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Book Review by Daniel Johnson

ERIC THE RED

Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History, by Richard J. Evans.
Oxford University Press, 800 pages, \$39.95



BAD IDEAS ARE RARELY TAINTED BY the evils perpetrated in their name. An ideologist can safely ignore evidence, however devastating, that his ideology brought untold suffering to countless people. If he brazens it out, a generation will eventually emerge with no memory of such horrors, whereupon he can impress new cadres of intellectuals all over again. Genius is not required—only longevity.

Historian Richard J. Evans's *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* perfectly captures this pathology. Marxism was already a zombie ideology by the time of Hobsbawm's birth in 1917. Economists already regarded the Marxist labor theory of value as a museum piece; social scientists noted that the working class had not been "immiserated," but had in fact prospered under capitalism. The German Social Democratic Party—by which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had set such store—had abandoned revolution in favor of reform and, like other Socialists in the Second Interna-

tional, had failed to prevent or even oppose the First World War.

Then came Russia's Bolshevik Revolution. It changed everything. Lenin and Stalin improvised their own version of Marxism—a shock therapy imposed on a peasant society at the cost of starving millions to death. The dictatorship of the proletariat, originally envisaged as a transitional phase, morphed into the one-party police state—a collectivist, totalitarian tyranny unprecedented in the scale of its savagery. The fact that Communism actually existed in the Soviet Union gave new life to the ideas that inspired it—ideas that could in turn be ruthlessly deployed to justify this new despotism.

IN HOBBSAWM'S HANDS, AN IDEOLOGY THAT had once longed for government of the intellectuals, by the intellectuals, for the intellectuals, became instead a cynical calculus of power politics, in which the end of a Communist utopia justified any means, from Gu-

lag to genocide. This is nowhere more obvious than in his attitude to an important aspect of his own identity: the fact that he was a Jew.

A couple of illustrations suffice. At a dinner party in the 1980s given by fellow historian Hugh Thomas, Hobsbawm held forth about the threat that the Middle East conflict might precipitate a superpower clash. David Pryce-Jones was present and, writing in the *New Criterion*, recalled that Hobsbawm said "it would be better to kill a few million Israelis by dropping a nuclear bomb on their country than to suffer the deaths of two hundred million Europeans and Americans in the Cold War nuclear exchange that he forecast would very soon happen. When I said that Goebbels was the last person I could recall who had spoken of mass murder in terms of arithmetic, an enraged Hobsbawm left the room and did not return."

This was no isolated outburst: Hobsbawm blamed the Jews for their own misfortunes. In 2009, he wrote, apropos of Gaza: "Let

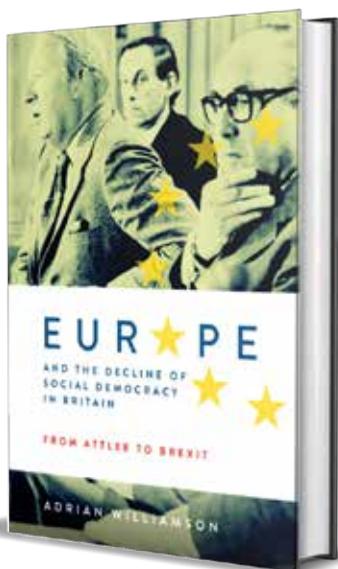
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ADRIAN WILLIAMSON



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—Fintan O’Toole,
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Offering a much-needed historical perspective to the current political crisis in Britain, this book explores the country’s gradual disenchantment with both social democracy and the EEC/EU, culminating in the 2016 vote for Brexit.

September 2019, \$34.95/£25
ISBN: 9781783274437, 384 pp., HB

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me not beat about the bush: criticism of Israel does not imply anti-semitism, but the actions of the government of Israel occasion shame among Jews and, more than anything else, they give rise to anti-semitism today.” Hobsbawm’s background, as a grandson of Polish-Jewish immigrants, makes his visceral hatred of Israel even more dismal, but it extended to other aspects of Jewish survival. As Evans relates, Hobsbawm once sneered contemptuously: “Would it matter if Yiddish disappeared?” In this, he was true to the teaching of Marx himself. In the formative text of left-wing anti-Semitism, *Zur Judenfrage* (“On the Jewish Question”), Marx claimed that “money is the jealous God of Israel” and that “the social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism.”

HOBBSAWM WAS BORN IN ALEXANDRIA, Egypt, the son of Percy, an English postal official, and Nelly, a Viennese jeweler’s daughter. Their family name was Hobsbaum, but Eric’s name was misspelled by the clerk who registered his birth. The only other member of the clan to distinguish himself was Philip Hobsbaum, a poet and critic, impressive not least for having held out against the academic Marxism of which his cousin became high priest.

At age two, Eric Hobsbawm was transplanted from an outpost of the British Empire to post-imperial Vienna. His mother knew how to deal with the anti-Semitism that suffused the Austrian capital, warning him: “You must never do anything, or seem to do anything, which might suggest that you are ashamed of being a Jew.” Her son, however, thought he knew better. After his parents died, he moved to Berlin to be with an uncle working in the film industry. There, parachuted into the last years of the Weimar Republic as an orphaned and impressionable teenager, Hobsbawm became a Communist. For the next 80 years, until his death at 95, he saw no reason to modify his credo.

Although he remembered being terrified in Berlin—alone in a streetcar with Nazi stormtroopers, or stuffing Communist Party leaflets into postboxes—he was spirited out of the German capital in March 1933 by his uncle Sidney, before the real terror began. He entered London, “not as a refugee or emigrant, but as someone who belonged here,” he recalled. This is important: his decision to remain a party member in England was not a matter of existential survival, but cool calculation. “Drown yourself in Leninism,” he wrote in his diary. He admired Soviet leaders for combining principle and opportunism: “Lenin and Stalin were [great statesmen],

Trotsky was not.” Already as a schoolboy, the iron had entered Hobsbawm’s soul. The ideas had taken root that would enable him to justify Gulag, famine, and terror.

AFTER THE BUZZ OF BERLIN, THE LONGUEURS of London made Hobsbawm eager to escape to Cambridge, where he studied history at King’s College (1936-39). The only academic there who impressed him was M.M. Postan, who knew his Marx—he had been a Communist at 17, he told undergraduates, “but I grew out of it.” Postan had experienced Bolsheviks firsthand in his native Bessarabia and knew how brutally they treated the peasantry and the bourgeoisie, but Hobsbawm only heard what he wanted to hear. He left university knowing far more about history, seen through a Marxist prism, yet none the wiser about its distortions.

This was evident in his reaction to the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact of August 1939. Hobsbawm judged that Stalin had struck a blow for peace by isolating Hitler; in fact, Stalin had thrown the rest of Europe, including his comrades, to the wolves. “I don’t think there’ll be a war,” Hobsbawm wrote. Four days later, Hitler invaded Poland.

Hobsbawm was too busy writing pro-Soviet propaganda to question the party line (that this was an “imperialist” war), let alone the fact that his hero Stalin was on the war’s wrong side for two years. Drafted into the British army, Hobsbawm narrowly avoided being sent to Singapore just before it fell to the Japanese. Instead, he had a “good” war in the Army Educational Corps, where his intellectual prowess served him—if not always his country—well.

Hobsbawm did not have to choose between party loyalty and patriotism during World War II. That changed in the Cold War. When his first wife, Muriel, wished to signal that their marriage had broken down, she sent him a copy of Orwell’s anti-Communist novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Such was his contempt for the British ruling class that he might have been surprised to learn how efficiently MI5 kept him and his party colleagues under constant surveillance. These detailed (and inadvertently hilarious) intelligence reports enrich Evans’s biography. The security services had themselves been penetrated, of course. After the spy Guy Burgess fled to Moscow, he called his friend to apologize for missing the annual dinner of the Apostles, the secretive Cambridge society, thereby “making absolutely certain that my phone would thenceforth be bugged.”

Hobsbawm, though, would rather be bugged than buggered. He was indeed one of the Apostles, whose members permeated



what was just coming to be known as the establishment. Yet Hobsbawm's tastes were demotic (jazz and cinema); he did not share their homoeroticism (he had many affairs, but only with women); and, above all, he was no fellow-traveler, but an unwavering Communist, dedicated to the long march through the institutions.

Finding the atmosphere more congenial at the workers' evening schools offered by Birkbeck College, London, than among the *jeunesse dorée* at Cambridge, Hobsbawm moved to the capital. There he could play a significant part in Communist politics, not least as chairman of the party's Historians' Group, which included E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill. The way that history is taught today in British schools and universities owes much to their ideological zeal.

THE MAJORITY OF EVANS'S HUGE BIOGRAPHY covers the latter half of Hobsbawm's career. Yet as his fame grew, the narrative lapses into a chronicle of visiting chairs (notably at the New School in New York), ever longer books (including his trilogy on the 19th century, *The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, and *The Age*

of Empire, and culminating in 1994 with his bestselling history of the 20th century, *The Age of Extremes*) and accolades, academic or political (Queen Elizabeth, on Tony Blair's advice, made him a Companion of Honour). The man who considered himself an "outsider," even in the Communist Party, had become the ultimate insider of the establishment he despised.

The scale of Evans's biography is disproportionate to Hobsbawm's "life in history," but it may yet justify itself by his daunting legacy. If you would see his monument, look around: the Leftist politicians of our day—not only fossils of the Cold War, such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, but also the new wave of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her ilk—echo Hobsbawm's critique of the West and justification of its enemies. From neoliberalism to neo-imperialism, from capitalism to climate change, the free world's supposed defects have been the relentless focus of that critique. The indifference of the "progressives" to, for example, famine-stricken Venezuela is striking: the cruelties of Chavez and Maduro are blamed on the U.S. The evils of empires that once worshipped at the shrine of Marx are still relativized.

And the relativist-in-chief has long been Eric Hobsbawm.

Even a sympathetic biographer like Evans cannot disguise his subject's readiness to toe the party line. Other Communists could not stomach the invasions of Hungary or Czechoslovakia; Hobsbawm could. Others might have doubts about, say, the 45 million Chinese peasants who died in Mao's Great Leap Forward; Hobsbawm showed none. Asked by Michael Ignatieff in 1994 whether it would have made a difference to his decision to become a Communist in 1934 if he had known about Stalin's crimes, Hobsbawm replied: "Probably not...the chance of a new world being born in great suffering would still have been worth backing." Ignatieff pressed him, asking whether "the loss of fifteen, twenty million people might have been justified?" Hobsbawm: "Yes."

To write history as cold-blooded as Hobsbawm did is to consign humanity to perdition. But the historian who does so belongs, for his part, in a place too cold for Hell.

Daniel Johnson is editor of the U.K.-based online platform TheArticle and founder of the monthly magazine Standpoint.

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