

An exhibition in Berlin: German artist George Grosz in the Soviet Union in 1922

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1922: George Grosz travels to Soviet Russia, *an exhibition at the Little Grosz Museum (Das kleine Grosz Museum) in Berlin, November 23, 2022 to March 3, 2023*

The recently opened Little Grosz Museum (Das kleine Grosz Museum) in Berlin is currently showing an exhibition centred on the 1922 visit of left-wing German artist George Grosz to the Soviet Union (1922: *George Grosz travels to Soviet Russia*).

The exhibition features a number of drawings and photos dealing with the artist's trip, as well as a number of other works by Grosz, which confirm he continued his artistic efforts on behalf of the German Communist Party after 1922.

A brochure accompanying the exhibition provides an extensive overview of the year in question, dealing with political developments in both the Soviet Union and Germany, along with information about the rapidly growing collaboration between leading artists in the two countries. We learn, for example, that while People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky had a high regard for Grosz's work, the co-leader of the October Revolution, Leon Trotsky, was less impressed (more on this below).

Until now there has been a lack of concrete material detailing Grosz's four-month stay in the Soviet Union.

Grosz was a prolific caricaturist and painter. The exhibition features a few quickly drawn sketches of landscapes in Norway as Grosz and his travelling companion, Norwegian writer Martin Anderson Nexö (author of *Pelle the Conqueror*), travelled through the country before crossing into the Soviet Union. There are, however, no later sketches despite the plan of the two men to produce a book with text by Nexö and illustrations by Grosz.

In the course of his stay in Moscow and Petrograd, Grosz took part in celebrations marking the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution and also attended sessions of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (November-December 1922), hearing speeches by both Vladimir Lenin and Trotsky. Grosz met with leading members of the Russian Communist Party, notably Karl Radek and Lunacharsky, as well as leading Russian artists, including the Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin.

The question arises: what happened to the planned book with illustrations by Grosz? The new exhibition in Berlin includes material drawn from research into recently available Russian archives, but is unable to answer the question fully.

In his autobiography, *A Little Yes and A Big No (Ein kleines Ja und Ein Großes Nein)*, written over two decades later, and at a time when Grosz was breaking with his former left-wing sympathies, he wrote largely in a negative fashion about his trip to the Soviet Union.

By 1922, the vast country, the first workers state in history, had undergone four years of civil war waged by counter-revolutionary White forces, Cossacks and layers of the Russian bourgeoisie backed by Great Britain, France, the US and Japan. Failing to address the implications of the war and the legacy of poverty and backwardness inherited from

tsarism, Grosz simply noted that everyday life was "dirty and lousy, the vast majority of people poor and uneducated, and the functionaries devious and insincere." In Grosz's opinion, the country was "in a terrible state of decay by Western European standards." His chapter devoted to Soviet Russia was missing from the first American edition of the book in 1946 and was only published in 1953.

In his memoir, Grosz also mentions his discussions with Radek and Lunacharsky in 1922 and claims he rejected their advocacy of a so-called "proletarian art." In his autobiography, Grosz wrote: "The name was badly chosen. There could not be a proletarian culture if one did not grossly distort the meaning of the word. The proletarian develops upwards towards culture, so he was no longer a proletarian in the sense in which the word had hitherto been understood."

In reality, the most prominent opponent of the notion that it was possible to create a viable "proletarian art," laboratory style, comparable to the development of bourgeois culture, was the co-leader of the October Revolution, Leon Trotsky, who addressed the issue at length in his book *Literature and Revolution* (1923). Lenin was a thorough-going ally on that question.

According to Grosz's autobiography, he appears to concur with Trotsky regarding the unfeasibility of proletarian art, but Trotsky was evidently not impressed with the work of the German artist. The exhibition material includes a quote from American socialist Max Eastman, who also attended meetings of the Comintern in Moscow in 1922. In his book *Love and Revolution*, Eastman recalls: "Even Trotsky, I remember, pushed away with a squeamish gesture a book of them [Grosz caricatures] that George had given him. 'To me they seem cynical rather than revolutionary,' Trotsky said."

To understand Trotsky's response, it is necessary to examine more closely the career and development of one of Weimar Germany's leading artists.

Georg Ehrenfried Groß, his given name, was born July 26, 1893 in Berlin-Mitte, the son of an innkeeper. The family lived in the working-class district of Wedding. After the early death of his father in 1902, his mother moved with Georg to Stolp in Pomerania (now Słupsk in Poland), where his mother took over the running of an officers' mess.

Grosz received his artistic training from 1909 to 1912 at the Royal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts in Dresden. He described his training disdainfully as mainly the "reproduction of plaster casts in original size."

Grosz was, as he himself relates, completely apolitical at the time, but nevertheless saw himself as part of a rebellion against "those in authority" whom he had unhappily encountered in his school days—in school with the cane and later with the police sabre.

After graduating, he continued his studies in Berlin on a state scholarship. Grosz visited exhibitions of modern art in Berlin, but also sampled fairs, pubs and dance halls. Everywhere he went, he sketched figures and locales. In the spring of 1913, he was able to go to Paris, staying eight months, where he absorbed the atmosphere and people. He

took lessons in nude drawing and was particularly inspired by Honoré Daumier and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

Grosz also read prolifically, and refers to authors such as Strindberg, Gustave Le Bon, Tolstoy and Nietzsche. The generally misanthropic outlook of the young artist at this time came to the fore on the eve of World War I. While living in poverty in Berlin, Grosz strived to dress like a dandy in order to dissociate himself from the masses for whom “the stupidest, the most foolish, and the most tasteless is good enough” (Grosz in a 1933 letter).

Like many other young artists at the time, Grosz volunteered for military service at the outbreak of war in 1914, but was discharged as unfit for service in 1915 after an operation for a sinus infection. In 1916, he anglicised his name to George Grosz, similarly to his friend John Heartfield (born Helmut Herzfeld), in protest against German nationalism and anti-British jingoism.

In common with many of his European contemporaries—including his later friend Bertolt Brecht—Grosz regarded America, or a romantic-mythic notion of America, with great enthusiasm.

According to his own account, Grosz was due to be shot as a deserter during the First World War and was only saved by the intervention of his patron Harry Graf Kessler. Grosz was drafted again in January 1917, but suffered a nervous breakdown just two days later. Suffering from depression and hallucinations and confined to a mental hospital, he attacked a medical officer. Based on an evaluation by the famous psychiatrist Magnus Hirschfeld, he was finally discharged from the military at the end of April 1917 on the grounds of being unfit for service.

“War for me was horror, mutilation and annihilation,” Grosz explained. During the war, his poems and lithographs appeared in Franz Pfemfert’s expressionist journal *Die Aktion* (*The Action*) and *Neue Jugend* (*New Youth*), a paper published and printed by Heartfield and his brother, Wieland Herzfelde (the brothers spelled the family name differently).

Dada and the November Group

At the end of the war, Grosz joined the Berlin Dada movement, which sought to stir up the city’s polite middle classes and placid art establishment with wild provocations. Many of the Dadaist experiments still have an impact on the art world today, including Action and performance art, free-ranging combinations of word and image and the art of collage developed by artists as diverse as Hannah Höch, Heartfield and Grosz himself.

Horrified by the imperialist war, Grosz, like many artists and intellectuals, turned to the left. Together with his friends Herzfelde, Heartfield and theatre director Erwin Piscator, Grosz joined the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) at its foundation in December 1918-January 1919, receiving his party card personally from Rosa Luxemburg. During the Spartacist uprising a week or two later, Grosz was arrested but managed to escape. Luxemburg and her comrade Karl Liebknecht were murdered by right-wing forces during the events.

Grosz became a member of the Novembergruppe, an artists’ association that saw itself as radical and revolutionary and worked closely with the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Workers Council for Art).

When, contrary to its original aims, the Novembergruppe largely shed its political pretensions, an opposition formed comprising of Grosz, Otto Dix and other artists close to the KPD. They wanted to be “an expression of the revolutionary forces, an instrument of the necessities of our time and of the masses ...” (Published in the journal *Der Gegner* [*The Opponent*], II/8-9, 1920/21)

These figures saw in the October Revolution the possibility of a future without war and social misery. Grosz searched for a new “realism,” an “art which took sides” and was appropriate to the political and social situation.

From 1919, the Herzfeld(e) brothers’ Malik Verlag publishing house put out the magazine *Die Pleite* (*Bankrupt*) with large-format Grosz

drawings, featuring acerbic caricatures of the leaders of the Social Democratic Party, Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske, who had ordered the bloody repression of the 1918 November Revolution and the Spartacist uprising, as well as caricatures of military figures such as General Erich Ludendorff.

The “Kunstlump” controversy

The embrace of communism and the working class on the part of Grosz and Heartfield did not take place smoothly. In the course of street fighting in Dresden, between workers and members of the military supporting the far-right Kapp Putsch in 1920, shots were fired that hit the city’s famed Semper Gallery, which housed collections of paintings, sculptures and photographs.

A painting by Peter Paul Rubens was struck by a bullet and Oscar Kokoschka, expressionist artist and professor at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, issued a statement deploring the damage to a valuable work of art and arguing that the painting was worth more than the lives of the people killed in the confrontation. Grosz and Heartfield responded with a broadside against Kokoschka’s position, “Der Kunstlump” (“The Art Scoundrel”), and bourgeois art in general. Grosz wrote: “We greet with joy bullets whizzing into the galleries and palaces, into the masterpieces of Rubens, instead of into the homes of the poor and working class.”

Of course, communists are opposed to bullets aimed at workers, but Grosz’s boast that he would “greet with joy” bullets directed at a “masterpiece” encouraged the ultra-leftists and anarchists who denounced the entire legacy of bourgeois culture and art. The “Kunstlump” controversy made clear that Grosz and Heartfield had failed to break with the type of ultra-leftism and bohemianism which Trotsky so trenchantly criticised in *Literature and Revolution*, and other works of the time.

In fact, Grosz’s remarks in his “Kunstlump” article bear a striking resemblance to foolish comments made by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. In the decrees issued by the Committee of Futurists that he helped to found, Mayakovsky called for end to the “imprisonment of art in the storerooms of human genius, in palaces, art galleries, libraries and salons.” Raphael was to be treated like a White Guard, and according to Mayakovsky: “It is time for bullets to splatter the walls of museums.”

“Siegfried Hitler”

Based on his experiences in the war and afterwards, in the course of the suppression of the November Revolution, Grosz recognised that the spectre of fascism was quite able to co-exist and even thrive in the “democratic” Weimar Republic. Grosz sketched representatives of the state apparatus who, in their struggle against the proletariat, did not hesitate to adopt the methods of dictatorship and the police state. Already in a photo-lithograph from 1923, Grosz depicts “Siegfried Hitler” wearing, in the words of one commentator, “a bearskin and other attributes drawn from the world of Teutonic mythology.” Grosz adds a quote from Hitler: “I propose that the leadership of the German government be taken over by ME” and “Tomorrow there will be either a national government in Germany or we will be dead. There is no other alternative.”

Grosz was also highly sensitive to the bureaucratic degeneration in the Soviet Union, which made him begin to question his political views. In 1923, following the failure of the German October revolution, Grosz,

along with many of his artistic and intellectual contemporaries, reacted with growing scepticism toward the working class. Workers, in his artistic efforts, increasingly become a suffering and manoeuvrable mass. Grosz resigned from the KPD in 1923, but remained a supporter and became involved in the international Red Aid.

Together with Brecht and other leading cultural figures in Germany, Grosz was aware of Trotsky's opposition to Stalin and his criticism of the Stalinists' disastrous policy of "social fascism," whereby all members of the SPD were denounced as fascists. The Stalinist policy sabotaged united front action between Social Democratic and Communist workers and created the conditions that enabled Hitler to take power in 1933.

At the height of the Great Depression, Grosz's print *World Politicians* (1931) farsightedly caricatured the situation two years before Hitler came to power: British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, French Prime Minister Pierre Laval and Belgian Prime Minister Henri Jaspar play cards over the future of Europe. Meanwhile, in the background, German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning is cutting up a world map with a razor. In the front right sits Josef Stalin, unconcernedly poring over a game of his own. Far from being the hope of the international proletariat, Grosz depicted Stalin as a man quite prepared to adapt to the power games of the leading capitalist nations.

While Nazi thugs were ransacking his studio, Grosz fled Germany on board a ship for America in 1933. Unable to find a wide audience for his art in the US and bitterly disappointed with political developments in Germany, Grosz became increasingly hostile to communism and also railed fiercely against Trotskyism.

In summarising Grosz's significance as an artist, it might be helpful to recall Trotsky's evaluation of Mayakovsky, a contemporary and a fellow left artist. "Without exaggeration it can be said," Trotsky wrote in May 1930 after the poet's suicide, "that Mayakovsky had the spark of genius. But his was not a harmonious talent. After all, where could artistic harmony come from in these decades of catastrophe, across the unsealed chasm between two epochs? In Mayakovsky's work the summits stand side by side with abysmal lapses. Strokes of genius are marred by trivial stanzas, even by loud vulgarity."

Grosz's sensitive artistic nature and political perceptiveness enabled him, more than many of his fellow artists in Germany at the time, to grasp, vividly portray and even predict important social developments in his art. However, damaged by the war and plunged into the social upheaval of the Weimar period and subsequent tragedies, Grosz was unable to fully develop and, as Trotsky writes, was finally denied by circumstances the opportunity to progress and mature in a "harmonious way."



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