

The Guardian's Jonathan Jones denounces the Russian Revolution and its art

By Chris Marsden and Paul Mitchell
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Guardian art critic Jonathan Jones has used a forthcoming exhibition at the Royal Academy (RA) as an opportunity to denounce the Russian Revolution.

The headline of his vile comment, “We cannot celebrate revolutionary Russian art—it is brutal propaganda,” speaks for itself. But what follows is a diatribe that mixes political reaction and intellectual charlatanry.

To underscore the political, rather than artistic motivations of Jones, he is critiquing an exhibition that he has not even seen! “Revolution: Russian Art: 1917-1932” does not open until February 11. Instead, without anything to comment on, he complains that a previous exhibit at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, held “in the heart of capitalist Manhattan,” was supposedly “intellectually lazy” for “apolitically” celebrating Russian art.

There is nothing to suggest that the RA ignores the political context of the art it will display. Its advertising material states that it will feature “Renowned artists including Kandinsky, Malevich, Chagall and Rodchenko [who] were among those to live through the fateful events of 1917, which ended centuries of Tsarist rule and shook Russian society to its foundations.”

“Amidst the tumult, the arts initially thrived as debates swirled over what form a new ‘people’s’ art should take. But the optimism was not to last: by the end of 1932, Stalin’s brutal suppression had drawn the curtain down on creative freedom. ... Revolutionary in their own right, together these works capture both the idealistic aspirations and the harsh reality of the Revolution and its aftermath.”

The RA speaks here as a well-respected and well-funded institution of the British ruling elite.

The Russian Revolution was the single most important event of the twentieth century, indeed of modern times. It took place in the midst of the mass slaughter of World War I, after the imperialist powers had dragged humanity into a bloodbath of hitherto unknown proportions—ultimately resulting in 17 million deaths and more than 20 million wounded. The revolution was led by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Bolsheviks—the representatives of the internationalist tendency that had stood out against the great betrayal by the parties of the Second International, which had supported their own national bourgeoisie in waging that terrible war.

It was thanks to this defence of socialist internationalism that the Bolsheviks won the support of the revolutionary working class and poor peasants, after mass anti-war sentiment led to the overthrow of the tsarist regime—thwarting the efforts of the bourgeois leaders of the February Revolution to maintain Russian involvement in the war.

For the working class and oppressed masses of Russia, October established their government. For advanced workers throughout Europe and the world, it was a beacon of hope and a pledge for the socialist future of mankind.

For the imperialist powers, it was a state that had to be destroyed, by reinforcing and rebuilding the remnants of the tsarist armies to install a

military dictatorship. This drive for counter-revolution was the real cause of the terrible suffering inflicted on the Russian masses—not their heroic resistance against such seemingly impossible odds. It is why the revolution became such a powerful pole of attraction for Russia’s artists and such an inspiration to their creative energies.

Jones rejects even the RA’s generally accepted differentiation between the flourishing of art during and immediately after the revolution and the stultifying impact of the counter-revolutionary consolidation of the rule of the bureaucracy under Stalin. He wants the RA to issue a public warning—that “we must not overlook” that Lenin’s “regime’s totalitarian violence rivalled Nazism.” Otherwise there is a danger that “every young idealist in the country will be clamouring for a ticket” to the RA—and will, he clearly and anxiously understands, walk away inspired by what they see.

Jones launches a broadside against the October Revolution, as “one of the most murderous chapters in human history,” adding that the RA’s event is equivalent to putting on “a huge exhibition of art from Hitler’s Germany.” He describes the revolution as a “coup” and insists that Lenin and the Bolsheviks destroyed rural society by waging war on the “kulaks,” or rich peasants, in a way that “anticipated nazism by demonising an entire category of people.”

Amid these rabid slanders, he makes a veiled, but politically central attack on the analysis made by Leon Trotsky of the subsequent rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union—declaring baldly, “To see Lenin’s revolution through rosy spectacles as a Good Thing, a ‘utopian’ dream that only went wrong because the wicked Stalin spoiled it all, is to believe in fairy tales.”

Jones treats the artists inspired by the Russian Revolution as propagandists who, for reasons that are never specified, produced work that is still “undoubtedly some of the most powerful of the 20th century.”

He singles out Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky for helping impose Bolshevik ideology by creating the Suprematist and Constructivist movements, with their claims “to express a utopian vision of a revolutionary future.”

This is a disgusting slur on Malevich, who fought, until his death from cancer in 1935, against Stalin’s imposition of “Socialist Realism”—suffering isolation, poverty and the banning of his works.

But Jones reserves particular venom for El Lissitzky’s 1919 poster “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge.” This alone reveals the obscenity and stupidity of his attempt to draw a parallel between Bolshevism and fascism.

Jones denounces the poster’s appeal for workers and young people to support the struggle against the counter-revolutionary White Armies as “a call to merciless violence,” in which “a sharp red triangle is being driven into a black mass like a stake into Dracula’s heart.”

“Extreme methods were used by both sides,” he says in passing. But Lissitzky, in supporting the struggle against the Whites, has drawn a wedge that “really was red—with blood.”

Jones paints a lying picture of gratuitous violence by the Bolsheviks, but fails to mention the intervention of the imperialist powers, or to detail the White terror they helped sustain. He ignores the blockade that cut imports and exports to virtually nothing, which was a major factor in the deaths of millions due to hunger and disease.

Admiral Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak, the main leader of the Whites, was advanced by the imperialist powers as “the supreme ruler of Russia” because he wanted to re-enter the war and was committed to the violent overthrow of the Bolsheviks. Wherever his forces held sway, violent anti-Semitic pogroms were the norm, claiming an estimated 100,000 lives, as were massacres of peasants and workers loyal to the revolution. The regime established in Siberia by Kolchak was such that one of his generals, Konstantin Sakharov, later described it as “in essence the first manifestation of fascism.”

It was reported of another of Kolchak’s generals, Grigory Semenov, that in one three-day period, he killed over 1,000 people—the last ones burnt alive. Another demanded, “Those villages whose population meets troops with arms, burn down the villages and shoot the adult males without exception.”

So brutal were the anti-Semitic pogroms that Winston Churchill, ruthless in his determination to see Bolshevism “strangled in its cradle,” complained that “my task in winning support in Parliament for the Russian Nationalist cause will be infinitely harder if well-authenticated complaints continue to be received from Jews in the zone of the Volunteer Armies.”

Trotsky, leader of the Red Army in the Civil War, poured scorn on those who protested the use of violence by the oppressed only to justify the violence of the oppressors. Indeed, among more than a thousand mainly hostile comments on Jones’s article, one pointed out just this sort of hypocrisy, when in 2009 Jones excused the Spanish Empire and Inquisition by declaring that “brutal regimes and empires have long contributed to a legacy of eye-popping realism in religious painting and sculpture. ... Everyone hates empires, but who would be without their achievements?”

American author Mark Twain once pointed to the rank hypocrisy of those who condemned the harshness of the French Revolution: “There were two ‘Reigns of Terror’, if we could but remember and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passions, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon a thousand persons, the other upon a hundred million...what is the horror of swift death by the axe compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heartbreak?”

And may one put in a word on behalf of the countless victims of the British Empire, which enslaved entire continents? No apologist for the British ruling elite, responsible for immeasurable misery, devastation and death in Africa, India and other parts of Asia, Ireland and around the globe, should ever be permitted to preach in any forum about “merciless violence.”

Jones draws a direct line from the revolution to Stalinist terror. The truth is that the mass terror perpetrated by Stalin in the 1930s was not the result of the October Revolution, but deliberately targeted its socialist legacy. Hundreds of thousands of Bolsheviks were killed in the great purges or died in the gulags.

Jones also wholly ignores the battles that took place in the 1920s on the role of art and artists between the ruling Stalinist clique and the Left Opposition around Trotsky. The battles took on increasingly sharper forms and led to the purges of the 1930s, accompanied in the realm of art by the imposition of so-called Socialist Realism and the crushing of artistic creativity.

A number of perceptive commentators have compared Jones’s attack with those of British historian Robert Service, with one noting, “His [Service’s] anti-Trotsky ‘biography’ was condemned by the American

Historical Review as ‘hackwork’ because it was full of lies, historical falsification and glaring errors.”

The comment refers to a comparative review by leading historian Bertrand Patenaude of two books: the denunciatory biography, *Trotsky*, by Service and *In Defence of Leon Trotsky* by David North, the chairman of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Patenaude’s review is an unequivocal condemnation of Service’s biography and explicit endorsement of North’s critique, which he describes as “detailed, meticulous, well-argued and devastating.”

North described Service’s work as an example of “pre-emptive biography—an attempt to discredit Trotsky in anticipation of an eruption of revolutionary struggle.” This has immediate relevance in regard to the appearance of Jones’s comment in the pages of the *Guardian*.

Its publication exposes once again how very right-wing the voice of Britain’s nominal “liberal intelligentsia” has become. Jones’s biography goes some way to explain why this is so.

In an August 8, 2015, comment on the leadership campaign then being waged by Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour Party, “Corbynites are kidding themselves if they think that ‘pure’ socialism is the path to hope and change,” Jones raised many of the themes he returned to this month. He claimed that his own infatuation with “pure socialism” ended in Moscow in the early 1990s, when he witnessed “the death of a monstrous lie in which I had somehow, through a mixture of idealism, anger, alienation and intellectual pride, managed to implicate myself.”

His “implication” was a brief flirtation with joining the Communist Party of Great Britain, as the “culmination of my student years as a serious and committed Marxist,” a laughable notion. Jones the “Marxist” was intent on joining the party that defended all of Stalin’s crimes for decades and which was then busy repudiating Marxism. It hailed Margaret Thatcher for having halted forever “the forward march of labour” and championed the rightward shift of the Labour Party to an explicitly pro-capitalist agenda that ended with New Labour under Tony Blair.

Jones instead cut out the middle man and completed his own journey rightward, as a well-paid media hack, by joining the Labour Party, declaring of himself, “I am Labour, but I am not a socialist anymore.”

Outlining his own concerns then, and revealing why he has now produced what can be described as a “pre-emptive” art review, Jones warns that the failings of communism have “been forgotten by too many people since the 2008 financial crisis started what looks to many like a true and profound ‘crisis of capitalism’”. A runaway banking system and a society that seems to hugely favour the rich have since inflamed the radical socialist conscience. ...”

He rails against the “anti-market obsession that has overtaken the thinking left,” insisting that “Markets are human, they have a powerfully creative side as well as a harsh unjust side,” while threatening his readers with the warning, “Greece has already found out what anti-austerity means in practice.”

There is nothing remotely progressive or “left” about Jones—and little that is not banal in his writings. As someone who recently pondered the question, “Did the Mona Lisa have syphilis?,” who has insisted that Princess Diana “deserves the very best of British sculpture,” and whose primary concern over Brexit is its possible disastrous impact on “London’s cosmopolitan art scene,” he is an unalloyed anti-communist and flunkey of the establishment.

The authors also recommends:

In Defense of Leon Trotsky (second edition) by David North

The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century by David North

Both books available from Mehring Books

Bolshevism and the avant-garde artists (1993)

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