Again on Censorship, Art and Socialism: A Tribute to Gustav Klutsis

Via Blog Comunistas

to Carolina Barrero and Marcel Theodore Anthony Bosch; and Klutsis, of course.

Exactly 83 years ago, on February 26, 1938, Latvian visual artist Gustav Klutsis was shot in the Soviet Union. Just three days earlier, the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Red Army, formed by Leon Trotsky on February 23, 1918, had been commemorated.

The Latvian artist's death was one of many that the Stalinist purges claimed. Apart from the false charges brought against him by the NKVD, the real reasons why Klutsis was shot were summed up in two major sins. The first and most serious was that he had designed a poster in honor of Trotsky on the occasion of the 6th anniversary of the Red Army. The gravity was increased by the fact that the poster was printed in 1924, just after Lenin's death, when the battle between the left opposition (led by Trotsky) and Stalin was reaching a point of no return.

Klutsis' other great sin was simply being Latvian. Unlike other nations that were part of the tsarist empire, after the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Latvia did not move towards socialism, but established a bourgeois republic. Thus, the Klutsis' homeland was not incorporated into the USSR until 1940, when it was invaded by the Red Army. Thus, being an artist who had paid homage to Trotsky during the struggle against Stalin – and a Latvian – was a dangerous combination in the Soviet Union of 1938.

Klutsis, who had studied first with Kazmir Malevitch and then at the Higher Workshop for Artistic and Technical Studies (Vkhtumas) – known as the "Soviet Bauhaus" – was part of the constructivist avant-garde led by Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitsky, and Várvara Stepanova.

Apparently, Klutsis did not dedicate enough posters to Stalin or did not like them as much as those of Rodchenko, who was not bothered during the purges. The truth is that the few posters where the Latvian artist portrays Stalin were not the classic epic posters in which the Party General Secretary guided the building of the Communist future.

One of its controversial examples is the poster "The reality of our program is the "real" people. This is you and me." In it, the triplicate image of Stalin is shown marching as one among a group of workers. But perhaps the most controversial is under Lenin's guidance. "Construction of Socialism." In this poster, behind Lenin, Stalin lurks like a dark, faded shadow. The rule – tacitly established – was that on Party posters, Stalin was placed in the foreground, superimposed on Lenin's face – even on Marx's – thus presenting the new General Secretary as the most finished expression of Marxism-Leninism. Not infrequently, the figure of Lenin was even limited to a portrait or a flag.

To understand the seriousness of the matter, we must keep in mind the date when Klutsis produced these works (1931 and 1930, respectively). During these years, opposition to Stalin within the Central Committee was not only defeated, but also banned. Leaders accused of being Trotskyists or "right-wing deviations" were dismissed, others caved in, and not a few were sent to prison. The pressures of the bureaucratic caste had led Leon Trotsky's friend and comrade Aldolf Joffe to commit suicide in the fall of 1927, just one week after the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Moreover, Trotsky himself, having been expelled by the Soviet bureaucracy in 1929, was in exile in Turkey.

In 1931, just three years before the Stalinist purges began (1934-1939), it was necessary to have loyal artists, especially those who mastered photomontage: one of the most distinctive features of the constructivist avant-garde that emerged in the Vkhtumas.

Photomontage would be one of the main tools of Stalinism to perfect the rewriting of history. Trotsky would later call this “the Stalinist school of forgery.” In this way, not only were the disgraced Bolshevik leaders erased from books, but also from Soviet iconography, and then literally disappeared.

The life, censorship and socialism of the Cuban Klutsis

For 60 years, Florence’s cathedral, Santa Maria Novella, was without a dome. Filippo Brunelleschi had designed it without knowing how to finish it. In turn, Vladimir Tatlin, also without knowing how and when it would be finished, designed a gigantic and beautiful architectural work in the middle of the civil war, but this time in honor of the Communist International. However, although the dome of Santa Maria Novella took six decades, we can still see it today. In contrast, Tatlin’s idea not only never materialized, but the Communist International and the Soviet Union disappeared.

In his exquisite anthropological documentary Anna, Nikita Mikhalkov argues that one of the main reasons the Soviet system disappeared was because the Bolshevik political project lacked the Russian Christian soul. This idealistic conception of the collapse of the USSR can be interpreted another way: while the Brezhnevs, Chernenkovs, and Andropovs greeted the masses in the Kremlin, watching them parade with the icons of their new gods, the working class professed a “spirituality” parallel to the liturgies of the bureaucracy.

Here lies the main danger to the success of communist projects: it is not the possible unviability of the Tatlins versus the realization of the Brunelleschi, but that the

representatives of Marxism, once in power, tend to turn away from the “soul” of the working class. One of the main ways in which the socialist bureaucracies have stopped listening to the people is by censoring their artists and intellectuals. They think that by silencing those who criticize their errors of theory and art, these problems will disappear. Quite the contrary. More problems are born: they provoke discontent among the intelligentsia.

In Cuba, the relationship of the successive governments that embodied the revolutionary project with its artists and intellectuals went from dialogue to openness, from openness to censorship, broken again by dialogue, and back to square one. While it is true that no “Cuban Klutsis” were shot, not a few Marc Chagall preferred to go abroad forever, or even ended up in prison like Malevitch – who never voluntarily left the Soviet Union -.

Decades ago, clocks stopped having pendulums. Time runs free on our cell phones along with social networks and all the information that the Internet brings in general. Censorship is increasingly obsolete, dialogue with artists and intellectuals more necessary, and openness more urgent.

How to achieve this openness is something that ultimately our leaders will be able to decide. In the meantime, they should not forget that clocks with pendulums exist only in museums, or in the Kremlin pavilion, from which, unfortunately – at Christmas 1991 – the red flag fell.

Epilogue

Today, part of the work of Latvian artist Gustav Klutsis is exhibited in New York’s famous Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The president of Estonia – another of the republics occupied by the Soviet Union along with Poland and Latvia in 1940 – Nikolas Pätt was arrested by the Red Army during the military intervention and deported to the USSR. He spent his last years

in a psychiatric hospital. Later medical reports found that the patient suffered from “severe hallucinations,” as he claimed to be “the president of Estonia.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union, strong anti-communism grew in the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which continues to this day. In 1991, the governments of these three countries banned the Communist Party and most of the statues of Lenin were torn down. One of Stalin’s greatest crimes is that he committed his crimes in the name of communism. It is imperative that revolutionary Marxist militancy demonstrate that neither censorship nor repression is inherent in the construction of socialism.