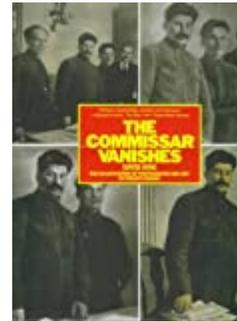


David King. *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997. 192 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-5294-7.



Reviewed by Tamara Machmut-Jhashi (Oakland University)

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The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia

Although it would seem impossible to imagine a context in which the names Pablo Picasso and Joseph Stalin could be linked, there is one fundamental concept that both men understood and manipulated: art is a lie that helps us understand the truth. Picasso exploited this notion to revolutionize the artistic vocabulary of the twentieth century, while Stalin took this idea to its most sinister and horrific conclusion: to create a visual vocabulary in order to write his own version of Russia's revolutionary history. The British photo historian David King has published an extraordinary collection of photographs falsified during Stalin's time that tell the story of the Soviet Union through the lenses of the Stalin cult. As the book jacket explains, King compiled the images in the book using photographs, posters, and art from his own collection that numbers more than a quarter million images. King began collecting pre-falsified Soviet photographs in 1970 in an effort that Stephen F. Cohen, professor of Russian Studies and History at Princeton University, describes in the preface as "heroic—the product of an immense, one-man archaeology" (p. 7).

Airbrushing has long been a tool of the photogra-

pher, for smoothing out complexions or concealing imperfections. But this device placed in the hands of Soviet photographers in the 1930s and 1940s soon surpassed any of the bags of tricks used by Hollywood retouchers. The subject of King's photographic study is made evident even before the reader opens the book; the front jacket illustrates a sequence of three photographs and a painting, based on a photo taken in Leningrad in 1926. At that time a snapshot was taken of Stalin surrounded by three others: Nikolai Antipov, Sergei Kirov, and Nikolai Shvernik. In each subsequent photograph a member of the foursome is omitted from the original until only Kirov and Stalin remain. The final work of the sequence, a painting created by Isaak Brodsky in 1929, is based on Stalin's image in the photograph. Now the leader is depicted alone—the sole and all-powerful hero.

King's photo study brings to light the extensive use of cropping, clipping, and airbrushing techniques in Stalinist Russia to create a "corrected" history of the times. As the author states in the introduction: "The physical eradication of Stalin's political opponents at the hands of the secret police was swiftly followed by their oblit-

eration from all forms of pictorial existence” (p. 7). The basic aims of falsifying photographs in Stalinist Russia were two sides of the same coin: removing any trace of Stalin’s political enemies while at the same time creating a visual hagiography of the leader. Not only were photographs part of this process but virtually the entire artistic production in Russia, including painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts beginning in the 1930s, was directed at mythologizing Stalin. Painting is touched upon in the book, but King wisely limits his discussion to a few relevant examples.

The author interestingly points out that only about a dozen photographs existed of Stalin from his birth in 1879 until he was appointed General Secretary in 1922, a situation that made it difficult to create a viable visual history of the leader and his accomplishments (minor and obscure, to be sure, in this period), no matter how skilled the hands of the retoucher. For that reason, paintings and sculptures could compensate for the lack of documentary material and embellish the real nature of Stalin’s position. “The bronze Stalin, the marble Stalin, were invulnerable to the bullets of the ‘Zinovievite bandits.’ The flesh and blood Stalin could safely stay out of the public gaze. Sculpture became the real Stalin-heavy, ponderous, immortal” (p. 13). The entire socialist realist endeavor in painting and sculpture was geared toward facilitating the cult of hero worship in the 1930s.

The Commissar Vanishes is a handsomely designed book, in coffee-table format, and is lavished with hundreds of photographs. With so many reproductions, the book is surprisingly affordable. Altered versions of photographs are shown side by side or on adjacent pages with the originals so that the reader is spared the annoyance of constantly flipping pages. King presents his material chronologically, beginning with the 1917 revolution. Party members come and go, disappearing from photographs, or are sometimes scratched out with heavy pen, especially with the onset of the Great Purges in the 1930s. A photograph taken in March 1919, of twenty delegates to the Eighth Congress of the Bolshevik Party, was published in its entirety in the Soviet Union only seventy years later. More than two thirds of the men perished under Stalin. This photograph also pictured Lenin, Stalin, and Kalinin seated side by side. This trio was later cropped from the original, and later Kalinin too was removed.

Eliminating figures from group photos through cropping and clipping was one avenue of falsification. King reproduces the famous photograph taken by G. P. Gold-

shtein of Lenin addressing the troops outside the Bolshoi Theater on 5 May 1920. One of the most widely published revolutionary photographs, it became an icon of the Russian revolution. The original photograph included the figures of Trotsky and Kamenev, but reproductions of the photo, down through the Gorbachev era, were always cropped to eliminate the two. The legacy of this photograph extended into the realm of painting: it was the basis for a large scale canvas executed by Isaak Brodsky in 1933 that became one of the most recognized examples of socialist realist painting; reproductions of his canvas numbered in the millions and earned Brodsky an exalted position in the pantheon of accepted socialist realist artists.

Another famous photograph, of Lenin and Stalin seated together outdoors in Gorki during Lenin’s illness, is unquestionably a fake. Taken from different sources, the two images are crudely joined in an effort to bolster Stalin’s position in the critical period during Lenin’s illness in 1922. King includes the subsequent works that exploited the image of the two in the photograph. In an aptly titled section, “The Stalin School of Petrification,” King reproduces two large scale sculptures based on the falsified photo. One, completed in 1938, depicts the two men seated on a bench engaged in conversation. Lenin seems to offer wise counsel to the future leader, who sits in rapt attention. The other piece, displayed in 1949 at a large exhibition entitled “Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin in the Visual Arts,” now depicts Stalin standing, towering over the seated Lenin, clearly in a commanding position. No subtlety in the message here, neither is there evidence of the pockmarked skin, shriveled arm, or Stalin’s actual five-foot, four-inch frame.

Many of the photographs in King’s book are published for the first time, including a dramatic group portrait of the prosecutor-general of the Supreme Soviet, Andrei Vyshinsky, surrounded by his staff of 228 men and women. Taken in 1934, “these are the faces of the bureaucrats who processed the lies, in the guise of socialist justice, that sent millions of people to be destroyed in the Gulag” (p. 121). It is a remarkable photograph, horrifying in its own way, for it literally injects a real element on all the “faceless bureaucrats” who were the necessary cogs in carrying out Stalin’s paranoid directives. Needless to say, part of the horror of this group photo lies in the fact that many of those photographed were themselves purged by the end of the decade.

King’s book also includes the tragic story of the little girl who was photographed with Stalin in 1936 at a

Kremlin reception. There the six-year old Gelya Markizova presented Stalin with a bouquet of flowers, whereupon Stalin embraced the girl. The photograph became famous, depicting Stalin as the joyous “Friend of the Little Children” (the photo was cropped to eliminate another figure who appeared to the side of Stalin, the first secretary of the Buryat Mongol ASSR, M.I. Erbanov). As repugnant as the scene is in its own right with the trusting young child in the arms of the grinning bogey-man, the fate of those connected with the photograph is also a chilling example of Stalin’s atrocities. The parents of the girl, Ardan and Dominica Markizov, were murdered just a year after the photograph was taken. The father, second secretary of the Buryat Mongol ASSR, was charged with spying for Japan and shot; the mother was killed as the wife of an enemy of the people.

One of the most compelling sequences of images in King’s book is the reproduction of several pages of a photo album titled “Ten Years in Uzbekistan” created in 1934 by the celebrated avant-garde artist of the 1910s and 1920s, Alexander Rodchenko. King found a copy of the album among Rodchenko’s own collection of books and magazines, still in the bookshelves of the artist’s apartment-studio in Moscow, which is today occupied by members of the artist’s family. King describes the discovery of the album: “Looking inside Rodchenko’s copy of ‘Ten Years of Uzbekistan’ was like opening the door onto the scene of a terrible crime. A major purge of the Uzbek leadership by Stalin in 1937, three years after the book’s publication, meant that many of the official portraits of Party functionaries in the album had to be destroyed...The names of those who had been arrested

or had ‘disappeared’ could no longer be mentioned, nor could their pictures be kept without the greatest risk of arrest. Petty informants were everywhere. The walls really did have ears” (p. 10).

Over the span of eight pages, King reproduces the defacement of the album by the artist himself. Faces and names are blocked out ominously in heavy pen and brush marks. The collective fear that poisoned the 1930s is exposed in the violent strokes of the pen that scratched and blotted out faces and figures. Not only did Rodchenko feel compelled to destroy his own work, but, as the author points out, it was the duty of librarians and even school children in the Soviet Union to carry out the necessary task of eliminating traces of those cast in the role of enemy.

The Commissar Vanishes will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers: from experts in the field of Russian history, who will find photographs published for the first time, to those with less scholarly interests. Specialized knowledge is not necessary to appreciate the single most important aspect of King’s book: the profound and inexpressible effect that these falsified images make upon our hearts and minds. *The Commissar Vanishes* is a fascinating and important contribution to our understanding of Stalinist Russia and one that this reviewer recommends to every student of twentieth-century Russian history.

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