

BROTHERS IN ARMS: THE MAKING AND MIGRATION OF BLACK AND WHITE UNITY

Maria Gough

Of the more than 200 photomontages Heartfield prepared for the illustrated workers' weekly *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) during the 1930s, one of the sparest and most powerful is *Ob schwarz, ob weiß – im Kampf vereint!*¹ (Whether black or white – in struggle united!).

Two arms – one black, the other white, both muscular and male – are raised almost vertically, clenched-fisted in unison, in a gesture that has long expressed working-class and racial solidarity, strength, defiance and resistance. Monumental in scale, neither arm fully belongs to its respective head, however, at least not in terms of orientation and proportion. Indeed, the original maquette² is a composite of five fragments, all of which are cut from first- or second-generation photographs rather than print media. Overlapping one another from left to right we find: a rear-side view of a heavily retouched white man's head; a white arm with a retouched rolled-up shirt sleeve; a rear-side view of a Black man's head; and a black arm, also with a rolled-up sleeve. The precise layering of these fragments affords a sense of what János Reismann, who produced original photography for the artist on occasion,³ later described as the photomonteur's exacting process. Reismann also recalled that he and Heartfield had together scouted a white arm to photograph at the Mezhrabpom Film Studio in Moscow, where the monteur was residing at the time as a guest of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (MBRKh), a Comintern agency that sought to facilitate cooperation between foreign and Soviet artists in the struggle against fascism.⁴

Once it was assembled, Heartfield had the maquette retouched with ink and then rephotographed. His cropping instructions on the final print⁵ served to foreground not so much the individual figures themselves, but rather their shared gesture – across race – of raised arm and clenched fist. This gesture is not that of the confrontational, clenched-fisted forearm brandished before the viewer like a weapon, such as we see in Heartfield's



Ob schwarz, ob weiß – im Kampf vereint!, page from the AIZ, 1931
The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection XB1990.2047. 31.26, photo Lynton Gardiner © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020

famous logo for the Roter Frontkämpferbund (Alliance of Red Front-Fighters), a paramilitary organization that provided security and propaganda for the German Communist Party (KPD). Instead, the reader is entreated to join these comrades in their march towards the radiant light entering from the right, which falls across the Black man's knuckles, along the right side of his forearm, his sleeve and the top of his head. In the printed image, a septet of partially rhyming verse, perhaps composed by the artist's brother, Wieland Herzfelde, provides the words to a song that these workers might be singing on their way to radical enlightenment: "Whether black or white – in struggle united! We know only one race, we all know only one enemy – the exploiting class."

The rhetorical assertion that there is only one race succinctly encapsulates the argument of the special issue of the AIZ in which the montage first appeared, in an edition of several

hundred thousand, either in late June or very early July 1931.⁶ Running to twenty pages, the issue documents the lives of Africans, African Americans, African Caribbeans and Black Latin Americans, and their struggles against racism and colonialism, a subject the *AIZ* had covered sporadically since 1926.⁷ Packed with photographs and texts, the issue surveys the racial subjugation and capitalist exploitation of Black people by white racists, colonialists and terrorists, while at the same time detailing inspiring instances of Black activism and resistance. Its primary objective was to build solidarity among working people of all races: working class Blacks would recognize the fundamental role of class in their oppression (“wage slavery” having replaced slavery, for example, in the American case), while the white working-class would acknowledge the systemic racial and colonial violence endured by their Black “class brothers”.

The special issue was a collaboration between James W. Ford and Willi Münzenberg, in concert with the *AIZ*'s regular editors in Berlin. Münzenberg's outsize role in the organization, on behalf of the Comintern, of a wide network of initiatives, associations and publications – including the *AIZ* – in western Europe during the 1920s and 1930s is now well known. That of Ford, much less so. Born in Alabama in 1893, Ford had been radicalized by his experience of racism as an African American serving in the US Army during World War I. After demobilization, he became a trade union organizer on the South Side of Chicago; he joined the American Communist Party in 1926 and would later be nominated three times as its candidate for vice-president of the United States.⁸

In 1928, Ford travelled to Moscow as a delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Profintern (Krasnyi internatsional' prof-soiuzov), which was the Comintern's trade union wing. He also participated in the Comintern's Sixth Congress, presenting trenchant critiques of both the American party, for having failed to follow the international organization's antiracist directives and thereby draw Black workers into its ranks, but also the organization itself, for having neglected to agitate among workers and soldiers in colonial Africa, despite having had this task on its books since 1922, when Black activists Otto Huiswood and Claude McKay addressed its Fourth Congress. In the wake of his intervention, Ford was appointed to a leading role in the creation of a “Negro Bureau” (Negritianskoe biuro) within the Profintern, which was charged with formulating and implementing twin policies of anti-racism and anticolonialism. Ford wore several other Comintern-related hats, including heading up the newly established International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. Located in Hamburg, the committee's objective was both to encourage Black workers to join the trade union movement and

to stamp out the rampant racism within unions that had hitherto prevented them from doing so. To that end, Ford edited and distributed a monthly magazine, *The Negro Worker*, and wrote numerous pamphlets addressing key problems. In contrast to the heavily photo-illustrated *AIZ*, however, these publications initially carried few if any photographs.

According to Münzenberg, the idea for a special issue of the *AIZ* on race had been around for some time: “After having collected material for [more] than a year and having corresponded with different Negro departments and bureaus, it has been finally possible to publish this number,” he writes.⁹ What prompted Ford and Münzenberg to spring into action was the urgency of the international campaign to save the falsely accused African American “Scottsboro boys” from the electric chair in Alabama. Featured on the issue's front cover, accordingly, is an incarcerated young Black man, whose arms have been extended through the bars of a prison cell and wrists cuffed together on the outside so that he can neither move around nor sit down; punishment, the accompanying text informs us, for having rebelled against the laws of America's dollar democracy. With its clenched-fisted, upraised arms, Heartfield's full-page photomontage on an inside page thus provides a vigorous riposte.

Ford wrote the issue's lead article, a double spread titled “The Black Race Joins the Red Front!”, in which he discusses the intersection of race and class in the oppression and exploitation of Black workers¹⁰. In the upper left is a photograph of the author with Münzenberg and their colleague, the Malian activist Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté. Larger photographs show other Black leaders in action, including William L. Patterson, a union organizer and American Communist Party member, and Lamine Senghor, a Senegalese-born member of the French Communist Party. Another article reports on the hundreds of thousands of people who rallied in German cities to commemorate the international Tag der Solidarität (Day of Solidarity), a festival organized by Münzenberg's Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (Workers International Relief) over the weekend of 13–14 June 1931; KPD leader Ernst Thälmann and the Sierra Leonean seaman and activist Forster-Jones are shown sharing the podium at a rally in Hamburg, their arms raised and fists clenched in unison. But the majority of photographs, photocollages and texts in the issue document, by contrast, the horrific conditions of contemporary Black life: from the enslavement of Blacks in colonial Africa, to their appalling spectacularization as “display objects” (Schauobjekte) at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, to the ongoing and systemic mob-perpetrated and often state-sanctioned violence against, and lynching of, Africans under colonialism and African Americans under Jim Crow laws.

“On the whole ... I think [the issue] came out all right,” Ford writes to his colleague George Padmore on 13 July 1931. “Such an issue was necessary to wake up some of our [white] comrades in Germany with regards to the Negro question.” As for its “practical value”¹¹ among people of colour, Ford reports that the Hamburg Committee had sent copies to its various “connections”, and that the photographs alone had already had a strong impact on Black seamen in Hamburg. Padmore felt similarly: “Although our comrades in the colonies don’t read German,” he writes, “the pictures will nevertheless have [a] propaganda effect.” (Indeed, the special issue would later become something of a photographic repository for *The Negro Worker*, when the latter began to reproduce photographs from it in 1932, under Padmore’s editorship.) Both Ford and Padmore also called for the production of English and French editions of the special issue, though these never came about. As for Münzenberg, he considered the issue to be, from both a “political and technical” point of view, one of the *AIZ*’s “strongest” to date.¹²

The Comintern’s anti-racism and anti-colonialism project, shaped through the lens of class by Black activists like Ford and others, is thus a crucial aspect of Heartfield’s hitherto little-discussed *Ob schwarz, ob weiß*. Another key dimension of its story, however, concerns its migration from the pages of the *AIZ* to various other platforms between 1931 and 1971, each instance of which took on a new function and significance:

1. CALLING CARD: Having prepared the maquette for *Ob schwarz, ob weiß* in Moscow, Heartfield selected it to accompany an open letter to his “class brothers” that he published in *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* in July 1931, in order to introduce himself and his work to Russian readers. Its inclusion here positioned Heartfield’s visit to Moscow within the broader context of the Soviet Union’s rapidly escalating Scottsboro campaign.¹³

2. MEMORIAL: In the wake of the assassination in January 1961 of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the then newly independent Republic of the Congo, Heartfield, in collaboration with his brother, published *Ob schwarz, ob weiß*, without its septet, in the East German daily *Berliner Zeitung*, on 26 February. The caption notes that since its first publication in 1931, millions have made its demand for racial unity their own. Significantly, no mention is made of class. Instead, Heartfield’s montage now anchors a remarkable act of memorialization, in which the prime minister – who was neither communist nor socialist – is added to a pantheon of legendary figures of extraordinary courage and conviction from ancient, medieval, modern American and recent German history, all of whom were martyrs to their respective causes: Spartacus, Jeanne d’Arc, Lincoln, Liebknecht, Luxemburg and Thälmann. Like the names of these

martyrs, the brothers conclude, “the name of Patrice Lumumba will shine through the centuries.” It is worth underscoring that the Lumumba memorial was Heartfield’s first redeployment of the montage since the recovery of its original maquette in 1958 from the crate in which it had been stored for almost thirty years in Moscow, in the wake of his 1931 solo retrospective in that city, where it had first been exhibited.

3. LOGO: In late 1961, Heartfield repurposed *Obschwarz, ob weiß* as the logo for a group exhibition, *Im Kampf vereint!*, organized in Berlin on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Appearing on multiple platforms – such as a billboard, the cover of the catalogue and inside an exhibition space doubling as a lecture hall – the montage carries a modified text: “Ob weiss, ob schwarz, im Kampf vereint gegen des Friedens Feind!”¹⁴ (Whether black or white, in struggle united against the enemy of peace). World peace, not emancipation from capitalist exploitation, was now the goal of racial unity in a world outraged by endless war, the persistence of fascism, ongoing attempts to suppress decolonization movements in Africa and Asia (“We were and are all closely united in the struggle against war, fascism, and imperialism,” the artist explained)¹⁵, and, presumably, also the threat of nuclear annihilation.

4. STAMP: In 1971, three years after Heartfield’s death, East Germany repurposed *Ob schwarz, ob weiß* as a postage stamp, to commemorate the United Nations International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination. Perhaps the courageous, era-defining Black Power salute of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City – a gesture that was broadcast live on television and made the front pages of newspapers around the world – had something to do with this. Seven million stamps were issued. Seven million! That put at least six and a half million more reproductions of the maquette into circulation than the *AIZ* had been able to manage forty years earlier. Heartfield would surely have approved, not only because mass circulation was always his primary goal, but also because he had long ago understood that “stamps talk”.¹⁶ Each of these migrations demonstrates the semantic elasticity of Heartfield’s original photomontage – its ability both to belong to, yet also transcend, the historical moment of its original production and reception within the Comintern’s antiracist and anti-colonialist project of the interwar years. It is precisely that ability that gives *Ob schwarz, ob weiß* its extraordinary power, to this day.

MARIA GOUGH is Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University. She conducts research on the historical avantgardes, especially in Russia and the Soviet Union, in their transnational contexts.

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

- 1 *Ob schwarz, ob weiß – im Kampf vereint! Wir kennen nur eine Rasse, wir kennen alle nur einen Feind – die Ausbeuterklasse*, AIZ, vol. 10, no. 26 (1931); Akademie der Künste, Kunstsammlung (henceforth KS), inv. no. JH 19.
- 2 Akademie der Künste, KS, inv. no. JH 425.
- 3 See Roland März and Gertrud Heartfield, eds, *John Heartfield: der Schnitt entlang der Zeit* (Dresden, 1981), pp. 190, 286. Warm thanks to Andrés Mario Zervigón for alerting me to the latter passage more than a decade ago, and to the staff of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin for their exceptional assistance.
- 4 Maria Gough, "Back in the USSR: John Heartfield, Gustavs Klucis, and the Medium of Soviet Propaganda", *New German Critique*, 107 (Summer 2009), pp. 147–48, 157.
- 5 Akademie der Künste, KS, inv. no. JH 1884.
- 6 Specific dates were not given for the AIZ in 1931, only issue numbers. Nonetheless, Wieland Herzfelde dates the montage to 4 July 1931 in his *John Heartfield: Leben und Werk* (Dresden, 1962), p. 350.
- 7 See Henrick Stahr, *Fotojournalismus zwischen Exotismus und Rassismus. Darstellungen von Schwarzen und Indianern in Foto-Text-Artikeln deutscher Wochenillustrierter, 1919–1939*, Schriften zur Kulturwissenschaft, vol. 57 (Hamburg, 2004), pp. 357–420.
- 8 My discussion of Ford draws from Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Trenton, NJ, 2013), and Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Studies in Global Social History, vol. 14 (Leiden and Boston, 2014).
- 9 W. Münzenberg to Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, June (?) 1931. Quoted in Weiss 2014 (see note 8), p. 407.
- 10 James W. Ford, "Die schwarze Rasse stösst zur roten Front!", AIZ, vol. 26 (1931), pp. 510–11.
- 11 See Weiss 2014 (see note 8), pp. 407 and 410.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 John Heartfield, "Privet brat'iam po klassu", *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 37 (18 July 1931), p. 2.
- 14 See, for example, Akademie der Künste, KS, inv. no. JH 1218.
- 15 Quoted in Erika Wolf, Aleksandr Zhitomirsky, *Photomontage as a Weapon of World War II and the Cold War* (Chicago, 2016), p. 84.
- 16 See Heartfield, "Briefmarken sprechen", *Volks-Illustrierte*, 24 (16 June 1937), p. 385 (Akademie der Künste, KS, inv. no. JH 219).

JOHN HEARTFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY PLUS DYNAMITEX

Today, nationalism and right-wing ideology are again a real threat. So it is all the more important to recall Heartfield's political photomontages confronting war and fascism – and to question them again. The exhibition "John Heartfield: Photography plus Dynamite" (21 March – 21 June 2020) at Pariser Platz, gives us an opportunity to do so. It will subsequently be shown at the Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle (27 September 2020– 3 January 2021), and the Royal Academy of Arts in London (27 June – 26 September 2021). Central to the exhibition – which begins with the reworking and digitisation of his legacy in the archive – is Heartfield's creative process and the interaction of the arts, from book and stage design to photography and animated film. His complex field of reference, to Brecht, Grosz, and Piscator, among others, is rendered visible in works and documents, some of which are shown for the first time. The virtual exhibition, catalogue, and interdisciplinary programme of events also throw light on previously unknown aspects of his biography, shaped by exile, his working methods, his network, and the continuation of his themes in the digital realm, and allow both American and European voices to have their say. In addition, new historical perspectives are opened up by the experience of fake news and deepfake videos, and by images that contribute to war: Is the formal method of photomontage being continued with the aid of advanced techniques of image manipulation? What is the significance of the material, the process, and the stages in production? What has changed in the political use of images?

Exhibition curators: Angela Lammert, Rosa von der Schulenburg, Anna Schultz

The catalogue will be published in German and English, by Hirmer Verlag (312 pages, 309 colour illustrations), and Dutch by Uitgeverij Waanders & de Kunst, with texts by Vera Chiquet, Stephan Dörschel, Jeanpaul Goergen, Maria Gough, Steffen Haug, Meike Herdes, Haiko Hübner, Ralph Keuning/Bob Sondermeijer, Charlotte Klonk, Michael Krejsa, Prem Krishnamurthy, Angela Lammert, Rosa von der Schulenburg, Anna Schultz, Jindřich Toman, Erdmut Wizisla, and Andrés Zervigón and statements by Richard Deacon, Tacita Dean, Mark Lammert, Marcel Odenbach, and Jeff Wall.

Maria Gough's contribution to the catalogue is reprinted here.