

John Heartfield: Laughter Is A Devastating Weapon

David King on the famed German photomontage artist

By Jeff Lusanne
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Laughter is a Devastating Weapon (Tate Publishing, October 2015) is an exciting new publication devoted to the work of German artist John Heartfield (1891-1968), known for his incomparably dark, mocking, politically pointed photomontages. The title aptly refers to the satirical power of Heartfield's artistic efforts, which earned him one of the top positions on the Nazis' "the most wanted list" when they came to power in 1933 and nearly cost him his life.

Authors David King and Ernst Volland present a fascinating group of Heartfield images from King's own collection. Volland is a German artist, whose work includes photomontages, as well as efforts in other media. Also an author and curator, Volland has brought to light overlooked figures such as Yevgeni Khaldei, the Soviet photographer best known for the iconic image of a Soviet soldier raising a flag over the Reichstag in Berlin in May 1945.

King has pursued a decades-long interest in the Russian Revolution and its graphic representation, and the relation of the visual to the historical record. He has produced numerous works on the 1917 Revolution and the role of Stalinism, as well as several works about Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition. One of the books he designed was *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky*, published in 1976 by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

In the new volume, King has adopted the appealing format of his other works—like *Red Star Over Russia*—which combines elegant reproductions of hundreds of images with a distinct, bold style of text and layout. The Heartfield tribute is organized chronologically, starting with book covers that he designed in the early 1920s. Often, the authors were able to locate Heartfield's original materials—collaged photos, airbrush modifications, brushwork and text layout—providing insight into his process.

Nearly every image in *Laughter Is A Devastating Weapon* is accompanied by an informative caption. King and Volland explain the backgrounds and fates of a wide range of figures in this way, and the association to particular images provides a memorable means by which readers can enter into the history. It becomes clear that an astonishing number of the political and artistic figures mentioned ended up fleeing Europe or falling victim to fascism or Stalinism.

The book begins with a concise account of Heartfield's early life, which had a very strange twist. Helmut Herzfeld (Heartfield's original name) was born in 1891 in Berlin, to politically active parents. His mother, Alice, was a textile worker and political activist, and Franz, his father, was a socialist/anarchist author, poet and playwright. He had a brother, Wieland, and two sisters. Franz was politically persecuted by the German authorities, prompting the family to move out of the country in impoverished conditions.

In 1899, for reasons that are still unknown, the children were suddenly

abandoned by their parents. The former eventually ended up in the care of foster parents who raised them on strict Catholic lines. Helmut showed skill at drawing and painting, and began studies at the Bavarian Arts and Crafts School in Munich in 1908. He went to work as a graphic designer for printers, and by 1913, he had moved to Berlin and was reunited with his brother Wieland, now an aspiring writer, and they stepped into the lively avant-garde art scene.

When World War One broke out, Helmut was conscripted. Horrified at the prospect of participating in Germany's nationalist and militarist cause, he faked a nervous breakdown to avoid service. Wieland joined the medical corps and was kicked out in 1915 for hitting a sergeant, was called up again, and then started a hunger strike and was discharged for good.

Helmut decided to change his name to "John Heartfield" as a conscious protest against German anti-British propaganda. John and Wieland (who changed the spelling of his last name from Herzfeld to Herzfelde) met artist George Grosz in 1915, which began a long-term artistic and personal friendship.

The King-Volland book describes how the group invented photomontage. In 1928 Grosz explained that "On a piece of cardboard we pasted a mishmash of advertisements for hernia belts, student song books and dog food, labels from schnapps and wine bottles, and photographs from the picture press, cut up at will in such a way as to say, visually, what would have been banned by the censors had we said it in words."

Simultaneously, the group launched leftist journals that attacked militarism, the pro-war Social Democratic Party and bourgeois society as a whole. Wieland founded a new publishing firm, Malik Verlag, which would publish many significant works during the Weimar Republic (1919–1933). Heartfield, his brother and Grosz all joined the newly formed German Communist Party (KPD) on December 30, 1918, receiving their membership cards from Rosa Luxemburg in person. Just two weeks later, on January 15, 1919, Luxemburg was assassinated by members of the *Freikorps*, a far-right paramilitary force ordered by the Social Democratic government to crush revolutionary upheaval in Berlin.

Heartfield, Grosz and Herzfelde were all participants in the Dada movement in Berlin, the most political of its groups. Dadaism arose as a protest against the war, militarism and nationalism and against the "rational" bourgeois culture that had produced the war. The Dadaists hence attacked traditional aesthetics, carried out artistic provocations and valued "nonsense, irrationality and intuition."

The work of Heartfield and the others within Dada took on a more thoughtful aesthetic character and a deep satirical strain began to emerge. For Grosz, that took the form of scathing drawings that Wieland published in very successful print portfolios. Heartfield hit his stride with photomontages that often involved a playful and wild use of text and

image.

Laughter is a Devastating Weapon presents a range of lesser-known work from the 1920s, particularly book cover designs Heartfield produced for Malik Verlag. Summarizing these, the authors write that “his use of photographs, integrated with his often idiosyncratic typography, transformed cover design in the 1920s. He was the first person to make a wraparound cover and his political vision combined with his visual engineering created strong and dynamic effects.”

Included in the book are striking designs for works by Upton Sinclair, John Reed, Franz Jung, Isaac Babel and others. Heartfield also created a striking cover for a German translation of Leon Trotsky’s *My Flight from Siberia* in 1922. The artist inevitably had run-ins with censorship. In the case of the cover for *Sex and Espionage in Ghent* by Heinrich Wandt, about the author’s experiences in World War I, the result is uproarious. The rejection of Heartfield’s first cover by the authorities led to increasingly absurd versions, which ultimately include an image of the censor himself cutting apart the cover, with far more overt sexual overtones than the original version had.

On the back cover of the *Illustrated History of the Russian Revolution*, published in 1928, Heartfield initially included a photo of Trotsky within an artistic montage of images suggestive of revolution. The authors note that once Trotsky was sent into exile by Stalin “the back cover photomontage was soon removed and replaced by an advertisement or, in one case, simply a solid red printing.” Later, in postwar East Germany, Trotsky was airbrushed out of the cover.

The year of that cover is significant. In 1928, James P. Cannon, a leader of the American Communist Party, during his stay in the Soviet Union, was accidentally handed a copy of Trotsky’s withering critique of the Draft Program of the Communist International. Cannon agreed with Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism and went on to help found the Trotskyist movement in America. Other sections of the International Left Opposition emerged around the world.

In Germany the Nazi Party began to gain political strength in conditions of economic ruin. In an expression of its impotence and disorientation, the Stalinized Communist Party (KPD) asserted that the Social Democratic Party was “social-fascist,” and rejected Trotsky’s call for a united front of the two workers’ parties against the threat of fascism. The Stalinists’ reactionary, ultimatic policy, its inability to advance any convincing way for the German masses out of economic despair, left the working class paralyzed and divided, and opened the door to the Nazi barbarism.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Heartfield designed many KPD political posters and magazine covers, some of them quite well-crafted and effective as imagery, which promoted the party’s twists and turns. The iconic image of man whose head is entirely wrapped in newspaper pages—“Reading the bourgeois press makes you blind and deaf. Throw away these stupid bandages!”—goes beyond the immediate circumstances and makes a more lasting argument about media-promoted ignorance and narrowness.

Perhaps one weakness of *Laughter is a Devastating Weapon* is its failure to emphasize sufficiently the devastating impact of Stalinism on Heartfield and his circle, as artists and political figures. One wonders to what extent Heartfield and the others followed the Left Opposition and Trotsky’s positions. We know that playwright Bertolt Brecht, whom Heartfield first met in 1924, was reading Trotsky extensively, along with critic Walter Benjamin.

Heartfield created his most famous work as the German disaster unfolded. In 1930, he was hired by the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper, or AIZ), a widely read weekly magazine published by “left-wing press baron” Willi Münzenberg, the cultural front man of the Communist International.

Heartfield, the authors of *Laughter is a Devastating Weapon* importantly point out, “always considered the final mass-production

results, printed in their hundreds of thousands, to be his works of art, never the one-off original of cut-up images painstakingly glued together.” At its height, AIZ had a circulation of half a million, with a considerable following in the working class.

Janos Reissman, a Hungarian photographer who took pictures for Heartfield, describes the “painstaking” process. “He insisted on the minutest changes [in the darkroom] which, in the end, I could no longer comprehend. ... I used to get so tired that I could hardly stand, let alone think ... But he would hurry home with the photos still damp, dry them, cut them out and position them under a heavy sheet of glass.”

Some of Heartfield’s images devoted to the rise of the Nazi Party remain fresh and disturbing to this day. He used inventive metaphors, playfulness, dark humor and seething anger to analyze and expose. One of the most legendary, of course, is Heartfield’s play on Hitler’s boastful claim, “Millions stand behind me.” In Heartfield’s composition, Hitler, making his famous salute, reaches behind his head to take cash from a gigantic, looming capitalist. The work’s text reads: “The real meaning of the Hitler salute: Millions Stand Behind Me—Little Man Asking for Big Donations.” The image appeared in October 1932, only months before the Nazis came to power.

On the night of April 14, 1933, the paramilitary SS burst into Heartfield’s apartment block as he was packing up his work. Hearing them, he dove through the window and leapt over a balcony, spraining his ankle. The Nazi’s searched the courtyard, but failed to find him hidden in a garbage bin, where he stayed for another seven hours. With the assistance of the underground KPD, he escaped over the Sudeten mountains into Czechoslovakia on foot, and he eventually reunited with Wieland and the AIZ staff.

In exile in Czechoslovakia, where Heartfield made some of his most famous anti-Nazi images, the circulation of AIZ fell to around 12,000. The authors state that “to be caught in Germany with a copy would have been suicidal.” When the German and Austrian ambassadors complained about the presence of Heartfield’s work at an international exhibition in Prague in 1934, the organizers removed seven of his 35 works. “The furore fuelled colossal publicity, and the Czech public voted with their feet, streaming to see Heartfield’s photomontages ‘turning laughter into a devastating weapon,’ as AIZ reported.”

One senses in Heartfield’s anti-fascist images of the mid-1930s and beyond a growing despair. There is something savage but strained about some of them. Again, the damage done by Stalinism is incalculable. Heartfield’s output and influence began to wane in exile. Publishing opportunities withered away towards the end of the 1930s, and once war broke out, it took sustained effort by well-known individuals to get the British authorities to admit Heartfield in 1938 as the Nazis threatened Czechoslovakia. Once World War Two broke out, “democratic” Britain detained Heartfield as an enemy alien in a camp. Only severe illness won him release.

King and Volland reveal that British intelligence kept a close eye on Heartfield from the moment he arrived in December 1938.

One MI5 memo from November 30, 1940 reads: “Unless there are strong reasons ... for Helmut HERZFELD’s continued release I should, from a security standpoint, recommend his re-internment. He was a known Communist at the time of his admission to the this country.”

In 1950, Heartfield and his third wife, Tutti Fietz, also a German exile, moved to Stalinist East Germany—where he again faced interrogation. *Laughter Is a Devastating Weapon* contains the transcript of Heartfield’s intensive, blockheaded questioning by the ruling Stalinist party’s control commission on October 18, 1950. The Stalinists were fearful of artists like Heartfield and Brecht, frightened that they could not control their output or the content of their work. Heartfield died in East Berlin in April 1968, aged 77. The King-Volland volume contains almost nothing by him created after 1938.

Heartfield, like many artists internationally, was powerfully influenced by the Russian Revolution and its potential to end war and inequality. Yet tragically, he and many others were ultimately limited or destroyed by the rise of Stalinism. When the book describes Heartfield's interactions and links to notable Soviet artists, like author and critic Sergei Tretyakov, it also includes their fate, which was often death at the hands of the Stalinist regime.

Laughter is a Devastating Weapon provides an engaging balance of high-quality visuals and informative text to help understand a complex artist living in a tumultuous time. Opening the book to full-page Heartfield images will no doubt grab the attention of a wide variety of readers, and King and Volland have provided the skilled curation, writing and research necessary to represent this important work and history.

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