in hand with a pinch of sex, anecdotes of partner swapping, and a superficial lay-Freudianism; a toothless semblance of the movement which our art institutions have eagerly propagated.

One example of such a “toothless semblance” was the exhibition held in the Museum Barberini in Potsdam (a city on the border of Berlin) last year, *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, which featured many fascinating works by Surrealist artists, while laying its emphasis, as the title indicates, on the movement’s relationship with magic!

Explaining the background to the recent exhibition in Munich, the organizers explain:

Our aim in this project is to make Surrealism once again visible as a militant, internationally connected and politicized movement, which is how many of its representatives understood it. In their art, the Surrealists insisted on an absolute “freedom” that was to infect

the rest of society. The Surrealists’ understanding stood at odds with fascist freedom: the freedom to command and obey. For the Surrealists, it meant a way of life whose rhythm was not that of wage labor and whose goals were larger than nation and profit.

The introduction to the catalogue-Anthology begins with a tribute to the role played by Trotskyism in the history of the Surrealist movement, in the form of a short verse:

When we are told that our age has other worries
than writing poems, we reply: “So do we!”

The introduction continues:

So declared the members of the Surrealist poetry and resistance group “La Main à plume” in 1941 in one of their typically ambiguous manifestos. They had indeed other things to do than write poetry, because as Trotskyists with connections to the French Resistance, they were exposed to great danger. In German-occupied Paris, they nonetheless wrote poems (often jointly), published in underground journals on philosophy and visual theory, discussed the role of the material in the photographic process, and circulated pamphlets with texts by their members. At the same time, they forged documents for others, provided hide-outs, carried out acts of sabotage, and organized escape networks.

Rarely mentioned in literature dealing with Surrealism, “La Main à plume” (the Writer’s Hand, from a line by French poet Arthur Rimbaud) worked under the most difficult conditions. Financed in part by Pablo Picasso, the group produced a series of magazines to propagate their anti-fascist and revolutionary message. Each edition required a different title in order to evade the attention of the Nazi censorship.

The Munich exhibition was largely organised around what the curators describe as “episodes,” i.e., the coming together of artists based on specific issues and on a largely chronological basis. The story begins in Paris but then spreads to Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Spain, Egypt, Martinique and eventually the United States.

The exhibition charts the first shoots of the Surrealist movement in

1924, stressing its political roots. André Breton, who directly witnessed the horrors of World War I serving as a nurse on the French front, wrote in 1942, in the middle of the Second World War, that Surrealism could “be understood historically only in relation to the war, I mean—from 1919 to 1938—in relation at the same time to the war from which it issues [1914-18] and the war to which it extends [1939-].” Other leading figures in the movement, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard and Jacques Vaché, also experienced the trauma of war and were subsequently bitter opponents of any notion of the nation or fatherland.

The exhibition and Anthology trace the series of political interventions made by the Surrealists led by Breton, beginning with the movement’s denunciation of France’s role as a colonial power in the Rif War (1925-1926) fought in the mountainous regions of Morocco.

Active at that time in and around the recently formed French Communist Party (PCF), the Surrealists supported the mass mobilisation opposing the war that culminated in a general strike on October 12, 1925. The Surrealists led by Breton also played an active role in opposing the *Exposition coloniale internationale* (*International Colonial Exhibition*) staged in Paris in 1931. Not only did they call for a boycott of the exhibition, which whitewashed France’s crimes in its colonies, they also organised their own alternative anti-colonialist exhibition.

The title of the Munich exhibition, *But Live Here? No Thanks (Aber hier leben, nein danke)*, is taken from a 2005 song by the German pop group Tocotronic. It is in part an allusion to the Surrealists’ response to the situation in Germany after Hitler’s coming to power in 1933, which forced thousands of artists and intellectuals, many of them Jewish, into exile.

As the Anthology notes:

With Nazi rule in Germany, and subsequently the Spanish Civil War, the situation changed: violence and struggle became more concrete. Exile, resistance, hiding, and imprisonment formed the reality in which many Surrealists were now living. Acting with manifestos alone was no longer possible. Numerous Surrealists, among them Eugenio Granell, Wifredo Lam, André Masson, Kati Horna, Mary Low, and Juan Bréa, as well as Carl Einstein campaigned and worked for the Second Republic in Spain.

The early 1930s saw relations between the French group of surrealists and the Stalinised French Communist Party reach a breaking point. In 1932, the main group around Breton split with those who accommodated themselves to Stalinism and its nationalist orientation. Aragon and Georges Sadoul swore allegiance to the PCF and renounced their Surrealist comrades.

In 1933, Breton, Paul Éluard and René Crevel were formally excluded from the party, because of an article in the Surrealist journal written by Ferdinand Alquié, which denounced “the wind of cretinization blowing from the USSR.” A year later, “Socialist Realism” was designated by bureaucratic fiat in Moscow as the officially sanctioned art form to be pursued by Communist parties and their supporters across the globe, which appalled the Surrealists.

In regard to Socialist Realism, Leon Trotsky later noted:

The name itself has evidently been invented by some high functionary in the [Soviet Union’s] department of the arts. This “realism” consists in the imitation of provincial daguerreotypes of the third quarter of the last century; the “socialist” character apparently consists in representing, in the manner of pretentious photography, events which never took place.

The Moscow Trials and the genocide of socialists in the Soviet Union, the betrayal of the French and Spanish revolutions (1936-39) and the Hitler-Stalin pact in August 1939 cemented the gulf between the main body of French surrealism and the PCF.

In order to understand and combat the nationalist degeneration of the PCF and the Stalinist Third International, the Surrealists in France increasingly turned to the international perspective of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. In April 1938, Breton travelled to Mexico to meet Trotsky, and together they wrote the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” also signed by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, which called for the establishment of an International Federation for Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI).

In January of the following year, in its short-lived publication *Clé*, the French section of FIARI published a powerful statement titled “No Fatherland!”

The full text of the statement is included in the Anthology for the Munich exhibition, but it is worthwhile here citing a portion of the document. Changing what must be changed, the document could be applied to the present situation in the US and a host of other countries where capitalist elites are increasingly embracing rabid nationalism and fascism.

“No Fatherland!” begins:

The vile campaigns, conducted under the slogans “France Awake” and “France for the French,” are beginning to bear their poisonous fruits. The May decrees of Mr. Sarraut [chauvinist French interior minister] and certain implementation regulations appended to the November emergency decrees are putting in place despicable procedures at the expense of foreigners residing in France, particularly political emigrants, which resemble those of fascist countries. The deportation measures already taken and the preparations for internment that we are witnessing indicate the escalation of a policy of panic, and violent actions aimed at establishing an “authoritarian” and soon thereafter totalitarian regime in France. They testify to the rapid contagion afflicting the “democratic” countries, which, contrary to basic human considerations, are now allowing themselves to renounce the principle of the right of asylum, long considered sacred.

Art has as little a fatherland as the workers. To advocate today a return to “French” art, as not only the fascists but also the Stalinists do, is to oppose the preservation of this necessary close connection for art, to work towards the division and mutual misunderstanding of peoples, and to consciously promote historical regression.

Breton’s brief but highly productive collaboration with Trotsky was cruelly cut short by the assassination of the great revolutionary in August 1940 by the Stalinist agent Ramon Mercader.

The Anthology from the Munich exhibition is a vital collection of documents that confirm the political roots and nature of the Surrealist movement. It provides a great deal of valuable material for a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the conflicts and contradictions that raged inside its volatile and often shifting membership.

One of Surrealism’s important artistic antecedents was the Dadaist movement. It adopted the latter’s hatred of nationalism, chauvinism, militarism, appeals to church and family—all of the watchwords employed by Europe’s elites to justify plunging the world into the first imperialist slaughter in 1914—while at the same time embracing elements of Dada’s idealism and anti-intellectualism. According to Dadaist founding member Tristan Tzara, “thought is made in the mouth.”

Surrealism also drew from a deep vein of anti-authoritarian French ideology and literature with significantly irrationalist and subjectivist overtones. Woven into the Surrealist articles, discussions, manifestos and activities as well were the writings and thinking of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, with its focus on sexual life and the functioning of the individual unconscious.

A great deal of ideological confusion prevailed in the Surrealist circles, a potent mix of genuinely revolutionary hatred of the existing order and sharply idealist, at times bordering on mystical, conceptions about the relationship of thinking to being.

Clarification of the aesthetic, political and philosophical issues that beset the Surrealists and other left-wing artists at the time was made impossible, above all, by the emergence and, later, dominance of Stalinism in the Communist parties.

The fresh, healthy shoots of collaboration between Soviet artists and intellectuals with progressive artists in France, Germany and throughout Europe that sprouted in the wake of the October Revolution in 1917 were savagely cut down by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow.

Trotsky, who had made major contributions affirming the importance of the free discussion and dissemination of artistic ideas and impulses, was forced into exile and eventually murdered. His fellow thinkers were expelled from the Soviet Communist Party and many executed in 1937 in the course of the great purges. These included figures such as Aleksandr Voronsky, a supporter of Trotsky's Left Opposition and editor of *Red Virgin Soil*, the most substantial Soviet literary journal of the 1920s.

These developments led to the growing separation of the best artists from genuine Marxism. It encouraged the artists' weaker sides and the sort of ideological "one-sidedness" the Surrealists often exhibited (obsession with the unconscious, intuition, dreams, etc.).

To his credit, Breton, with the rise of fascism in Germany, France and throughout Europe, increasingly distanced himself from many of the idealist excesses that accompanied the inception of Surrealism. In a lecture delivered in Belgium in 1934, for example, Breton noted that he now viewed the movement's earlier belief in the "omnipotence of thought" as "being extremely mistaken." Three years later in one of his finest essays, "Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism," Breton proclaimed the first of "a fundamental and indivisible set of propositions": "Adherence to all the principles of dialectical materialism endorsed in their entirety by surrealism: the primacy of matter over thought." Tragically, the death of Trotsky and the onset of the second imperialist war largely put an end to this intellectual evolution.

The exhibition in Munich and its documentation, although not without political and ideological issues of their own, provide a basis for re-examining these issues and serve as a meaningful counterweight to the prevailing tendency by museums and cultural institutions to play down, distort or ignore completely the political history of the Surrealist movement.



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