
John Heartfield
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About the author(s)

is an academic, writer and a literary translator. Her books on photography include a history of photojournalism, an anthology of photographers and a biography of Julia Margaret Cameron. She has curated numerous exhibitions, including of the work by her mother, the immigrée Picture Post photographer Gerti Deutsch. She publishes widely on European and Latin American photography, and writes photographers' obituaries for the Guardian.

Cover image: **Fig. 4** *The Happy Elephants*, by John Heartfield. Published in the 15 October 1938 issue of *Picture Post*. The Image was commissioned by Stefan Lorant as a response to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's 'Peace for our time' speech. (© The Heartfield Community of Heirs / DACS 2019; photograph Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; exh. Four Corners, London).

John Heartfield

by Amanda Hopkinson • 12.12.2019

The first image in this exhibition at Four Corners, London, of posters by the anti-Nazi photomontage artist John Heartfield is of a row of vertical skeletons receding into the distance, looming over an advancing march of uniformed child cadets bearing bayonets. In the foreground stands 'Kaiser Bill' with his spiked helmet and signature moustache, his uniform laden with medals from the 'War to end all wars', for which he mobilised thirteen million young Germans, fifty-five per cent of whom were killed. The caption reads: 'Ten years on: fathers and sons, 1924'. The final image in the exhibition shows a dove impaled on a bayonet, its neck broken, feathers fluttering loose [FIG.1](#). The caption reads: 'Never again!', 1960. The image is a sceptical (and cynical) response to the Geneva Conventions' remit to prevent human rights abuses in times of war. It is essentially a reprise of a much earlier version [FIG.2](#), used as a cover image by the radical German illustrated magazine *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ, 27.11.1932), protesting at the concessions made to Hitler in Geneva in 1932. Behind the impaled dove can be seen the League of Nations building, flying the Swiss flag doctored to replace the cross with a swastika. It followed an incident when machine guns were turned on a crowd of anti-Fascist protestors and the caption concludes, 'The meaning of Geneva: where capital lives, peace cannot'.

It is an exhibition that is especially relevant to our times, as the co-curator Carla Mitchell explained:

'In our own era of a resurgence of the far-right, Heartfield's work is particularly timely. His subversion of Hitler's populist fascist iconography sought to expose the capitalist and war-mongering interests which he believed were the real backers of the Third Reich. Heartfield's background in advertising enabled him to develop a powerful visual language to combat his opponents. We can draw parallels with today's social media environment, in which mass media fake news is being countered by the use of memes and viral campaigns, such as those of the group Led By Donkeys. Heartfield's vivid satirical images offer an example of how political art can intervene to reveal previously hidden meanings, and thereby struggle for a better world.'¹



Fig. 1 *Never again!*, by John Heartfield. 1960. Poster, 42 by 59 cm. (Liverpool John Moores Special Collections and Archives; © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / DACS 2019; exh. Four Corners, London).

It is startling to see images of birds on the dust-jackets Heartfield designed for nature books in the post-war years, which are also on view in the glass cabinets, which contrast with his photomontages from the 1920s to 1960s, made in his native Germany and in English exile. They are drawn from a life dedicated to political activism. When in 1950 Heartfield returned to live in his native Berlin it was, as for Bertold Brecht, to make a life in Communist East Berlin. Cabinet displays of books, magazines and memorabilia attest to the depth of Heartfield's anti-Fascism and the breadth of his interests, including in natural history. It shows how *Fathers and Sons* was first displayed among First World War memorabilia in the shopfront of Malik-Verlag, the publishing house founded by Heartfield's brother Wieland Herzfeld, who retained his German name when Heartfield anglicised his in 1918, a mark of his disgust at

German expansionism.



Fig. 2 Never Again original AIZ, by John Heartfield. Date? Dimensions? (© The Heartfield Community of Heirs / DACS 2019).

Within a decade of *Fathers and Sons*, and two years after Hitler took power, it was clear that Germany was re-arming. *Hurrah, the butter is finished!* **FIG.3**, published in *AIZ* in 1935, shows a stage set for the cabaret *Guns for Butter*, for which Heartfield also wrote the libretto. It is a visual pun on Herman Goering's 1935 speech delivered in Hamburg, in which he declared that 'Guns will make us powerful!'.² Heartfield's image is subtitled with a quote from the speech: 'Iron has made the Reich strong, butter and lard at best make it fat'. A German family is seated at the dinner table piled with iron objects and hemmed by Nazi slogans and photographs; swastikas decorate even the wallpaper. Father and mother gnaw on heavy weights and bicycle handlebars. At their feet a dog chews

on a giant bolt and a baby nibbles an axe.

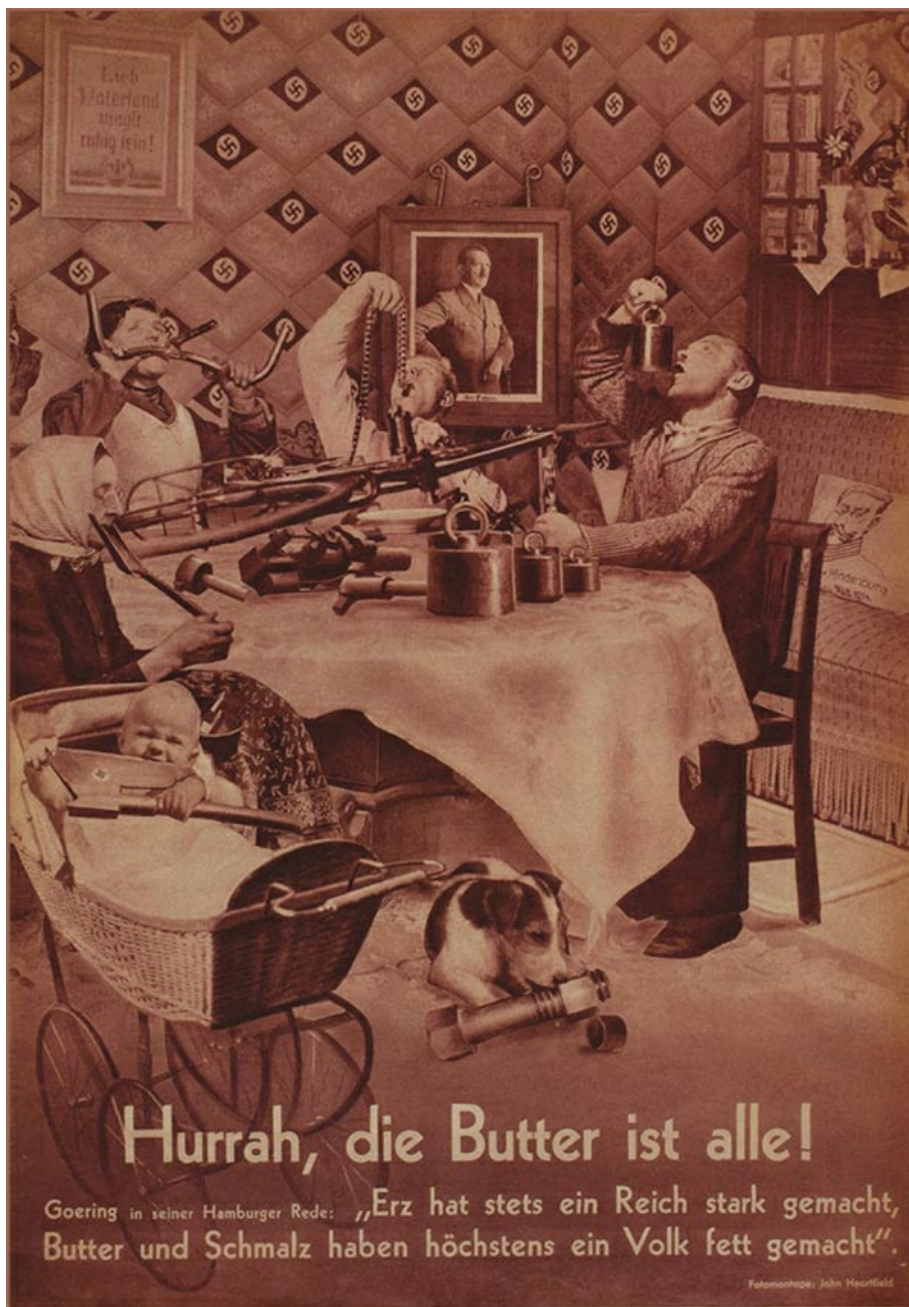


Fig. 3 *Hurrah, the butter is finished!*, by John Heartfield. 1935. (© The Heartfield Community of Heirs / DACS 2019; exh. Four Corners, London).

Throughout his life, Heartfield would work across disciplines with playwrights, artists, musicians, publishers and activists. At Malik-Verlag, he and his brother published Berlin Dadaists and exemplars of New Objectivity, establishing a lasting collaboration with George Grosz, who had also anglicised his name. In 1933 Grosz fled to the United States and the Herzfeldes to Prague. Malik's stock had already been confiscated by the Nazis and would shortly be consigned to a public book burning.

PICTURE POST

Vol. I. No. 3

October 15, 1938



THE HAPPY ELEPHANTS.

The elephants are happy. They are flying about in the sky. The elephants are happy because they have got peace. For how long have the elephants got peace? Ah, that alas! no one can say.

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Fig. 4 *The Happy Elephants*, by John Heartfield. Published in the 15 October 1938 issue of *Picture Post*. The image was commissioned by Stefan Lorant as a response to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's 'Peace for our time' speech. (© The Heartfield Community of Heirs / DACS 2019; photograph *Picture Post*/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; exh. Four Corners, London).

In 1938, with Nazi Occupation of the Czech Sudetenland imminent, Heartfield sought exile once again in London. There he met Stefan Lorant, the Hungarian editor of the satirical pocket magazine *Lilliput*, who hailed Heartfield as 'A Master of Political Art'.³ Lorant's next project, *Picture Post*, launched in October 1938, the month Heartfield arrived in London. The paper was 'strongly political and anti-Fascist' and its success lay in combining political commitment with mass popularity, with sales soon exceeding two million copies per week.⁴ Heartfield's skill in making art a political weapon using collage – made accessible by dint of his inclusion of ephemera and pop-culture images – was ideally suited to the magazine's radical stance.

The visual puns employed by *Lilliput*, and for which *Picture Post* became famous, were given a particular political edge by Heartfield's technique. His first contribution shows elephants in the savannah, some of which have achieved lift-off by means of crudely appended wings. Tom Hopkinson's faux-fey caption alludes to Chamberlain's 'fairytale' of the Munich 'Accord' with Hitler: 'The elephants are happy. They are flying about in the sky. The elephants are happy because they have got peace. For how long have the elephants got peace? Ah that, alas! no-one can say' FIG.4. Within months of this illustration appearing, the Second World War was declared.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Heartfield: One Man's War* at Four Corners, London, 2019. (Photograph??).

Heartfield's own sequencing of thirty-three poster-sized images has been conserved in this exhibition of contemporary scans taken from the collection rediscovered by Professor John Hyatt at Liverpool John Moores University FIG.5. Heartfield had lectured at the Liverpool School of Art and his widow Gertrud donated the set of images. Selected by Heartfield shortly before his death in 1968 and displayed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1969, they include many of his most celebrated works.



Fig. 6 *Maggie Regina*, by Peter Kennard. 1983. Gelatin silver print on paper, 66 by 50 cm. (Tate, London; exh. Four Corners, London).

According to Mitchell, these images ‘can be viewed in many ways but are fundamentally an original historical production of which Berlin’s Akademie der Künste retains the archival material’.⁵ This situates Heartfield’s political agitprop within the narrative of official art history. At the same time, his legacy is multiple and myriad. His influence crosses and combines art genres and can be seen in the work of photographers Peter Kennard and Jo Spence as well as in that of the film-makers and visual artists Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn, whose experimental documentaries were made and shown at the legendary Camerawork community darkrooms at 113 and in the Half Moon film editing and screening rooms at 121 Roman Road, where Four Corners Gallery still resides.



Fig. 7 *The Highest Product of Capitalism (after John Heartfield)*, by Jo Spence with Terry Dennett. 1979. Gelatin silver print on paper, 49 by 69 cm. (Tate, London; exh. Four Corners, London).

Heartfield's artistic legacy has been continuous. Glass cabinets display work by British successors, fronted by Peter Kennard and Jo Spence. Kennard's *Maggie Regina* **FIG.6** is a photomontage of Queen Victoria with Margaret Thatcher's head, and Spence's *The Highest Product of Capitalism (after John Heartfield)* **FIG.7** shows her standing in front of a wedding dress in a shop front holding a sign reading: 'I'll take (almost) any work'. The allusion to Heartfield references his image of an unemployed man holding a sign reading 'Any work accepted' (1932).



Fig. 8 Vinyl sleeve for *Orgasm Addict*, by Buzzcocks. 1977. Collage by Linder.

Arguably the cultural movement that first and most wholeheartedly adopted Heartfield in Britain is Punk. Politically, this suggests that his influence was as much Anarchist as Socialist or Communist. But Heartfield died before Malcolm McLaren, Jamie Reid or King Mob really got going. And when they did, for McLaren at least, it was in 1975 with the Sex Pistols rather than via his earlier experimental artwork, which included photomontage.

Beyond the southeast, Linder Sterling achieved prominence with her *Pretty Girls* series (1977–2007). Her work subverting female stereotypes takes Spence's into new terrain, both politically and graphically. Homage to Heartfield is implicit in her choice of medium; an option for black-and-white film; shared recurrent concerns include war, death and ritual; subject where the head has been modified or replaced. In *Pretty Girls*, Sterling substitutes the heads of naked women with everyday appliances such as a camera or an iron, which tops a reclining nude with scarlet grinning lips in the place of nipples. The latter image became the cover for the second Buzzcocks' album *Orgasm Addict* FIG.8. Thus part of Sterling's important contribution to punk culture is her power in speaking to and for contemporary women, a generation (at least) beyond that of the housewives featured in Heartfield's work under the rubric *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*.⁶

Since lessons from history are those humanity reputedly never

learns, it will be interesting to learn how 'critical photomontage seems to be making a comeback as meme', a topic which will be explored by Sabine Kriebel at a talk at Four Corners in January. She continues:⁷

Made from reconfigured and recombined photographs (among other things), memes can be posted, circulated, and re-circulated in the digital age with a speed, ease, and reach that radical artists such as John Heartfield could only dream of a century ago. That digital facility may be accompanied by a certain conceptual facility, however, whose political message and tactics often verge on the simplistic, the vulgar, the ephemeral.

Heartfield's influence surfaces most directly, however, in punk, and specifically in *Metal Postcard*, Siouxsie Sioux's's homage to *Hurrah, the butter is finished!* It is a truism to say that you have to fight to win peace. Heartfield's weapon of choice was coruscating political satire, arresting attention by using whatever mass media he could access. Theatre and cabaret; books and magazines; political pamphlets and flyers. And thirty-three posters exhibited in a free public gallery.

Exhibition details

Heartfield: One Man's War
Four Corners, London
1st November 2019–1st February 2020

Footnotes

- 1** In email correspondence with the present reviewer, 09.12.19.
- 2** Göring, who was in charge of the Four-Year Plan and thus responsible for the industrial and military rearmament of the country, repeatedly demanded an increase in the iron industry's productive capacity to boost the exploitation of domestic ores. In 1937 his demands culminated in the founding of the 'Reich Works Hermann Göring', which sought to compete with the traditional iron industry of the Ruhr Region. The population was expected to tighten its belt to fund military expansion.
- 3** See the first press publication of Heartfield's photomontages in Britain, with an accompanying text by Stefan Lorant in *Lilliput* (July 1939) pp.464–73.

- 4** See R. Kee: *The Picture Post Album*, London 1989, p.6); and A. Hopkinson: 'Picture Post: "Strongly political and anti-fascist"', in M. Bohm-Duchen, ed.: *Insiders Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and their contribution to British visual Culture*, London 2019, p.122.
- 5** Interview with the present reviewer for *Burlington Contemporary*, 31.10.2019.
- 6** The Nazi Party adopted a slogan used in the First World War with the intention of increasing the population to expand the German Reich. According to Nazi ideology, women's lives should be confined to three spheres: *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (Children, Kitchen, Church).
- 7** Sabine Kriebel will present the talk *From Heartfield to Memes: Lessons from History* at Four Corners on 22nd January 2020.

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