

# Art and Politics in Interwar Germany

## The Photomontages of John Heartfield

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In his essay of 1936, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin explored the transformation of European culture in the post-war era. Art for art’s sake had become obsolete, he argued; a painting could no longer sustain its “aura” or “authenticity” in the modern world of mechanical reproduction, as photography and film produced a multitude of copied images far more accessible, stirring and popular. “The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production,” he concluded, “the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics.”<sup>1</sup> The photomontages of the communist artist John Heartfield exemplified this new purpose for art, commenting directly on political and social conditions in Weimar and Nazi Germany, presenting revolutionary themes, and encouraging political action. The artist’s materials, too, reflected modern culture in the age of the machine: he utilized photography, constructed images through montage, and introduced captions or slogans in a manner akin to mass advertising. The results were photomontages of tremendous pictorial power and cunning, documents of the political struggle

1 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Glasgow 1973), 226.

between the German right and left from the late 1920s through to the Second World War.

The potent relationship between modern German art and politics had first begun in the Weimar Republic, exploding in Berlin Dada, continuing thereafter in the work of George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz, Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator — some of the most famous artists of the left. The unsteady position of the Weimar parliamentary system, and the considerable amount of freedom allowed in the Republic for political and cultural expression, gave artists the impetus and opportunity to speak out, usually in criticism of Weimar's leading parties.<sup>2</sup> The few historical studies of these agitational artists have helped our understanding of what is broadly termed "Weimar culture." Beth Irwin Lewis' *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic* is a fine example of such work.<sup>3</sup> But John Heartfield, while a familiar subject for German scholars, has been relatively neglected by English writers, including historians of modern Germany.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, although two of

2 John Willett, in *The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period, 1917-1933* (London 1978), 225, argues that many Weimar artists developed a new sense of community feeling, which intensified their political views.

3 Beth Irwin Lewis, *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Princeton 1991 [Madison 1971]).

4 Part of the problem for historians may be the lack of primary sources on Heartfield; he did not write much about his art or his life in Weimar. In addition, he lost letters and personal papers when he was forced to flee Germany in 1933 and then Czechoslovakia in 1938. German art historians and cultural theorists have not been daunted by this fact, and they have produced the best studies of the artist to date. See Roland März, ed., *John Heartfield: Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit. Selbstzeugnisse — Erinnerungen — Interpretation* (Dresden 1981) and März's more recent work, *Heartfield Montiert, 1930-1938* (Leipzig 1993), along with Eckhard Siepmann's *Montage: John Heartfield. Vom Club Dada zur Arbeiter-Illustrierten-Zeitung* (Berlin 1977). Michael Töteberg, a literary historian, has written a brief but solid biography, *John Heartfield: In Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg 1978). Wieland Herzfelde, Heartfield's brother, also wrote a fascinating, if biased, biography of the artist, entitled *John Heartfield: Leben und Werk* (Dresden 1962; rpt. 1976). In 1991 East Berlin's Akademie der Künste held the most extensive exhibition to date of Heartfield's art (celebrating the centenary of his birth) for which a catalogue was produced, available in both German and

the best studies of Heartfield's art in English — David Evan's *John Heartfield, AIZ* and Douglas Kahn's *John Heartfield: Art and Mass Media* — offer insightful analyses of individual photomontages and excellent information on Heartfield's work for *AIZ* (the *Workers' Illustrated Newspaper*), they lack important elements of the historical background against which Heartfield's work can be placed.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, these authors could say much more about the history of the Communist Party (KPD) in Weimar (and its relationship to the SPD), particularly during the twilight years of the Republic's existence.<sup>6</sup> Heartfield was a revolutionary artist dedicated to the communist movement, and much of his work was done in support of the KPD: knowledge of the KPD's political platform, then, is crucial for understanding his photomontages from 1929 on.

In this article, I give a selective account of Heartfield's life and his development as an artist, and then turn to an analysis of several photomontages from 1930-1934. I approach these works primarily as a historian, probing what they express about the political conditions of these years. From this perspective, it is clear that Heartfield's communism produced a ferocious hatred of war and capitalism, and an often perceptive understanding of the threat of fascism — evident in so many of his anti-Nazi works. In fact, he

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English. See Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef, eds., *John Heartfield* (Köln 1991; New York 1992). The few monographs in English on Heartfield include Douglas Kahn, *John Heartfield: Art and Mass Media* (New York 1985), David Evans, *John Heartfield, AIZ* (New York 1992) and David Evans and Sylvia Gohl, *Photomontage: A Political Weapon* (London 1986). Finally, there are also several films on Heartfield, including Helmut Herbst's superb *John Heartfield: Fotomonteur* (Hamburg 1977), Joe Lee's *Celebration: Heartfield* (London, 1991) and *Zygnosis Montage: John Heartfield and the Political Image*, director Gavin Hodge (New York, 1991).

5 Both Evans and Kahn came to Heartfield's work out of a professional interest in photography.

6 Moreover, it is interesting to note that the abbreviated English version of the 1991 exhibition catalogue, *John Heartfield* (Pachnicke and Honnef, eds.), eliminated the only article in the German edition addressing the history of the KPD in Weimar: Hermann Weber's "John Heartfield's politische Fotomontage und die Auseinandersetzungen von SPD und KPD in der Weimarer Republik," 357-65.

recognized that Hitler was the most dangerous enemy of the Communists years before the KPD leadership admitted this, as is evident in photomontages of 1932 and 1933.<sup>7</sup> In works like *His Majesty Adolf* (see Illustration 10) or *After Twenty Years* (illustration 9) Heartfield expressed a brilliant reading of Nazism, lashing out against the militarism and the loss of freedom workers could rightly expect from Hitler; in *Adolf the Superman* (illustration 5) or *Hurray, The Butter is Gone!* (illustration 8) the artist also targeted the deception of the Hitler myth and the threat to civic freedom and social equality in the Third Reich. These works, then, were telling commentaries on the lies of Nazism and its proffered *Volksgemeinschaft*. At the same time, some of Heartfield's photomontages obscured political realities; the artist's commitment to the KPD and to its political program resulted in works that cannot be called politically accurate, yet are still fascinating visual documents of KPD strategy vis-à-vis the SPD and the Nazis. One can see, for example, the rash confidence of the KPD in the early 1930s, following election victories in 1930 and 1932, and the assumption that a workers' revolution is imminent. Apparent too is the KPD's ill-fated "social fascist" tactic directed against the Social Democratic leadership, and the party's position that the Nazis were tools of big business. In these photomontages Heartfield's political judgement is flawed, and we see the limitations of Communist thinking in the 1930s. Ultimately, Heartfield's art offers the historian a unique perspective on the KPD's history, especially during the key years 1930-1933. His photomontages also constitute a prime example of Weimar's political art. To Heartfield it was self-evident that art must dedicate itself to the revolutionary tasks of socialism, and thus he developed photomontage as an important means for both artistic and political statement.

7 This point is emphasized in Weber, "John Heartfields politische Fotomontage," 365.

## Heartfield's Development as a Political Artist

When World War One began, John Heartfield did not yet exist, at least in name. He was known then as Helmut Herzfeld, a twenty-three-year-old designer and graphic artist with a troubled past. His father, socialist writer Franz Herzfeld, had fled Germany in 1895 after being accused of blasphemy for one of his works; in 1899 he and his wife Alice Stolzenberg, a textile worker, abandoned their four children for reasons unknown.<sup>8</sup> After this, Helmut lived a tough and lonely life, shuttled from family to family in Austria and Germany, and often separated from his brother Wieland, whom he loved dearly.<sup>9</sup> In his late teens he decided upon a career in art, first attending the Royal Institute of Arts and Crafts in Munich from 1909-1913, and then winning a scholarship to Berlin's Kunst-und Handwerkerschule. The move to Berlin was a pleasant and productive change for Herzfeld, especially once Wieland moved to the capital to join him. The brothers made friends among the literary and artistic avant garde while pursuing their art. Wieland wrote poetry, Helmut sketched and painted. At this point neither showed much concern about internal or international politics. Indeed, during the summer of 1914 Helmut was preoccupied with work on a wall design that he submitted to the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne — for which he won first prize.<sup>10</sup> Weeks later war erupted and Wieland was sent to the Western Front. The outbreak of hostilities shattered the “lyrical-sentimental”<sup>11</sup> expression in Helmut's paintings and designs, and his carefree independence in Berlin.

Helmut was conscripted into a military unit in Berlin (the Franz Joseph Regiment of the Guards), but luckily never went to the

8 Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 7.

9 Details of the brothers' youth can be found in Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 7-13 and Toteberg, *Heartfield*, 7-14.

10 Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 12.

11 Roland März uses this description in *John Heartfield: Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit*, 23.

Front. He was released from duty in 1915 after feigning mental illness.<sup>12</sup> Wieland too managed to return to Berlin in January 1915 and together the brothers became fiercely opposed to the suffering and brutality of the European conflict. Along with a small circle of friends — poets Else Lasker-Schüler, Johannes Becher and Theodor Däubler — they cried out against the fever that swept Germany. National pride had touched all sections of the country and artists were not immune: Thomas Mann, Max Liebermann, Ernst Barlach, and even a young Bertolt Brecht were initial supporters of the supremacy of the German cause and German culture.<sup>13</sup> Literature of hatred was another outcome of the war, usually penned by second-rate writers and directed against Britain. One such example proclaimed: “We love collectively, we hate collectively, we have only one enemy, England!”<sup>14</sup> In opposition to this hysteria, Helmut Herzfeld changed his name to the English John Heartfield, although the war-time authorities would not recognize his decision.<sup>15</sup> The name change set in motion a dramatic metamorphosis, for not only did it express an anti-war sentiment, it also heralded the creation of a new artistic persona: the political artist John Heartfield. It was a sign of an irrevocable departure from the past.

Part of this change must also be attributed to the influence of George Grosz, whom the brothers first met in Berlin during the summer of 1915. They found this fierce artist a powerful contrast to their idealistic temperaments. According to Wieland, “Grosz

12 Herzfelde claims that he and Else Lasker-Schüler tricked Heartfield into believing he was mad, but the story sounds rather implausible. See Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 16.

13 Peter Gay discusses Mann’s support of the war in *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York 1968), 11-12 and 73-74; on Max Liebermann and Ernst Barlach see Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1980), 235-47; Brecht’s shifting mood during the war is noted by Klaus Völker in *Brecht: A Biography*, trans. John Nowell (London 1979), 8-9.

14 Ernst Lissauer, *Chant of Hate*, reprinted in Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee, eds., *World War I & European Society* (Lexington 1995), 30-1.

15 Wieland Herzfelde and George Grosz also made slight changes to their original names of Herzfeld and Gross. Töteberg, *Heartfield*, 16.

worked on us like a cold shower: shockingly sober and intensely stimulating.”<sup>16</sup> Grosz’s cynical view of the world, his bitter portraits of Berliners, and his acidic drawing style deeply impressed Heartfield, to the extent that he questioned the value of his own art. In a fit of rejection he destroyed all his previous paintings and designs, and joined in a partnership with Grosz: the two collaborated on many works in the next few years.<sup>17</sup> Grosz’s visceral hatred of the bourgeoisie, a critical inspiration for his art, also fired Heartfield’s spirit and fed in both a radical vision of culture and politics.

The way forward led to Dada, arguably the pivotal point in Heartfield’s development as a political artist. Berlin Dada was first proclaimed by Richard Huelsenbeck in February 1918, and Grosz, Herzfelde and Heartfield emerged as leading members and co-founders.<sup>18</sup> While the Dadaists experimented with absurdist performance art, collage, and nonsense poetry, Germany collapsed into revolution. Berlin Dada joined the side of the Spartacists.<sup>19</sup> It

16 Quoted in *Ibid.*

17 Lewis details the Grosz-Heartfield partnership in *George Grosz, Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, including their creation of a satirical anti-war journal *Neue Jugend*, 42-51. In 1917 Heartfield began the publishing company Malik Verlag, which produced two collections of Grosz’s drawings: the *Erste George Grosz Mappe* and the *Kleine Grosz Mappe*. Under the direction of Wieland Herzfelde the Malik Verlag would become one of the leading publishers of left-wing literature in the Weimar Republic. Heartfield designed the book covers for Malik — superb creations of photo and text for novels by Upton Sinclair, Maxim Gorki and Ilya Ehrenburg, among others. His book cover design had a considerable impact upon the development of the modern book sleeve, and also constituted early examples of Heartfield’s photomontage.

18 One of the best accounts of Berlin Dada is offered by Hans Richter in his *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. David Britt (London 1978). Richter was one of the originators of Zurich Dada, and later went on to become a leading experimental film-maker in Weimar Germany.

19 The Berlin Dadaists differed, however, in their attitudes to politics; Grosz, Heartfield and Herzfelde joined the radical left, supporting the fledgling Communist movement in Weimar, while Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck and Hannah Höch distanced themselves from political activity, even though they claimed to be sympathetic to workers’ concerns. Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London 1978), 79.

attacked the “swindle” of bourgeois art and society which had allowed and condoned the war, and also seized upon the Social Democratic leadership for “betraying” the left and forcefully suppressing the revolution in 1919. The Dadaists claimed to speak for the oppressed worker in the new Germany, where little, they argued, had changed politically or socially since the Wilhelmine era. The catalogue for the First International Dada Fair of 1920 declared “The Dadaist is the radical opponent of exploitation,” and on one wall of the gallery a placard announced that “Dada fights on the side of the revolutionary proletariat.”<sup>20</sup>

Its political concerns aside, Dada was a revolutionary development in art, and in this aspect too it had immense significance for Heartfield’s later work. Because of its anti-art stance Dada offered freedom to new forms and methods. The Dadaists looked to the material realities of their world and reflected these in the actual items used to form their works. The “tools” included scissors, adhesives and paper, with which the Dadaists connected objects from everyday life — photographs, newspaper cuttings, and magazine advertisements — in collages and the first photomontages.<sup>21</sup> Dada emphasized the machine, and the notion of the artist as engineer, using objective materials rather than the individualistic style of the brush or pen. Heartfield was called *Monteurdada* — a significant title as *montieren* translated from the German means to assemble or mount, and a *Monteur* is a fitter, mechanic or engineer. In the First International Dada Fair of 1920, a parody of the conventional bourgeois art exhibition, Grosz and Heartfield had themselves photographed alongside a placard reading “Art is dead! Long live the machine art of Tatlin.” They were referring to the Russian Constructivist who in the same year had created a futuristic model of a tower: an awesome technological structure designed as a monument for the Third International.<sup>22</sup>

20 Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 26-7.

21 Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 49.

22 Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield*, 90.



It was at this same Dada Fair that the first photomontages were shown, and disputes were later to develop among the Dadaists as to who had discovered this new art. Despite the controversy, the collage techniques and the initial photomontages of Dada had a decisive influence on Heartfield. He was severed irrevocably from an earlier flirtation with expressionist art and introduced to the use of photography, as well as to collage and the interchanging of diverse images. Although in 1920 Heartfield left Dada behind, he departed with the tools necessary to become an effective and creative political artist. Dada's negation of all previous art allowed him to venture forth in new directions, and eventually on to photomontage; and its revolutionary spirit further convinced him of the importance of art in the class struggle, although he now saw that art would be of use in this conflict only if it had relevance and value for its working-class viewers.

In the years after Dada, Heartfield allied himself more closely with the German Communist Party, becoming a leading artist for the movement. When and how had this connection first begun? According to Wieland Herzfelde both he and Heartfield initially became interested in the radical left when they heard Karl Liebknecht's anti-war appeal in 1916.<sup>23</sup> They and other friends, including Lasker-Schüler and Grosz, began supporting the USPD (the Independent Socialist Party) and the Spartacists, although they were not yet members of these political groups. The Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 further inspired Heartfield and his brother to believe in the inevitability of momentous political and social change within Germany. At this point, Herzfelde has noted, it appeared to these radical artists that the Bolsheviks

of whom we were hearing for the first time, were fighting the battle of all men worthy of the name. Although we knew nothing more

23 Noted in John Heartfield, *Photomontages of the Nazi Period*, ed. Konrad Farner (New York 1977), 21. On Liebknecht's public protest in 1916 see Helmut Trotnow, *Karl Liebknecht: Eine politische Biographie* (Köln 1980), 240-241.

specific, we immediately called ourselves Bolsheviks, and on New Year's Eve 1918 we joined the Communist Party, which had been founded the day before.<sup>24</sup>

The two brothers joined the Communist Party with little actual understanding of Communist doctrine: according to Herzfelde, "we knew Karl Marx by name, but of Marxism we knew nothing at all."<sup>25</sup> Rather, their membership in the KPD signalled radical opposition to the "bourgeois" republic, and was part of their Dadaist rejection of the post-war status quo.

Heartfield's association with the KPD matured, however, in the years that followed, based on unwavering support for the Communist movement in Germany combined with loyalty to the Comintern and Soviet Russia. Indeed, when Stalin claimed a stronger hold (through the Comintern) on western Communist parties, resulting in Soviet-style bureaucratization of the KPD, Heartfield's commitment to the party remained firm.<sup>26</sup> This link between Heartfield and the KPD was significant, for he was more keenly devoted to the party than other left-wing artists of the Weimar Republic like Grosz or Brecht, and this political commitment influenced the subjects of his work and its messages.

Essentially Heartfield's connection to the KPD developed in three distinct phases from 1918 to the party's dissolution by the Nazis in 1933. Roughly defined these phases include the years 1918

24 Quoted in John Heartfield, *Photomontages of the Nazi Period*, (ed., K. Farner), 21.

25 Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 13.

26 For histories of the German Communist Party in Weimar see Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main 1969); Ossip Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (Offenbach 1948); Werner Angress, *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921-1923* (Princeton 1963); Siegfried Bahne, "Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands," in Erich Matthias, Rudolf Morsey, eds., *Das Ende der Parteien 1933* (Dusseldorf 1960); Ben Fowkes, *Communism in Germany Under the Weimar Republic* (New York 1984); Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929-1933* (Cambridge 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm, "Confronting Defeat: The German Communist Party," in *Revolutionaries* (New York 1973).

to 1920 when Heartfield first joined the party and when his radicalism found expression in Dada, with his political views rather hastily formed; from 1920 to 1925 when, through the rejection of Dada and through work on satirical political journals like *Die Pleite* (Bankruptcy) and *Der Gegner* (Adversary), Heartfield's political commitment matured and a closer connection to the KPD was developed; and the years after 1925 when the KPD became "bol-shevized," led by Ernst Thälmann. In this last phase the party turned its attention to the importance of art in the political struggle, and demanded direct cooperation with revolutionary artists. Heartfield now worked within the party, designing election posters and creating photomontages for particular political issues set out in the newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag). After 1929 Heartfield concentrated on photomontage for the *Arbeiter-Illustrierter-Zeitung* (Workers' Illustrated Newspaper), or *AIZ*, an ostensibly independent newspaper that was in fact financed by the Comintern; his art became simpler in theme and more effective visually, reaching a much larger audience.

By this time Heartfield's expertise in political work and artistic creation was at its high point. His photomontages for *AIZ* became part of the KPD's attempt to win political power, echoing the party's confidence during the dramatic rise in voter support in the elections of 1930 and 1932. While George Grosz had become disillusioned with the KPD by the late twenties,<sup>27</sup> Heartfield in contrast was convinced of the party's future and the importance of his role in expressing its revolutionary message to the German workers.

## The Technique of Photomontage

The technique of photomontage is a difficult art form to define; indeed, artists and critics have had different notions of what con-

27 Lewis, *George Grosz*, 193-8.

stitutes this type of expression. László Moholy-Nagy described photomontage as a compact statement of visual and verbal wit, and here he may have been thinking of the humour of the Dadaist photomontages, such as Hannah Höch's *Der Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser* (Cut With The Kitchen Knife).<sup>28</sup> William Rubin, in *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* emphasizes the technical process of photomontage: the artist's use of the mass media for his materials, which replaces conventional painting or drawing.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the best definition has come from the Soviet writer Tretyakov, Heartfield's close friend and the author of the first monograph on this artist.<sup>30</sup> He argues that photomontage occurs in instances where several photographs influence each other, each gaining in significance, and collectively producing a new meaning. With the help of an accompanying text, the photomontage is able to present the social reality that underlies the facts the photographs present — and thus the importance of the photomontage is its ability to go beyond appearance and to reveal a hidden meaning. In achieving this effect, photomontage does not necessarily have to comprise a montage of photographs; it can also be photograph and text, photograph and colour, or photograph and drawing.<sup>31</sup>

Following from Tretyakov's ideas it has been suggested by some critics that the process of photomontage may be described as dialectical.<sup>32</sup> In photomontage several images with distinct connotations are contrasted, and yet by their placement in the montage they are shown to be associated. The combination of these images

28 Töteberg, *Heartfield*, 60. A superb study of Höch's photomontages is Maud Lavin's *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven 1993). Höch has also written an article on Heartfield's work for the Malik Verlag and *AIZ*: see "Heartfield in Context," *Art in America*, February 1985, 85-92.

29 William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* (New York 1968), 42.

30 Sergei Tretyakov, *John Heartfield* (Moscow 1936). I have used the German excerpt from this Russian monograph, in Roland März, ed., *John Heartfield*, 291-315.

31 *Ibid.*, 293-8.

32 Ades, *Photomontage*, 12.

leads to the creation of a new idea: a synthesis. Thus for the Marxist artist the technique of photomontage is an excellent means of presenting the ideology of class struggle, with the themes of class inequality and political injustice. Still, in the years leading up to the Second World War photomontage was used by all political factions. During the Spanish Civil War montaged posters were created to support Franco's efforts, and in Italy the Fascists used photomontage extensively to propagate their leadership.<sup>33</sup> In Nazi Germany, Goebbels ordered the production of many nationalistic photomontages, although they were clearly inferior in quality to Heartfield's work.<sup>34</sup>

Dada had welcomed photography as anti-art, an excellent example of the ready-made object, by-passing the artist and his palette. Heartfield also saw photography as a powerful method of expression when employed in newspapers and illustrated journals of the time. Because the creation of the photograph was part of a mechanical process and the non-subjective eye of the camera, the product was considered objective — a document of the times, showing reality. But photography could be abused by the “bourgeois” press: the seeming objectivity of the camera, which had such credence for the viewer, helped the German papers to distort the truth. Heartfield initially recognized this problem during the First World War, as he noted much later (in 1936):

under the influence of the imperialist war of 1914-18 the pillars of bourgeois culture and morality began to collapse. The artist could no longer keep in step with the events. The pencil proved to be a slow medium; the lies that the bourgeois press disseminated overcame it ... [the bourgeois press] made use of photography — the most powerful means of agitation for the masses. The proletarian artist must look squarely at the fact of the development of photography.<sup>35</sup>

33 *Ibid.*

34 Examples of some of these Nazi photomontages, imitative of Heartfield's work, are found in Michael Krejsa, “NS-Reaktionen auf Heartfields Arbeit 1933-1939,” in Pachnicke and Honnef, eds., *John Heartfield*, 368-378.

35 Quoted in Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield*, 145.

Understanding the power of the photograph, Heartfield utilized it within photomontage: now as a weapon in the class war.

As Heartfield developed the technique of photomontage, two of his skills proved invaluable: a sharp memory for photographs and a creative sensitivity for image associations.<sup>36</sup> Heartfield was a diligent worker, continuously searching through photo archives for needed material and keeping on hand a large collection of national and international newspapers. He made use of many sources, and was able to create a montage in a short space of time to answer to a particular event or theme decided upon by AIZ. When he did not have the material he desired for a photomontage he would arrange to have photographs taken, following sketches he had made as to what was needed. Heartfield did not take the pictures himself, but hired photographers to work under his close and demanding supervision. Some assistants have noted it would take many hours, and perhaps even an entire day, to set up and capture the photograph Heartfield required.<sup>37</sup> Heartfield likely did not make use of the camera because he wished to keep apart from the actual process of picture-taking, thus maintaining his sensitivity for the ready-made image.<sup>38</sup>

As “aimed” works, Heartfield’s photomontages have two levels in operation. The first is the medium of photography, which establishes a direct and natural connection with the figure presented. The second level is the structure of the montage — the unnaturalness of the entire picture, akin to surrealism, with Heartfield distorting the popular images of figures such as Hitler or Goering.<sup>39</sup> The photographs in the montage often appear contradictory when placed side by side. At first they startle the viewer, but because of Heartfield’s great skill in combining images in a seemingly natural way they

36 März, *John Heartfield*, 17.

37 Wolf Reiss, “Als ich mit John Heartfield zusammenarbeitete,” in März, *John Heartfield*, 188-90.

38 Aaron Scharf, “John Heartfield, Berlin Dada, and the Weapon of Photomontage,” *Studio International*, October 1968, 135.

39 A. Jürgens-Kirschhoff, “Politische Fotomontage als Karikatur,” in Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield*, 234.

give rise to a new and cohesive image emphasizing a particular idea. The effect of the meeting of the photographs and the montage — of apparent reality and fiction — works to reveal the opposite: the deception of the appearance and the significance of concealed characteristics that Heartfield brings to light. Photomontage destroys the original image precisely because it utilizes it to create a new context, making “the absurd appear true and the true appear absurd.”<sup>40</sup> By this means Heartfield could reveal the underlying ideology of the borrowed images, exposing the militarism implicit in fascism and the racism and class divisions of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. Above all, Heartfield sought to demystify the appearance of leading Nazi figures and to make clear what their propaganda stood for: political and economic oppression, terror, and war.

Very few of Heartfield’s original photomontages still exist, but those that have survived reveal a clever and indeed beautiful construction, achieving a symmetry of form.<sup>41</sup> The quality of the work was as important to Heartfield as the political statement being made and thus his photomontages deserve the label of art, although Heartfield always asserted that he was a technician, a photomonteur.<sup>42</sup> Clarity of expression was central to Heartfield’s work, fulfilled by the unity of construction of each photomontage: his works were rarely questionable or ambiguous and were meant to

40 Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London 1968), 282.

41 The complete collection of Heartfield’s photomontages for *AIZ*, along with the few remaining original designs, are to be found in the John Heartfield Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

42 März, ed., *John Heartfield*, 181. Until quite recently Heartfield’s work was often dismissed by art historians, and his photomontages were rarely shown outside of Germany. According to Nancy Roth, “In the conception of modernism that did come to prevail — art defined as a self-contained activity pursuing goals unique to itself — there was little place for an artist whose medium of choice was the mass circulation press and who openly announced that his work served the cause of world socialism.” See Roth’s essay “Heartfield and Modern Art,” in the English version of Pachnicke and Honnef, eds., *John Heartfield*, 18-29.

impact immediately upon the viewer, much like commercial advertising.<sup>43</sup>

A few other elements were used by the artist to heighten the effect and theme of each photomontage. Heartfield introduced symbols charged with emotional power for viewers, their starkness and simplicity provoking a spontaneous response to the photomontage. These symbols included fierce animals (the predatory fish, the hawk, the hyena, the snake, and the tiger), as well as the bayonet, the skeleton, the gas mask, the top hat, and the dollar sign. Most underscored the ominous nature of modern militarism and industrial capitalism. Heartfield also used humour quite a bit in his work; in this respect his art is very different from the bitter sketches of Grosz and much closer to the wit of Brecht.<sup>44</sup> Many of Heartfield's depictions of Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels, for example, are deliberately satirical and funny. Heartfield realized from his experience with Dada that humour was an agitational force, since through laughter the observer could share in the attack on accepted notions and respected figures.

Finally, in order to underline the meaning of the photomontage, Heartfield often included a text in his works. He might choose a title, and then a motto or quote attributable to the figure present, and also an explanatory few sentences. The text was intended to reinforce and make plain the central idea of the photomontage. Also, if the *AIZ* editors did not think a montage of Heartfield's was clear enough they would request a title or commentary to accompany it, if Heartfield had not already provided this. The typeset for the texts was carefully chosen too by Heartfield, to underscore a particular message: for example, he often used gothic script in anti-Nazi photomontages, to emphasize the reactionary nature of fascism.

43 Ades, *Photomontage* 14.

44 Hanne Bergius explores Heartfield's use of humour and horror (as elements of both engagement with and distance from the work) in "Der groteske Tod — Erscheinungsformen und Motivik bei Heartfield," Pachnicke and Honnef, eds., *John Heartfield*, 55-64.



Most of Heartfield's photomontages as we know them today were produced specifically to be printed in the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*. When Heartfield's work first began to appear, in 1929, *AIZ* was in its fourth year of production, published weekly, and with a circulation totalling 350,000 copies. By 1931, *AIZ* could claim more than 500,000 readers, and was one of the most popular newspapers in Germany.<sup>45</sup> Sellers hawked it in the streets of the major cities, and it was also distributed to Austria, France, Belgium and Britain. The success of *AIZ* allowed Heartfield's photomontages to reach the attention of many Germans, including a good section of the working class, if one accepts the published statistics about the class background of the readers.<sup>46</sup> Heartfield, in turn, was helpful to *AIZ*: his photomontages were popular with the readers, and in 1930 it was announced that his work would appear monthly.<sup>47</sup>

The *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* was one of the many publications directed by the enterprising Willi Münzenberg, former secretary of the Socialist Youth International and the brilliant director of a vast communications empire in the Weimar Republic, promoting Soviet-German relations.<sup>48</sup> The KPD did not have a direct connec-

- 45 Lily Becher, who worked for *AIZ*, states this in Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield*, 148.
- 46 *AIZ* reported in 1931 (Nr. 41) that 42% of its readers were skilled labourers, 33% unskilled labourers, 10% employees, 5% young persons, 3.5% housewives, 3% members of the free professions, 2% independent workers, and 1% officials. See Heinz Willmann, *Geschichte der Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (Berlin 1975) 122-3.
- 47 *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, Nr. 6, 1930. In *AIZ*, Nr. 9, 1930, there is a letter from a Bremen worker named Hans Woile, praising Heartfield's work: a photomontage, Woile argues "gives us readers a clearer picture of current subjects than is possible in a long article. I feel personally that when one comes home from work and reads *AIZ*, it is the pictures and short reports that attract one most and startle with their clarity. And so it is that a good photomontage primarily offers to show what is topical by simple means."
- 48 A comprehensive biography of Münzenberg remains to be written; there is an account of his life by his common-law wife Babette Gross, entitled *Willi Münzenberg: A Political Biography*, trans. Marian Jackson (Michigan 1974), but there are gaps in her information and she can be rather too defensive about Münzenberg's political views. Some of the best descriptions of Münzenberg

tion with *AIZ*, although the magazines's small staff was composed mainly of Communist Party members. It would be more accurate to say that *AIZ* was an arm of the Comintern, since the paper remained part of the Münzenberg "Trust" of organizations, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, and film companies funded by the Comintern. Strictly speaking, then, *AIZ* was not a KPD newsletter; while it did promote the political platform of the KPD, at the same time it avoided dry political discourse (such as was evident in *Die Rote Fahne*), remaining flexible and appealing to a wider audience.

Under Münzenberg's direction, *AIZ* utilized all the techniques of a modern illustrated weekly, uniquely offering what one commentator has described "the world in workers' clothing."<sup>49</sup> It was made attractive to the eye, with compelling investigative reports, large page photographs or photomontages, and many articles of general enjoyment and pleasure. Photographs were printed with the aid of the newly developed copper-plate photogravure; this technique improved the quality of reproduction and gave clearer definition to tones and shades in photographs.<sup>50</sup> The front cover of each issue of *AIZ*, which often featured Heartfield's work, was generally of excellent effect. One photo or photomontage would fill the entire page, accompanied by *AIZ*'s insignia and the announcement of the leading article. In each edition *AIZ* was stylish, interesting and eye-catching: the paper became a well-matched competitor to the popular *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*.

are still found in Arthur Koestler's *Arrow in the Blue* (New York 1952) and *The Invisible Writing* (New York 1954).

49 Irene Tietze-Lusk, in an article for *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, 1932 (another of Münzenberg's publications), quoted in Siepmann, *Montage: John Heartfield*, 156.

50 Münzenberg had learned of the use of copper-plate printing in the U.S.A.; eager to make *AIZ* a successful illustrated newspaper, utilizing the most modern techniques, he introduced this invention to the staff in 1925. This fact is noted in the film by Helmut Herbst, *John Heartfield, Fotomonteur*.

## Heartfield's Photomontages, 1930-1935

In 1931, Heartfield declared to Tretyakov, "A member of the party and a revolutionary artist — for me these two notions cannot be separated from one another."<sup>51</sup> The themes of many of Heartfield's photomontages from 1929-1938 reflected this dedication to the KPD. To the historian these photomontages are of interest as they not only illustrate Heartfield's political art — his perception of political events and his attempts to inspire political action — but also because they express the views and aims of the KPD during this time of great potential and challenge. Before we turn to an analysis of several of these photomontages, we must note the shifts in KPD policy during the last few years of the Weimar Republic, since the new political tactics chosen by the Communist leadership directly influenced Heartfield's work.

Following a period of relative stability in German politics, from 1924-1928, the Republic descended into economic and political crisis, beginning in 1930. There now seemed to be a new potential for revolutionary development; the KPD made greater efforts to win broad support from the working class (for example, by increasing the number of street cells) and it resolved to battle enemies in the state: the SPD, the bourgeois parties (Center, DVP, DNVP) and the NSDAP.<sup>52</sup> Of these groups the SPD and the NSDAP were seen as the most important opponents. Behind the scenes Moscow controlled KPD decision-making via the Comintern, a situation that led to serious problems since the Moscow leadership did not have first-hand experience of events in Germany and thus dictated policy that favoured Soviet interests and lacked understanding of the political situation in the Republic.<sup>53</sup>

51 Heartfield, "Partei und Kunstler," in März, ed., *John Heartfield*, 131.

52 Street battles between the KPD and Nazis in Berlin have been detailed by Eve Rosenhaft in *Beating the Fascists*, and in her article "Working-class Life and Working-Class Politics: Communists, Nazis and the State in the Battle for the Streets, Berlin 1928-1932," in Richard Bessel and E.J. Feuchtwanger, eds. *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany* (London 1981), 207-40.

In 1928 the Comintern members accepted an ultra-left position under the slogan “class against class.”<sup>54</sup> This new tactic followed from the ambitious socialist programmes adopted under Stalin’s leadership in Russia — the beginning of collectivization and an attack upon the “kulaks,” and the introduction of the first five-year plan for industrialization. Furthermore, the Comintern’s swing to the left was part of Stalin’s confrontation with Bukharin, who had become the leader of the Comintern following Zinoviev.<sup>55</sup> The ultra-left position inaugurated what the Comintern described as a third period, after the revolutionary years of 1919-1923 and the lull of 1923-1928. The third period was said to encompass a new revolutionary era, following upon the world depression of 1929.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the new strategy of the Comintern contained a resolution to oppose social democracy, now described as “social fascism.” As early as 1924 Stalin had spoken of social democracy and fascism as “twin brothers.”<sup>57</sup> By the late twenties the Soviet leadership believed the Communist movement was strong enough to strike out at its rival in its own class, and indeed saw this as the most important aim.<sup>58</sup> In Germany, the KPD adopted the social fascist position, as made clear by Thälmann’s remark to the central committee of the KPD in 1931.

Social democracy, above all the “left wing” SPD, is still the main obstacle in the German proletariat’s revolutionary struggle for liberation. The Party and the working class cannot possibly be successful in the fight against fascism and against the capitalist system in general, without beating this main obstacle and destroying this most dangerous enemy in the camp of the working class.<sup>59</sup>

53 Siegfried Bahne, “Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands,” in Matthias and Morsey, eds., *Das Ende der Parteien 1933*, 656.

54 *Ibid.*

55 Franz Borkenau, *The Communist International* (London 1968), 333.

56 *Ibid.*, 336-8.

57 Bahne, “Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands,” 657.

58 Babette Gross, “The German Communists’ United Front and Popular Front Ventures,” in Milorad Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, eds., *The Comintern: Historical Highlights* (London 1966), 115.

59 Quoted in *Ibid.*

Up to 1933, and even after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, the attack on the SPD continued. Notably, only the SPD leadership was chosen as a target; the rank and file members were still considered potential supporters of the Communist movement, and the formation of a united front of the proletariat was pursued with vigour by auxiliary organizations of the party, such as the *Kommunistische Jugendverband* (Communist Union of Youth).<sup>60</sup>

In the early 1930s the KPD leadership thus embraced a "camp mentality" and refused to form effective alliances with other political parties.<sup>61</sup> It rejected the SPD as a treacherous enemy of the workers, while presenting itself as the only legitimate representative of the working class. Cooperation with the SPD in the Reichstag was rejected. Moreover, in 1931 the KPD joined in a referendum for the dissolution of Prussia's SPD government — a referendum spearheaded by the National Socialists. When the Braun government fell in July 1932 (the victim of a coup arranged by Chancellor Franz von Papen) the KPD spoke of the capitulation of social democracy to fascism and applauded the destruction of the last bastion of SPD power as evidence of social democracy's disintegration as a political force.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, the two parties had diametrically opposed aims; the KPD sought revolution, the SPD opposed the creation of a "Soviet Germany" and attempted to sustain the democratic system. These differences made any alliance extremely unlikely.

Heartfield accepted the KPD's war on social democracy, expressing the anti-SPD line in several of his photomontages. In 1930 he created a photomontage for *AIZ* of a passive, faceless figure, entitled *Whoever Reads the Bourgeois Papers Will Become Blind and Deaf. Away With the Stupefying Bandages!*<sup>63</sup> (Illustration 1) The face of the man is wrapped with two SPD newspapers, *Tempo*

60 Bahne, "Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands," 669.

61 Rosenhaft, "Working-class Life and Working-class Politics," 208.

62 Bahne, "Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands," 673.

63 *Wer Bürgerblätter liest wird blind und taub. Weg mit den Verdummungsbandagen!* in *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, Nr. 6, 1930.

and *Vorwärts*. On the body is a police harness, emphasizing the link between the SPD and state security forces.<sup>64</sup> The verse at the bottom of the work is a parody of a traditional song, well known to many Germans: I am a Prussian, do you recognize my colours? Instead of a rousing patriotic stanza, Heartfield substitutes the following words:

I am a cabbagehead, recognize my leaves?  
 Sorrows make me lose my mind  
 But I'll stay quiet and hope for a saviour  
 I want to be a cabbagehead, black, red and gold<sup>65</sup>  
 Don't want to see or hear  
 Stay clear of politics  
 And even if they strip me naked  
 The red press won't come in my house!

Through the text and image Heartfield attacks what he sees as the immobilism of the SPD and its acceptance of the political, economic and social status quo. The figure here is a stereotype of the German philistine, burying his head in the sand (literally wrapped up in SPD rhetoric), and unwilling to act for progressive change. The SPD is accused of supporting the bourgeois state, opposing the Communist Party, and clinging to reactionary politics; furthermore, it threatens to deafen and blind its followers, and thus thwart all action and opposition.

Another attack on the SPD is found in a photomontage of 1931: *On The Crisis Party Convention of the SPD*.<sup>66</sup> (Illustration 2) Here we see the notion of social democracy as social fascism. The text of this work states:

64 David Evans argues that the figure is wearing the uniform of the SPD Reichsbanner, a paramilitary organization, which also seems plausible. See Evans, *John Heartfield: AIZ*, 44.

65 Black, red and gold were the colours of the Republican flag.

66 *Zum Krisen-Parteitag der SPD*, in *AIZ*, Nr. 24, 1931.

Social democracy does not desire the collapse of capitalism. Like a doctor it seeks only a way to heal and improve it. (Fritz Tarnow, chairman of the timber workers' union). The veterinarians of Leipzig: we shall of course draw the tiger's teeth, but first we must tend and strengthen him.

Heartfield begins this text with an actual quote by Tarnow, who spoke at the SPD party convention of 1931, held in Leipzig. He then follows this quote with satire; the “veterinarians of Leipzig” are the SPD leaders, who promise to ease the pains of capitalism even while they sustain and further the system. The photomontage declares that the fierce words of the SPD against capitalism are deceptive; the tiger-faced figure here is an SPD man, showing that the party is akin to the powerful foe it claims it will tame. On his tie we see a small swastika amongst a pattern of deathheads, suggesting as well social democracy's link with National Socialism. Heartfield targets the supposed hypocrisy of the Social Democrats (again, another “betrayal” of revolutionary ideals), and urges workers to reject any association with the party. We see the extent of KPD mistrust of the Social Democrats and the unwillingness to recognize the SPD as an ally in the struggle against National Socialism.

The optimism of the KPD — its belief that the possibility of revolution was drawing nearer and the chances for success were becoming more likely — receive interesting treatment in a photomontage of 1932: *6 Million Communist Votes*.<sup>67</sup> (Illustration 3) This work refers to the KPD gains in the Reichstag election of November 6th, 1932. Here we have one of Heartfield's most humorous creations, showing the aristocratic Chancellor Franz von Papen in tails and rolled up trousers, his gloved hands holding a large ladle and a small bucket, about to “drain” the Communist “swamp.” Heartfield repeats a quotation by Papen, in which the Chancellor advocates the strongest means possible to oust the Communists from Germany: “No means can be harsh enough to

67 *6 Millionen kommunistische Stimmen*, in *AIZ*, Nr. 47, November 1932.

exterminate Bolshevism in Germany by root and branch!" In the photomontage, Pape, bucket and all, is about to be overwhelmed by the turbulent waters — representing the substantial number of supporters now behind the KPD. Indeed, the Communist leadership touted the election results of this year as evidence of the "historical downfall" of the SPD and the "disintegration of the fascist mass movement," despite the fact that both the SPD and the NSDAP had won a greater share of the popular vote.<sup>68</sup> The confidence of the KPD was based on an exaggerated assessment of its gains; still, party leaders were convinced of future success, and continued to block cooperation with the SPD while also battling the Nazis. In September 1932 Thälmann boasted, "we must and will be the victor!"<sup>69</sup>

By far, the greatest number of photomontages developed by Heartfield, including some of his finest, were not those concerned with the SPD, or with the eventual victory of Communism, however; they are photomontages that target the danger and violence of Nazism. Some of these photomontages are perceptive and chilling, many are hilariously funny — exposing the emptiness of the Hitler myth — and some, again, reveal KPD misconceptions.

In all of the anti-Nazi photomontages, Heartfield sought to expose the falseness of National Socialist propaganda, including the idea of the classless *Volksgemeinschaft*. In *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute*<sup>70</sup> (1932) (Illustration 4) the familiar greeting of the Führer to the German people becomes a furtive reach for money handed over by an anonymous figure, representative of big capital.

68 The NSDAP received 33.1% of the vote, the SPD 20.4% and the KPD 16.9%. Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter* (Chapel Hill 1983), 211. Moreover, Hermann Weber notes that despite the increase in voter support for the KPD, the SPD remained the stronger workers' party. The SPD had about one million members in 1932, in 10,000 local groups. In contrast, the KPD had only about 300,000 members: see "John Heartfields politische Fotomontagen und die Auseinandersetzungen von SPD und KPD in der Weimarer Republik," 357.

69 Quoted in Bahne, "Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands," 681.

70 *Der Sinn des Hitlergrusses*, in *AIZ*, Nr. 42, October 1932.



“A small man asks for a big gift,” asserts Heartfield. The motto of the work, “Millions Stand Behind Me,” taken from an original quote by Hitler, expresses quite a different idea in the photomontage: capital, not voters, make the party. The effect of the montage is immediate and arresting: a skilful attack on the Nazi image of the omnipotent leader. Hitler’s salute, used in Nazi rallies to electrify the masses, is demystified here, becoming “a deceitfully open, receiving hand.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Heartfield contrasts the huge body of the anonymous capitalist with the diminutive figure of Hitler (dressed in a military uniform), asserting that the balance of power resides with big business.

In another photomontage of 1932, *Adolf the Superman* (Illustration 5), Heartfield satirizes the Führer by showing an x-ray view of his torso filled with gold coins and the emblems of the swastika and the iron cross. Hitler speaks, but Heartfield shows that the words are lies, fuelled by capitalist interest, fascist ideology and the desire for war.<sup>72</sup> In the composition of the work, Heartfield presents Hitler’s body as literally transparent; the surreal combination of the photograph of Hitler’s face and the see-through chest with the spine of coins is so carefully constructed that the work actually appears logical, despite its improbability. In both *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute* and *Adolf the Superman* Heartfield synthesizes press photographs of Hitler with symbols of capitalism (the photograph of the faceless capitalist, a column of coins inside an x-rayed chest) to stress the connection between Nazism and big business.

Success of the Nazi movement depended enormously on the power of its propaganda; the Hitler myth, as Ian Kershaw has shown, drew supporters, and after 1933 became an integratory force sustaining the regime despite economic problems and public dis-

71 Ades, 14.

72 In August 1932 this photomontage was enlarged to the size of a placard and posted throughout Berlin, to the disgust of the Nazis. Count Harry Kessler, a Weimar statesman and an important diarist of the period, also a friend to Grosz, Heartfield and Herzfelde, financed the poster’s production after seeing the photomontage in *AIZ*. Herzfelde, *John Heartfield*, 59-60.

content with party officials.<sup>73</sup> Thus when Heartfield subverted Hitler's image, making him appear grotesque, silly, or duplicitous, it was with the understanding that this satire, expressed through the persuasive techniques of the mass media, would distance viewers from the myth-making at the heart of the Nazi appeal. In this regard, Heartfield's photomontages show astute knowledge of the mechanics of Nazi propaganda and the falseness of Hitler's aura. Aesthetically, too, photomontages like *Adolf the Superman* are original expressions of visual satire, with clever pictorial content. The messages of some of these photomontages fail, however, when held up against the historical record. For example, in accordance with KPD doctrine, Heartfield proclaims in the above two photomontages that big business is the driving force behind Hitler, and that Nazism promises a more extreme form of capitalist oppression of the workers. In fact, big business was not a major contributor to the Nazis in the early 30s; most of the party's money came from membership dues.<sup>74</sup> Heartfield also depicts Hitler as a "small man" — a tool of German capitalists. We see this idea expressed directly in *A Tool in God's Hand? A Toy in Thyssen's Hand!*<sup>75</sup> (1933). (Illustration 6) Thyssen was a wealthy and powerful steel magnate, who did support the Nazis. Nonetheless, the image of Thyssen manipulating a puppet Hitler again rings false; the KPD refused to acknowledge the wide extent of public support for Hitler and his party — preferring to see the machinations of capital behind NSDAP successes. The KPD underestimated Hitler's political skill and his popularity with Germans, although it was not alone in this underestimation; Hitler was written off by many of his opponents before 1933. Perhaps the truth was a bitter pill to swallow: that Hitler was a determined and charismatic leader able to manipulate

73 Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich"* (Oxford 1987).

74 See the study by H.A. Turner, Jr., *Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* (New York 1985).

75 *Werkzeug in Gottes Hand? Spielzeug in Thyssens Hand!* in *AIZ*, Nr. 31, August 1933.

others rather than be manipulated. Ultimately, the KPD's underestimation of the force of Nazism became evident when it was too late: when Hitler's rise to power did not bring forward massive demonstrations and a wave of revolutionary support for the Communists.

With the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Heartfield fled to Prague, joining the exiled staff of *AIZ* (later renamed as the *Volks-Illustrierte*). Publication continued, the major concern now being to attack fascism in Europe; issues were smuggled into Germany and sold in Britain, France, Denmark, Belgium and the U.K. Heartfield's work appeared regularly on *AIZ* covers, focussing almost exclusively on the threat of Nazism. In 1934 Heartfield was still convinced of the precarious support for Nazism and of the domination of capital over the Nazi party, and this is seen in *The Thousand-Year Reich*<sup>76</sup> (1934). (Illustration 7) Here the artist refers to the statement made by Hitler at the party conference in Nuremberg in the same year, promising a new era for Germany and the National Socialist movement: "The German way of life has been finally laid down for the next one thousand years." Hitler is shown as the drummer alongside this house of unsteady cards, but Thyssen remains at the top alongside the Nazi flag — he is the "King" in the suit. The other cards indicate different props of the state: Goering, Goebbels, the Army, and the SS. Each card features symbols of Nazi oppression: Goering, for example, is accompanied by images of a prison and axe (referring to his position as Prussian Minister of the Interior), and Goebbels is pictured as a troll, conducting "first-class propaganda bells, the best remedy for hunger and employment." The card for the SA shows a bloody heart, in reference to Hitler's violent purge of this paramilitary force during the Night of the Long Knives from June 30th to July 2nd, 1934. While Heartfield was correct in predicting the eventual collapse of the Third Reich, his attack on the fragility of the Nazi regime in 1934, echoing the communist view that Hitler would fall in the wake of

76 *Das tausendjährige Reich*, in *AIZ*, Prague, Nr. 38, September 1934.

the crash of monopoly capitalism, missed its mark; the Nazi regime was popular with Germans at this point, despite economic problems. Both the suppression of the so-called “Röhm Putsch” and Hitler’s takeover of the Presidency, after the death of Hindenburg on August 2nd, added immensely to the Führer’s popularity.<sup>77</sup>

A more telling attack on Nazism appears in *Hurray, the Butter is Gone!*<sup>78</sup> (1935) (Illustration 8), in which Heartfield ridicules the new demands put upon the populace by the Nazi leadership — the drive towards arms production in preparation for war. Goering’s statement that iron will make a nation strong is given literal translation by Heartfield as a peasant family of Nazi supporters devours various metal objects. The serious message is that the needs of the people will be sacrificed to Nazi aims for war.

The warning of oncoming war was one of the most prominent themes in Heartfield’s work, exposing Nazi militarism and Hitler’s duplicity as the “man of peace” in Europe during the 1930s. In 1934 Heartfield reproduced a work that had appeared ten years before as the first political photomontage of his creation, entitled *After Ten Years*. By 1934 *After Twenty Years*<sup>79</sup> (Illustration 9) had not lost its force or its relevancy. The photomontage contains three elements: the photo of General Litzmann, an old officer formerly of the Wilhelmine military; the line of skeletons; and the boys marching in uniforms as young troops. The quotation at the side is an endorsement of the importance of military spirit and its inculcation in the young, taken from a Japanese newspaper.<sup>80</sup> The row of skeletons towers over the small boys; their line is more disciplined, their presence more aggressive and fearsome. The boys represent a second generation, following the lead of Litzmann — representative of the *Machtpolitik* of the First World War.<sup>81</sup> The con-

77 See Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*, 64-7.

78 *Hurray, die Butter ist alle!* in *AIZ*, Prague, Nr. 51, December 1935.

79 *Nach zwanzig Jahren*, in *AIZ*, Prague, Nr. 37, September 1934.

80 The quote reads: “Even three-year-old children playing at war must be solemnly taught proper handling of a gun and saber, instilling the feeling that war is pleasant and ought to be loved.”

81 Bergius, “Der groteske Tod — Erscheinungsformen und Motivik bei

frontation of life and death is expressed in a grotesque and indeed fantastical manner, a strong statement against the military ethos of Nazism. This photomontage can be paired with an earlier and more humorous work offering a similar message. *His Majesty Adolf*<sup>82</sup> (Illustration 10) appeared in 1932 and is an inventive rendering of Hitler as the Kaiser. The Nazi uniform is mingled with the epaulets, medals and head gear of the Wilhelmine period. Heartfield adds to the work a statement slightly altered from a famous quote of the Kaiser's: "I lead you towards a great epoch" now becomes "I lead you towards a great misfortune (*Zeiten-Pleiten*)."<sup>83</sup> The viewer is reminded of the immense disaster suffered by Germany in the First World War, and of the hardships that came thereafter. Heartfield argues, then, that Hitler promises the same result to Germany if no one opposes him. The message was prescient.

## Heartfield and History

When the Second World War began, Heartfield was in London, having fled Prague as the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938; his production of photomontages dwindled with the end of the *Volks-Illustrierte*, although a few of his works were featured on the covers of *Picture Post* and *Liliput*. He also found temporary employment as a book designer for a new publisher, Lindsey Drummond, and for the prestigious firm of Penguin Books. The low point came in 1940, when for six weeks he was interned in a refugee camp, set up to prevent German exiles from collaborating with the Nazis. Heartfield was considered of minimal risk, and eventually released because of illness.<sup>83</sup> In 1950 he left London for East

Heartfield," 59. David Evans points out that General Litzmann became an enthusiastic member of the NSDAP in 1929: see Evans, *John Heartfield: AIZ*, 252.

82 *S.M. Adolf*, in *AIZ*, Nr. 34, August 1932. This photomontage was reproduced for Britain's *Picture Post* in September 1939, under the heading *Kaiser Adolf: The Man Against Europe*.

83 Töteberg, *Heartfield*, 114.

Germany, where he remained until his death in 1968. During the twilight of his life he worked only sporadically on photomontage, plagued by health problems. Moreover, in East Germany, cultural bureaucrats criticized Heartfield's art as "formalist," arguing that the new art should be positive and uplifting in its representation of workers' lives, simpler in content and form than the avant-garde cultural experimentation of the 20s and 30s.<sup>84</sup> In a bizarre twist of fate, Heartfield's photomontages were rejected as too negative and of little relevance to the East German working class; it was not until the late 1950s that the first books and exhibitions appeared in the DDR celebrating Heartfield's work. In fact, the most comprehensive exhibition of Heartfield's art, held in East Berlin's Academy of Arts, took place after Heartfield had died and Germany had reunified, in 1991.

In North America Heartfield is not very well known, although some of his photomontages (above all, *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute*), have been reproduced in English-language texts, and are recognizable. His art deserves greater attention. Because of Heartfield's skill, photomontage became an important element of political art in Weimar Germany. Furthermore, his work is a prime example of what John Willett has termed the "constructive vision" of Weimar culture: the resolve by select German artists like Heartfield, Piscator and Brecht to address contemporary subjects and pressing human needs through techniques of the modern media and through collective approaches to the expression of art.<sup>85</sup> Heartfield utilized photography, "the painting of the poor,"<sup>86</sup> and through *AIZ* brought his images to workers. His work was not intended for appreciation by the social elite; rather it was meant to affect the lives of the masses. Heartfield embraced a new role for the artist,

84 *Ibid.*, 118; see also Ilse-Maria Dorfstecher, "John Heartfield als Bühnenbildner 1951 bis 1966," in Pachnicke and Honnef, eds., *John Heartfield*, 379-381.

85 Willett, *The New Sobriety*, 11.

86 This was the term given to photography during the Paris Commune: see Sergei Tretyakov's description, quoted in März, ed., *John Heartfield*, 291.

tied to political goals. Art was no longer to be passive or contemplative: it was to be topical, accessible, arousing interest and constructive involvement with one's society. Above all, it was meant to inspire political consciousness and revolt.

In all of his works, Heartfield expressed sympathy with the viewpoint of the Communist Party while it resided legally in Germany and while it went underground within the Third Reich. Before 1933 his photomontages lashed out against the fragile democracy of the Weimar Republic — through assaults on the SPD — helping to undermine the Republic's validity for his audience. In this regard, we must question his understanding of historical conditions in the late Weimar era. Weimar artists on the left, like Grosz and Heartfield, while producing powerful and compelling artistic statements of protest — intended as accurate commentaries on social and political realities — made mistakes. Their art was dedicated to unmasking the truth, but could instead reflect political misconceptions or propaganda. As one critic has noted, some of their works make too great a claim of accuracy, “whereas the truth, as history attempts to see it in the perspective of time, has proven to be much more complex.”<sup>87</sup> For any writer on Heartfield, this significant criticism raises problems: how does one weigh the artist's errors of political judgment against those works that accurately reveal the menace of Nazism, or so majestically subvert the Hitler myth?

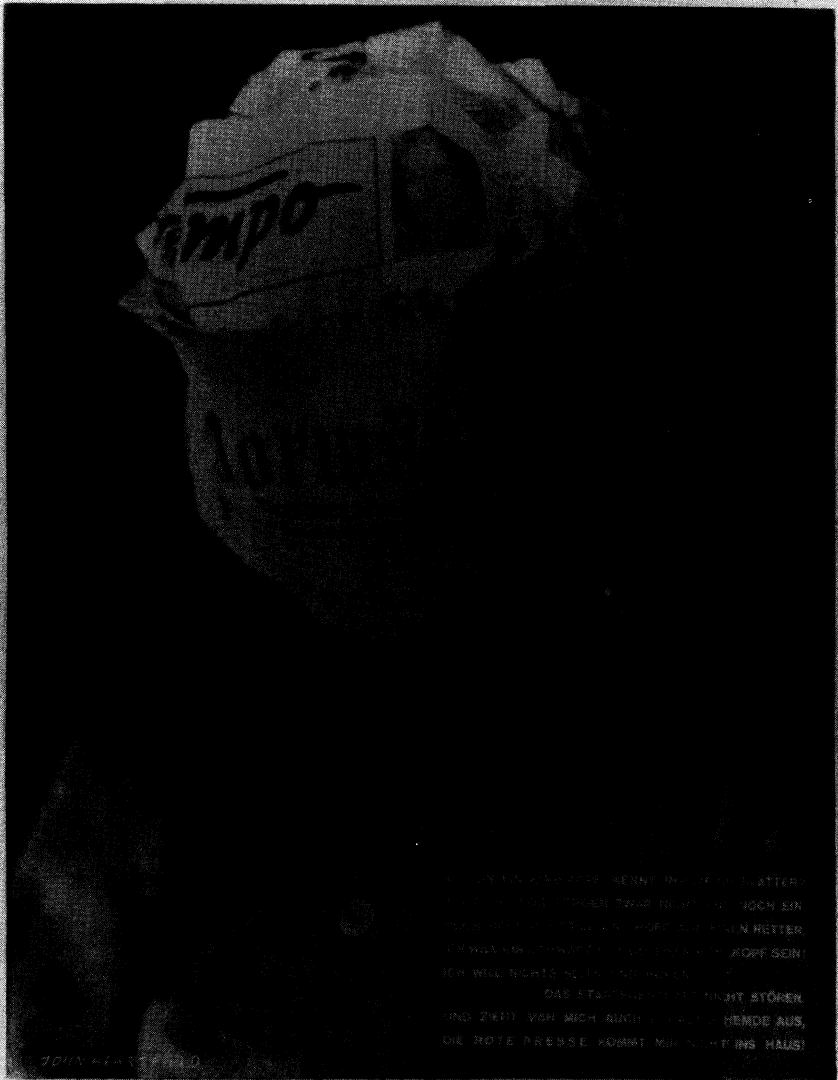
We must accept that Heartfield could be both insightful and blinkered, that he brought to his art both the mistakes of party dogma and accurate observations of Nazism and Nazi propaganda — observations he made precisely because he was a communist and so intensely opposed to the oppression of workers by fascism. Not all of his photomontages are fair to the muse of history, but as visual expressions of communist policy and as ingenious examples

87 Sidney Simon, “The Artist as Social Critic in the Weimar Republic,” in Frank Hirschbach, *et al.*, eds., *Germany in the Twenties* (Minnesota 1980), 25.

of revolutionary art they are valuable documents for the historian of culture and politics in interwar Germany.

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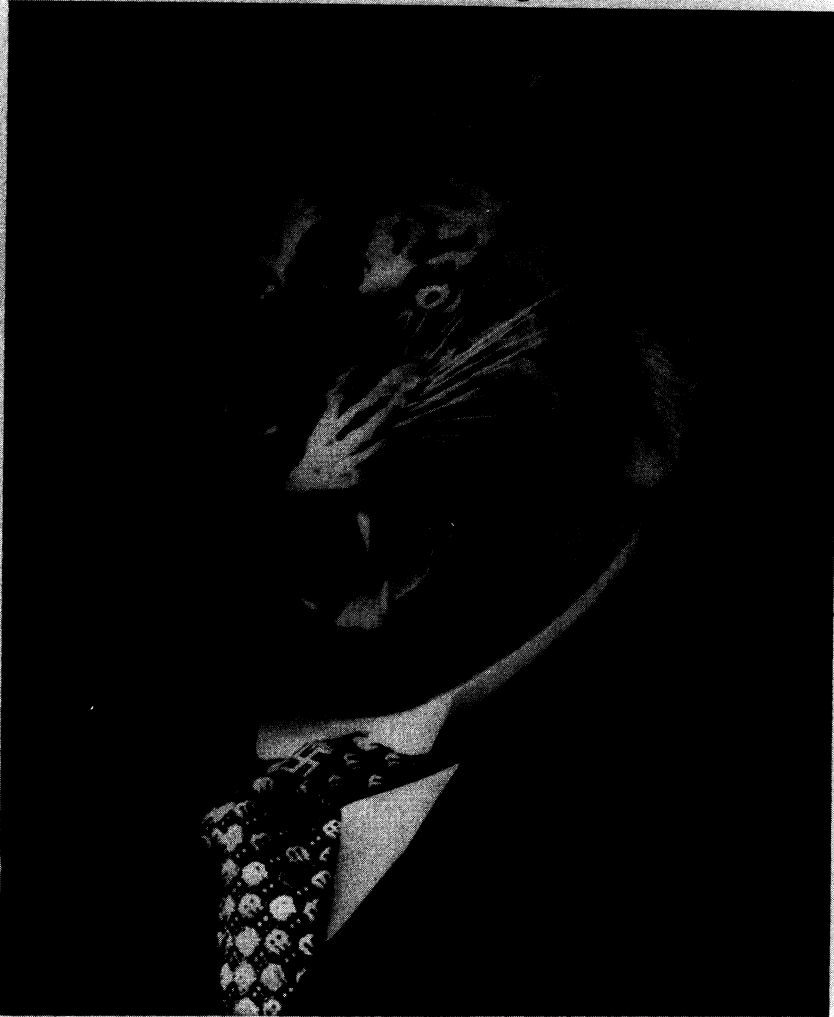
WENN ICH WÄRENTE, KENNT ICH DIE BLÄTTER,  
DIE ICH LIESE, WENN ICH WÄRE, WÄRE ICH  
NOCH EIN  
MENSCH, DER SICH UM HILFE BÜHLE, DER HILFE  
ERWARTET, DER WÄRE, DER WÄRE, DER WÄRE,  
ICH WÜLL NICHT WISSEN, WER ICH BIN,  
ICH WÜLL NICHT WISSEN, WER ICH BIN.

DAS STÄNDIG WÄRE, NICHT STÖREN,  
UND ZEHE WICH AUCH, WENN ICH HEMDE AUS,  
DIE ROTE PRESSE KOMMT MIR NICHT INS HAUS!

**WER BÜRGERBLÄTTER LIEST WIRD BLIND UND TAUB.  
WEG MIT DEN VERDÜMMUNGSBANDAGEN!**

Illustration # 1

## Zum Krisen-Parteitag der SPD



Die Sozialdemokratie will nicht den Zusammenbruch des Kapitalismus. Sie will wie ein Arzt zu heilen und zu bessern versuchen. (Fritz Tarnow, Vorsitzender des Holzarbeiterverbandes)

FOTO-MONTAGE: JOHN HEARTFIELD

**Die Tierärzte von Leipzig: „Selbstverständlich werden wir dem Tiger die Zähne ausbrechen, aber zunächst einmal müssen wir ihn gesundpflegen und herausfüttern.“**

VOORHOUT ENZEL - 1918 N. 10. G. I. A. S. 04. 2. 10. 1918  
VAN DE WERKSTADT, DEN 11 - 1918 N. 10. 1918

# 6 Millionen Kommunistische Stimmen



Wie viele Leute gehen gegen den Bolschewismus in Deutschland mit Stumpf und Stiel an? Wie viele Leute gehen gegen den Bolschewismus in Deutschland mit Stumpf und Stiel an?

„Aber Papen, was machen Sie denn da?“  
„Ich lege den bolschewistischen Sumpf trocken.“

WOLFF, 1918 N. 10. 1918

Illustration # 3

# A-J-Z

ERSCHEINT WOCHENTLICH EINMAL • PREIS 20 PFG., Kc. 1,60  
30 GR., 30 SCHWEIZER RP. • V. b. b. • NEUER DEUTSCHER  
VERLAG, BERLIN W 8 • JAHRGANG XI • NR. 47 • 16. 10. 1932

## DER SINN DES HITLERGRUSSES:



Motto:  
**MILLIONEN  
STEHEN  
HINTER MIR!**

### Kleiner Mann bittet um große Gaben

Illustration # 4



**ADOLF, DER UBERMENSCH: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech**

Illustration # 5

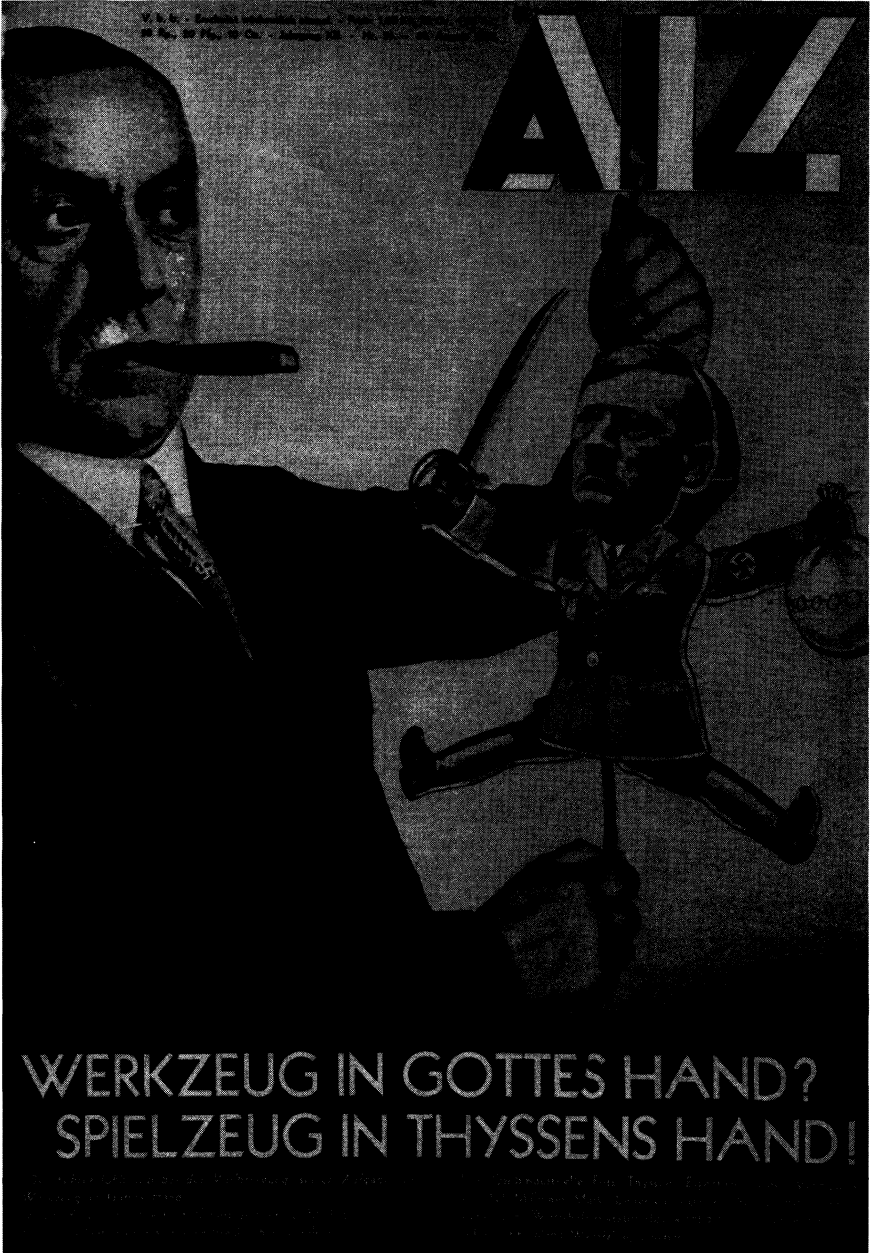


Illustration # 6

Illustration # 7

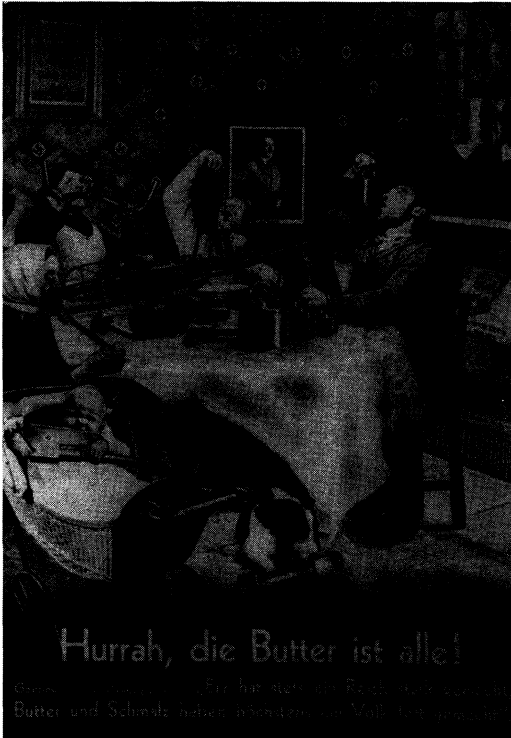
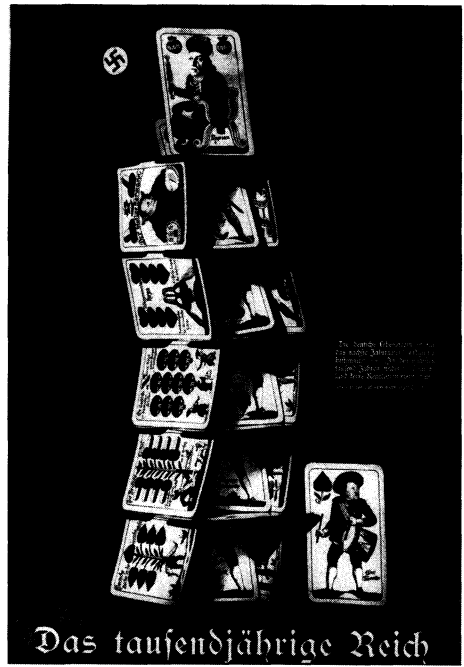
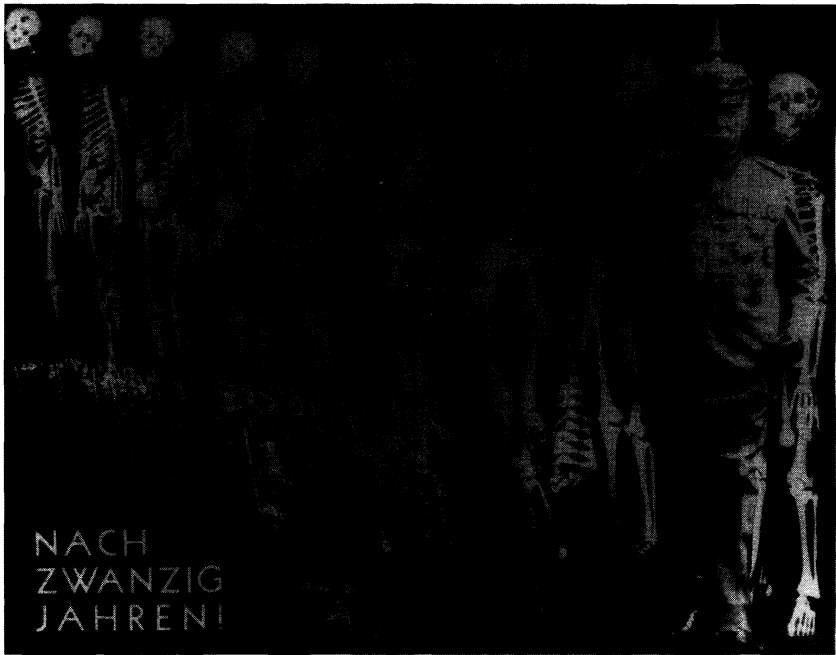


Illustration # 8



Siehe die Illustration 8 und die Illustration 9. Die Illustration 9 zeigt die Verfallenen der Gegenwart und die Schuld, welche ihnen anhängt und die Götter verflucht werden. Die Illustration 8 zeigt die Verfallenen der Vergangenheit und die Schuld, welche ihnen anhängt und die Götter verflucht werden. Die Illustration 9 zeigt die Verfallenen der Gegenwart und die Schuld, welche ihnen anhängt und die Götter verflucht werden. Die Illustration 8 zeigt die Verfallenen der Vergangenheit und die Schuld, welche ihnen anhängt und die Götter verflucht werden.

Illustration # 9



Illustration # 10