

Comrades in Art: How Stalinism ruined the Artists' International Association

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Andy Friend's 2025 book *Comrades in Art: Artists Against Fascism 1933–1943* underpins the current Tate Britain display *Artists' International: The First Decade* and will form the basis of a larger exhibition at the Towner gallery Eastbourne, *Comrades in Art: Artists Against Fascism*, running from May 7 to October 18, 2026.

Comrades in Art traces how artists in Britain responded to a decade of political and cultural upheaval—the rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, World War II and the Cold War.

At the centre of Friend's narrative is the Artists' International Association (AIA), founded in Britain in 1933 by a small group of radical, largely working-class youth, refugees and exiles. In its early phase many members genuinely looked to revolutionary change—an orientation that was later crushed by the rise of Stalinism and the Popular Front policies it imposed on the communist parties and their periphery.

Friend reconstructs the AIA's emergence. Cartoonist James Holland recalled that the collapse of patronage after World War I and widespread impoverishment compelled artists to “use their abilities to discredit a system that makes art and culture dependent on the caprices of the money markets.” Many of these young artists saw in the Soviet Union the only existing society attempting to reorganise culture on a non-capitalist basis.

Yet the trajectory Friend ultimately records is not the AIA's revolutionary promise but its political capitulation to the Popular Front—the direct outcome of the Stalinist bureaucratic counter-revolution. Rooted in Russia's economic backwardness, the isolation of the Soviet state after the defeat of revolutions abroad, the devastation of civil war, and the rise of a privileged bureaucratic caste, Stalinism—with its stated goal of building “socialism in one country” as an alternative to the perspective of world socialist revolution—transformed the Bolshevik Party and the Comintern from organs of proletarian internationalism into diplomatic and political instruments for defending bureaucratic interests.

The Comintern enforced class-collaborationist Popular Front alliances with “progressive” bourgeois forces and suppressed independent revolutionary currents, a process Leon Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Fourth International fought in the face of ferocious repression.

Culturally, this political turn meant dissolving explicitly revolutionary artistic groupings into broad, politically diluted coalitions; subordinating experimentation to propaganda; and elevating ideological conformity over critical and creative integrity.

In Britain the AIA mirrored this Popular Front turn: the revolutionary sentiments that animated early reports by its leading founders Clifford Rowe and Pearl Binder after visits to the Soviet Union gradually gave way to institutional compromise and cross-class coalitions.

Friend vividly describes those early, militant years. Rowe, already a political artist—as shown by his cover for *The Spirit of Invergordon*, commemorating the 1931 naval mutiny—spent 18 months in Moscow in the early 1930s. There he encountered a visual culture mobilised for mass education and political agitation, reinforcing his belief that art could function as a collective social force. His mural, *The Struggle between the Unemployed and the Police Forces*, produced for the Red Army's fifteenth anniversary celebrations and depicting the brutal repression of the British Hunger Marches, exemplified art committed to class struggle.

Binder, born in Salford to a Russian Jewish tailor, was struck by the popular enthusiasm for art she witnessed in the Soviet Union among “Red Army soldiers, housewives, street sweepers, shopkeepers, teachers and children.” Her 1935 lithograph *Russian Railway Journey* beautifully captures that sympathy.

Both rejected the Stalinist doctrine that later hardened into Socialist Realism, recognising it as doctrinal constraint that stifled experimentation and reduced artists to mere propagandists.

Friend tells the story of Edith Simon (1917–2003), a Berlin-born Jewish refugee who became the youngest founding member of the AIA at 16, who recalled the electrifying sense of purpose the organisation offered: the belief that art could help revolutionise society, that artistic values were inseparable from social values, and that integrating art into everyday life could enhance both.

Friend foregrounds the AIA's lively political cartooning—particularly the work of the “Three Jameses” (Holland, Fitton, Boswell).

James Fitton produced early works including his 1928 *May Day* lithograph and his Constructivist-style 1930 *Russian Oil Products* poster (pic 6). His 1935 *Trapeze II* fused political commitment with graphic discipline and popular spectacle. Fitton's wife Margaret produced less political, more domestic and lyrical artworks exemplified by *Rhubarb Pie*.

New Zealand-born James Boswell (1906–1971), influenced by German satirists, became one of the AIA's sharpest graphic voices. His illustrations for *Left Review*, including *His Majesty's Servants*, lampooned state surveillance and undercover policing. Boswell was the only card-carrying Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) member at the founding meeting.

Another key figure was Peter Laszlo Peri (1899–1967), a Hungarian Jewish sculptor shaped by Constructivism and political exile, who introduced innovative concrete sculpture—exemplified by his 1938 work *Fishing*—and a commitment to working-class representation.

Early AIA activity—posters, cartoons, book jackets and exhibitions confronting hunger, repression, war and unemployment—treated art explicitly as a weapon in the class struggle. *Comrades in Art* testifies to this militant practice, reproducing several images from the 1934 cartoon book, *Why We Are Marching!* published for that year's Hunger March, including Rowe's cover design and Roy Laurier's *It is a Fascist Scheme!* satirising the National Government's Unemployment Bill and pernicious Means Test.

After 1935 the AIA expanded rapidly—from roughly 30 founders to nearly a 1,000 members, including establishment figures such as Augustus John, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, and Laura Knight. The slogan “Unity of Artists against Fascism, War and the Suppression of Culture” was adopted.

This rebranding coincided with the organisation's full alignment with the Popular Front strategy. Its tragic consequences were revealed most starkly in Spain: the deaths of volunteers such as AIA member Felicia Browne—whose drawings of Republican militia appear in *Comrades in Art*—and the collapse of revolutionary proletarian resistance under cross-class alliances stand as reminders of the human cost when anti-fascism is channelled into class-collaborationist politics.

Friend also highlights more oppositional figures who joined the AIA, including Viscount Jack Hastings, an Eton-educated aristocrat who broke with his class, absorbed Trotskyist ideas while apprenticing himself to the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, and attempted to bring that revolutionary visual politics back to Britain.

Hastings never matched Rivera's power, but his mural *The Worker of the Future Clearing Away the Chaos of Capitalism* at the Marx Memorial Library remains a rare British attempt to fuse muralism with an explicitly anti-capitalist message.

In 1937, the AIA's *Unity of Artists* exhibition and its Artists' Congress in Support of Peace, Democracy and Cultural

Development were hailed as major anti-fascist mobilisations but exposed the full consequences of the Popular Front turn. The AIA was now a broad, politically diluted coalition that had abandoned any residual independent socialist perspective and craved establishment approval. The Congress echoed Popular Front resolutions, ignoring the dangers of class collaboration. *Guernica* in Spain was destroyed by Nazi bombers the day after it ended.

The twists and turns of Stalinist foreign policy had extraordinarily disorienting effects. The abrupt announcement of the Stalin–Hitler Pact in 1939 led the AIA to define the Second World War as an inter-imperialist conflict. But after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 the war was recast as a patriotic “People's War” in alliance with Britain, France and the United States.

Wartime cultural mobilisation—seen in Fitton, Rowe, Binder and others turning toward morale-boosting imagery—culminated in the 1943 *Art for Liberty* exhibition, which adopted President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms as its theme, a set of “universal” rights he claimed would shape the post-war world while legitimising emerging US hegemony. The AIA's wartime incorporation into establishment propaganda fed directly into post-1945 reconstruction and the stabilisation of British capitalism, a trajectory that continued until the organisation's dissolution in 1971.

Friend's book restores neglected artists and episodes to view, but it sidesteps the central narrative of Stalinist degeneration and Popular Front opportunism that defined the 1930s. The Popular Front did not advance socialist revolution; it demobilised the working class, drawing artists into cross-class projects that upheld capitalist property relations and the state, thereby betraying the revolutionary horizons many early AIA members had imagined.



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