

## Two Photomontages by Artist John Heartfield (1931)

### Abstract

---

These two photomontages by the politically engaged artist John Heartfield (1891–1968) criticized the center-left SPD for having purportedly abandoned its socialist principles and instead cozied up to capitalists and the conservative order. His work appeared regularly in the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* [Workers' Illustrated Newspaper], or *AIZ*, a pro-communist weekly that the influential publisher Willi Münzenberg built into the largest socialist publication in Germany. These works reflected the deep mistrust that had festered between the center-left SPD and the far-left KPD since the very beginning of the Weimar Republic, even though both parties adhered, at least rhetorically, to Marxist doctrine. This deep rift between the SPD and KPD prevented them from joining together to counteract the ominous and growing threat from the Nazi Party in the early 1930s.

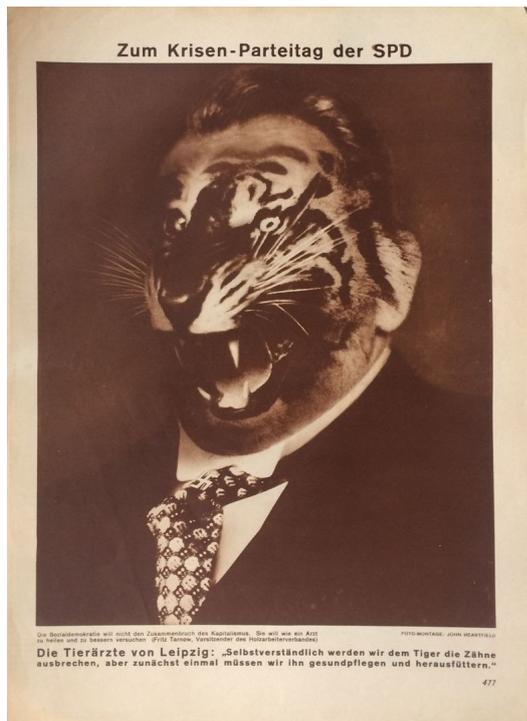
Born in Berlin in 1891 to socialist parents, Heartfield had anglicized his name from Helmut Herzfeld to John Heartfield at the time of the First World War, as a protest against the nationalism and xenophobia that he saw as having caused the conflict. Along with fellow artist George Grosz, Heartfield is considered the inventor of photomontage as an art form. Heartfield began publishing his photomontages in the *AIZ* in 1930.

In the photomontage titled “Zum Krisen-Parteitag der SPD” [On the SPD’s Crisis-focused Party Congress], which appeared in the *AIZ* in June 1931, Heartfield quoted Fritz Tarnow, an SPD trade unionist, who said, “Social Democracy does not want the breakdown of capitalism. Like a doctor, it wants to try to heal and improve it.” Heartfield bitingly criticized this comment as indicative of the SPD’s having turned its back on the goal of replacing a capitalist system with a socialist one. He satirized the leaders of the SPD, who were holding their party congress in Leipzig at the time, as the “veterinarians of Leipzig,” who first planned to nurse the tiger of capitalism back to health before then breaking its teeth.

In “Die letzte Weisheit der SPD: ‘Nieder mit dem Marxismus!’” [The latest pearl of wisdom from the SPD: “Down with Marxism!”], which also appeared in 1931, Heartfield pointedly criticized Wilhelm Sollmann, a decidedly centrist SPD representative in the Reichstag from Cologne. At the SPD’s 1931 party congress in Leipzig, Sollmann defended the party’s policy at the time of tolerating the existing center-right government. The subtitle read, “You are arrested as a false prophet, Mr. Karl Marx—we have not our chains to lose, but our feeding troughs and minsters’ seats,” suggesting that the SPD had sacrificed its principles to its desire for power and privileges. The montage showed the Prussian Interior Minister and Berlin Police President Albert Grzesinski, also a member of the SPD, ordering the arrest. Grzesinski had cracked down two years earlier on illegal open-air KPD rallies in Berlin. Marx, meanwhile, held a copy of the official KPD newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*.

### Source

---



Source: John Heartfield, *Zum Krisen-Parteitag der SPD*, photomontage, 1931. Heartfield Online:

<https://heartfield.adk.de/node/3712>

John Heartfield, *Die letzte Weisheit der SPD*, photomontage, 1931. Heartfield Online:

<https://heartfield.adk.de/node/3503>

Akademie der Künste

Recommended Citation: Two Photomontages by Artist John Heartfield (1931), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:image-5321>> [March 16, 2026].