Hobbsbawm’s sorcery
by David Pryce-Jones
A review of Eric Hobbsbawm: A Life in History by Richard J. Evans

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

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

It is a strange and unwelcome feature of political discourse today that double standards frequently apply when it comes to passing judgment on Nazism and Communism. Nazis are seen as criminals of evil intent while Communist crime, though greater in the number of victims, is only idealism gone astray. All sorts of opinion-makers who ought to know better subscribe to this degradation of history and morality, and Richard J. Evans turns out to be one of them. Formerly the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, he has written firmly and fairly about Hitler and the Third Reich. He was the expert whose evidence in the courtroom confirmed that David Irving, the premier Nazi apologist in the United Kingdom, was guilty as charged of Holocaust denial. No self-respecting thinker or writer was afterwards going to try to rescue the reputation of David Irving.

A cast-iron member of the British academic elite, with a knighthood to prove it, Evans has now published a book, Eric Hobbsbawm: A Life in History, that makes him look either a dupe or a fool of the higher sort, in any case earning him a reputation no historian would want to have.1 Eric Hobbsbawm (1917–2012), the foremost Communist apologist in the Britain of his day, is the counterpart of David Irving. Had Hobbsbawm been a Nazi, Evans surely would have thrown his doctrine back into his face.
Instead, he defends the indefensible with this hagiography of more than seven hundred pages, complete with the whole apparatus of references and footnotes.

Joining the Party in Cambridge in the 1930s, Hobsbawm never deviated from the Party line, however misguided or self-contradictory it might have been. The record speaks for itself. Stalin’s close colleagues confessed in a series of show trials to crimes they could not possibly have committed, but Hobsbawm nonetheless believed they were guilty. Every Soviet invasion of territory and suppression of other nation-states from the Baltic Republics and Finland at the beginning of the Second World War to Hungary in 1956, and then the Prague Spring afterwards, delighted him. He accused Mikhail Gorbachev of the wanton destruction of the Soviet Union, staying in the Party right up to its dissolution. Not long before he died, he caused a scandal by proclaiming in a BBC interview that the murder of fifteen or twenty million people would still now be justified if it led to the creation of a radiant Communist tomorrow. The omissions from his books amount to wholesale falsification. The secret police, Beria, the Gulag, slave labor and the White Sea Canal, the mass execution of Poles at Katyn, deportation of the Chechens and other minorities, enforced famines, riots—all are either met with silence or a half-sentence with grudge in it.

Hobsbawm was undoubtedly intelligent, and the surrender of his critical faculties is a most troubling character trait. Searching for a convincing explanation, Professor Evans turns into outright fellow-traveler. The Hobsbawm he hopes to establish is not a hardcore Communist but a variant: a Euro-Communist, a member of the New Left or some other Marxist group. This alternative Hobsbawm demonstrates “remarkable political independence of mind, as well as impatience, even perhaps disdain” for everyday Party tasks; he is “frequently at odds with the Party in these years,” and supposedly “kept his distance from Stalinism.” In the face of all the evidence he himself has provided, Evans can still write this utter absurdity: “there was no sense in which [Hobsbawm] was an active or committed member of the Party.”

Following Karl Marx, Hobsbawm believed that events occur in a fixed pattern. Writing as though this imaginary view of the how and the why of the world were reality, Hobsbawm is conjuring with facts, more a publicist or sorcerer than a historian at all. In the absence of analysis, Evans turns to incantation: “The book had all the hallmarks of Eric’s scholarly maturity—bold generalisation, engaging detail, immense readability, thought-provoking and sometimes epigrammatically expressed hypotheses, breadth of coverage, dazzling erudition and cogent, stylish expression.” Which book is in question is of no consequence, all of them having been
homogenized. Hobsbawm considered himself the best-known historian in the country since Arnold Toynbee. Evans goes further: in one particularly fanciful passage, he says that empiricism and humanism are qualities that distinguish Hobsbawm’s approach to history. In a crescendo, he concludes that Hobsbawm is nothing less than “the world’s most famous and widely read historian.”

Evans evidently had at his disposal a huge archive of letters and diaries, manuscripts and offprints that Hobsbawm had amassed in the course of his life. Most of this material has been put to the purpose of presenting Hobsbawm as a normal chap with a job and a house and a wife and friends. The qualification, however, is that he seems to meet only Communists, fellow-travelers, and students who had sat at his feet. This hermetic coterie of left-wingers recruited each other to their university faculties, to attend conferences and give lectures on subjects approved by Marxists, and to endorse or review each other’s books. In my experience, Hobsbawm was nothing like the genial and popular figure depicted by Evans. At a dinner in the house of Hugh Thomas, the historian of Spain and Cuba, Hobsbawm began by describing Castro’s Cuba as a Communist paradise. Another guest, Herbert Marchant, previously the British ambassador to Cuba, gave authoritative examples of Cubans persecuted, imprisoned, driven into exile, and sometimes judicially executed. All American propaganda, according to Hobsbawm. Then, pontificating about the Middle East, he said that 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. Moreover, it so happened that we were neighbors in Wales, and it was comic as well as pitiful that at the local village show he would stop to tell me at the top of his voice with expletives in front of surprised farmers how superior Communism was to the nationalism that replaced it. The man who puts a bullet into the back of his victim’s head is just a mindless thug who knows no better. Evans misses the ugly, brutish element that would have fitted Hobsbawm to be the commissar ordering the crimes the mindless thugs are committing. It was their good fortune that the British did not have to discover whether or not he would sign their death warrants.


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