Soviets in the Archive

Alexandra Dodd reflects on the life and legacy of Jon Berndt (1950–2010), and the fabulous archive of 1940s Soviet posters that he stumbled upon in the Archive of the National Library of South Africa.

When Derrick Bux, Murray’s latest body of work (see my review, p. 61) uses the pop aesthetic of Soviet iconography to lampoon the excesses of South Africa’s ruling elite, Jonathan Berndt’s interest in Soviet posters was part of a life shaped by his undying commitment to Marxist ideals. Berndt died on 11 September 2010 from a bout of pneumonia, exacerbated by the ravages of his childhood illness. Stricken with polio at the age of six, he experienced at first hand the weight of discrimination, and this helped to prepare the ground for his lifelong commitment to social justice that transformed an ordinary life into an extraordinary one,” writes his friend, Professor John Higgins.

Berndt had begun a doctoral thesis in the Archive and Public Culture research initiative and, a week before his death, had captured the imaginations of everyone present at a workshop at the University of Cape Town, when he presented a paper entitled “The Spectral Life of Posters in the Archive.”

A ceremony to commemorate his life and work was held on 30 November last year in a room in the Social Anthropology Department, renamed the Jon Berndt Thought Space in his honour, where a series of twelve original posters designed by Berndt have been hung as a permanent exhibit.

At the ceremony, Adrian Cooper and Neil James of Handshaping Puppet Company presented Berndt’s wife, Jill Jackson, with a copy of Neil Bartlett’s play Of How Could We Ever, recently interpreted with giant puppets for a run at the National Theatre in London. A love story about two men who span sixty-six years, the play is inspired by the longstanding relationship between Kohler and Jones, who have been close to Berndt and Joubert throughout their adult lives. Recognizing that their love stories were intertwined, Kohler and Jones have dedicated the published script to their cherished friends.

At the event, two bound copies of Berndt’s last academic paper were presented – one to Joubert, and one to the UCT archive. This was particularly poignant considering that Berndt’s ideas had resulted in him being expelled from Michaelis in the 1970s. Sparked by the student uprising of 1976 and a copy of Marx’s writings given to him as an undergraduate by a junior at the then University of Natal, he was working on a Master’s dissertation on Marx and Wittgenstein, arguing a case for the necessarily political nature of art, which went against the grain of the then dominant notion of Art for Art’s sake being propagated at the art school.

“Strongly influenced by the radical art movement called Arte Povera, which promoted an art of impoverished materials and contrasted the power structure of fine art and the gallery system,” he wrote in a short biographical teaser penned just last year.

Berndt began working at the Community Arts Project (CAP) in 1979, where he participated in establishing the Silikon Project, which subsequently assisted anti-apartheid organisations to produce political posters from 1982 to 1994. When CAP closed down he continued to work as a freelance poster designer, mainly for Social Movements.

The paper he was working on revolved around a collection of seventy-six Soviet posters from the 1940s, known as the TASS (Soviet News Agency) posters and was part of a bigger project exploring South African Struggle posters inspired by recent publications including Images of Defence (2004), Red on Black (2007), From Weapon to Ornament (2003) and the Bruce Murdie + MEDA Art Ensemble Retrospective (2009). He was particularly interested in how Russian and other archival networks of political posters had contributed to the cultural and political milieu in which the South African struggle posters had been made into existence.

In 1981, while he was working as an exhibition designer in the National Library of South Africa, Berndt found the TASS posters folded up and stacked on a floor in a basement. These hand-made, large-format posters emulated the stencil technique and format of the ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency) posters that were made shortly after the October 1917 Revolution. It is likely that they were donated by someone from the Friends of the Soviet Union, when the organisation became illegal following the pronouncement of the Suppression of Communism

Act No. 44 in 1950. Donating them to the National Library prevented them from falling into the hands of the security police.

“When I questioned what they were doing there, and if they could be exhibited, I was instructed to leave them as they lay,” writes Berndt. “The political climate of the day was becoming increasingly restrictive after the worker militancy of the 1973 Durban strikes and the student uprising in Soweto in 1976. So it would have been very difficult to have brought these Russian posters into the public domain.”

For the next decade, the TASS posters remained as Berndt had found them and possibly as they’d been since as far back as 1954. Then in 1991 – according to the archival notes of TASS South African National Gallery (ISANG) curator, Bård Dalland – ISANG was informed that the library had decided to trash the posters and intended to save them. They were exhibited in 1997 – “despite very limited research into their history” notes Berndt – and since then, have been out of public view in the archive facility at the Gallery.

Berndt’s research places the TASS posters within the context of the Friends of the Soviet Union, which came into existence in about 1931 or 1932 as an informal network established to support the Soviet Union and assist with cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and South Africa. It continued for a short period following World War II then dwindled due to anti-Communist sentiment, which grew with the spread of the Cold War.

The National Party election victory in 1948 and the ensuing Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 all militated against the communication of the FSU wrote Berndt, who was trying to trace the movements of the TASS posters, the FSU publication Soviet Life, and the FSU’s Soviet Pavilion (a structure that was erected as part of the Cape Town Exposition held at the Green Point Common in 1944) to shed light on the anti-Soviet-inspired critical milieu that existed in South Africa in the 1940s.

Across the globe, the membership of friendship societies comprised mainly intellectuals, “drawn from both bourgeois and working class backgrounds, who joined the FSU because they were interested in some form of cultural exchange with the Soviet Union.” In his interpretation of these friendship societies, Berndt draws heavily on the writings of Hannah Arendt. Arendt argues that if we are to understand the horror of Stalin, who she described as a totalitarian leader, then we should avoid the confusion of tracing totalitarianism back to Marx. She argues that it is important to distinguish between Marxism and totalitarianism if we are to retain a Western intellectual tradition and to humanism of the enlightenment.

Berndt’s efforts gain greater momentum in the context of the revisionist wave of contemporary interest in recovering and making public previously suppressed Communist archives and aesthetics. We can only imagine what Berndt might have made of Bert Murray’s exhibition ... Considering that it took place within the marketplace of the gallery system, with several world-touring exhibitions for more than R60 000, there are likely to have been some ideological points of departure. For Berndt, the (often collective) labour poured into the craft of making was in service of realizing a set of abstract political ideals. When I once suggested that he look at the unknown Australian writer of Winter of the World, who had a close friendship with William Kentridge, he shook his head, arguing that I’d misunderstood his interest in rethinking the archive. And, at that stage, perhaps I did. Crypts might argue that because Marxian no longer presents any real threat to the apocalyptic dominance of twenty-first century capitalism, it is now safe to celebrate this cleverness of tastes to reveal the constrained relics of Soviet aesthetics. Yet the social idealist in me retains something more hopeful in the fact that, on a recent visit to Tate Modern, the room housing author, artist and historian David King’s collection of Soviet-era posters was arguably the most packed room in the entire building. As a talk in the Soviet Graphics gallery, King is reported to have insisted that the podium be placed in front of a portrait of the Bolshevik leader Lenin.
The Friends of the Soviet Union Present A

Soviet Exhibition
Pictures Facts & Figures About Our Ally
Argus Gallery
June 18 to June 30
Open Daily 10:00 AM - 10:00 PM
Proceeds for the Medical Aid to Russia Fund

Soviet Films
"Leningrad Fights"
and
"Glory of Sevastopol"
presented by the Cape Town Friends of the Soviet Union
At the
Muizenberg Pavilion
Thursday, March 15th
at 8:15 p.m. sharp

Admission [at Door] 2/8

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