Eric Hobsbawm, 1917–2012

by Stephen Schwartz

The British Stalinist writer Eric Hobsbawm died on October 1, aged 95. I hesitate to refer to him as a “historian,” as other commentators doubtless will, given his extraordinary career as a purveyor of totalitarian lies. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt, but was orphaned and lived with his uncle and aunt in Vienna and Berlin before settling in Britain. He was awarded his doctorate at Cambridge before World War II, during which he served in the British armed forces. After the war he taught at Birkbeck College in the University of London, King’s College at Cambridge, and the New School for
Social Research in New York. At his demise he was president of Birkbeck.

One may predict with considerable certainty that leftist public intellectuals and academics will outdo themselves in praising him; the British author and critic A. N. Wilson noted in the London Daily Mail on October 2 that the London Guardian spread Hobsbawm’s obituary across its front page and filled most of its G2 supplement with similar glorification of the Stalinist icon. Wilson pointed out that in the London Times, Tony Blair—who had named Hobsbawm a Companion of Honor, a major British distinction—and Ed Miliband, leader of the Labour Party in opposition, paid homage to him.

Hobsbawm was a personality embodying the hypocrisy of numerous, if not the great majority of, radical leftists during the Stalin era. As reported in the London Financial Times, he remained a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain until just before its collapse in 1991. By then he had embraced the “Euro-Communism” of the Italian Communists—but in its decrepitude, Communism had changed, not Hobsbawm.

He is best known among historians for a bulky output describing the emergence of modern industrial society: The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848 (1962), The Age of Capital, 1848–1875 (1975), and The Age of Empire, 1875–1914 (1987). These were followed in 1995 by The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991, his most controversial book in its treatment of the Soviet rulers and the crimes they committed, with the approval of Hobsbawm and others of his kind. In a perverse form of honesty—or a pride in flaunting corruption—he unrepentantly supported the prolific brutalities of the Soviet commissars.

These included policies today seldom-remembered, but which he did not hesitate to justify ardently: the Lenin-period abolition of independent political parties; the consignment of millions of innocents to slave labor camps and imprisonment; the economic nationalizations and forced collectivizations in agriculture (that may have killed more than 12 million people); the massive purges and public trials of framed-up state officials; the gross censorship of art, literature, religion, and science; the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939-1941; the refusal to assist Polish patriots in their anti-Nazi rebellion in Warsaw in 1944; the deportation of whole ethnic groups to Central Asia; the postwar purges and mass suppressions in the puppet states of then-East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the former Czechoslovakia.

The list of atrocities, and of Hobsbawm’s apologetics for them, at times seems incalculable. It must be extended to Asia under the dominion of Mao Zedong, the Khmer Rouge, as well as the Vietnamese Communists, and the North Korean dynasty of Kim Ilsong. One cannot overlook, in the 1980s, the comparable cruelties visited upon the African and Latin American satellites of the disintegrating Muscovite empire and its Cuban agent, Fidel Castro. The full roster of evil Communist actions, and Hobsbawm’s pleadings in their favor, would make up a useful curriculum. Such is not likely to emerge quickly from the present-day academy, and, as a sobering detail, the opening of Russian
archives that began in the early 1990s was soon ended. Many more horrors remain unknown, or were lost to history by the destruction and disappearance of evidence. But they will no longer have Eric Hobsbawm to defend them.

Hobsbawm was incapable of critical reflection on these wicked episodes and those who idolized him accept no share in moral responsibility for them. As the Financial Times recalled, Hobsbawm told interviewers, and wrote, that he “had made his choice”—to advocate the lie that Nazism could only be defeated by a coalition led by the Communists and supported by Social Democrats, Liberals, and Conservatives. While such an alliance in Britain existed briefly during the World War II—led by Conservatives to whom the Communists were repeatedly disloyal—the Russian Communists Hobsbawm extolled were noticeably more concerned, before and after that conflict, with exterminating or sending to the Gulag any Social Democrats (then typically called “Mensheviks”), no less than “bourgeois” liberals and conservatives, that fell into their hands.

He opted for an ideological system that bore an unmistakable symmetry to the Hitler regime. Had the then-Trotskyists in America during the 1930s, some of who evolved into neoconservatives, lived in Western Europe, many of them might have been struck down in early adulthood, never to achieve distinction in a humanistic career. Several such cases were known, as Stalin ordered a homicidal assault on dissident leftists in the West, carrying out notable assassinations.

Additionally, in his Daily Mail contribution, Wilson quoted one of Hobsbawm’s most outrageous claims, advanced in his On History (1997): “Fragile as the communist systems turned out to be, only a limited, even minimal, use of force was necessary to maintain them from 1957 until 1989.” Such an offhand dismissal excludes from consideration, to repeat, the millions who died in Mao’s “Great Leap Forward” of 1958-61 and “Cultural Revolution” in 1966-76; those who were slain on political pretexts or were starved to death in Communist-ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991; victims of Pol Pot and his cohort; the human losses caused by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. The latter left an obscure mountain country in Central Asia vulnerable to usurpation by the radical Islamist Taliban and al-Qaeda, producing worse consequences with which we still must live. And more, and more. Once again, the fatal aspects of Communist terror appear beyond accounting.

Wilson predicted in the Daily Mail that Hobsbawm would be forgotten and his books would go unread in the future, as badly-written propaganda. Such may be a desirable, but a hasty judgment. With widening ignorance of the human disasters of Communism has come a denial that anybody outside the Communist dictatorships ever knew about them when they took place. The reality, the one veracity for which Hobsbawm was a witness, is that those who flocked to the banner of Communism did so in full possession of the facts—indeed, nobody was permitted to enter those ranks without voicing animated approval of the entire abominable catalogue.

One of Hobsbawm’s most egregious later acts comprised an assault, in the February 17, 2007 London Guardian
, on the reputation of George Orwell, and Orwell’s experiences in the Spanish civil war of 1936–39, as reflected in the 1938 classic _Homage to Catalonia_. Orwell had gone to Spain to enlist in the volunteer militias of the Partit Obrer d’Unificació Marxista (POUM), a dissident Communist force that, following the leadership of anti-Stalinist socialists, anarcho-syndicalists, and Catalan nationalist leaders, maintained armed resistance to the armies of General Francisco Franco. Franco had been provided with armaments, warplanes, and mercenary troops by Hitler and Mussolini. The POUM was charged with fascist collaboration by Soviet secret police agents operating within the bureaucracy of the Spanish Republic. The leader of the POUM, a gifted literary critic, Andreu Nin (1892–1937), was kidnapped, tortured, murdered, and buried in an unknown spot near Madrid.

The revolutionary leftist forces in the Spanish war were not unimpeachably altruistic; one must admit that atrocities were committed on both sides of the contest. But Orwell, who was hunted by Soviet spies in Spain and would have been sent to Moscow for execution if he had been caught, recounted truthfully the events of May 1937 in Barcelona, when the Stalinist Communists attempted to liquidate their leftist rivals. He was one of the first to perceive, and put into print, that the old and idealistic socialism inherited from the nineteenth-century labor movements had given way to something new, soulless, and bloodthirsty. The anti-Stalin leftists, although capable of terrorism and violence, rejected the Communist principle of social change dictated by an omnipotent state. The Spanish anarchists were the first to popularize, in recent times, the political term “libertarian,” and advocated voluntary, rather than obligatory, collectivization.

Orwell’s escape from Communist agents and his observation of their methods in Spain further informed his best-known work, _1984_. In his 2007 column, which like other Communist polemics was replete with falsehoods and distortions, Hobsbawm sneered at Orwell, pronouncing the judgment that “only in the cold-war era did Orwell cease to be an awkward, marginal figure.” Hobsbawm vociferously advocated the Communist line on the Spanish war, which held that the leftist forces not aligned with the Soviets were undisciplined and incapable of winning the war, and therefore deserving of elimination. As Hobsbawm put it, “It was not, as the neoliberal François Furet argued it should have been, a war against both the ultra-right and the [Soviet Communist International]. . . . The conflict between libertarian enthusiasm and disciplined organization, between social revolution and winning a war, remains real. . . . The Spanish civil war could not have been waged, let alone won, along Orwellian lines.” For the mass of literate readers today, “Orwellian” refers to statist tyranny; Hobsbawm’s use of the term to refer to anti-Stalinism was probably an unintended compliment.

Was Hobsbawm right about Spain? For decades, the Communist version of the Spanish war’s developments dominated views of the topic outside Spain and its Republican émigré community. The non-Stalinist left resisted their attempted destruction by the Russians and, after their defeat, the Republican militias withdrew into France. The Spanish Republic was referred to by the former POUM leader Julián Gomez Gorkin (whose work was translated in a volume edited by none other than Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, _The Strategy of Deception_, published in 1963) as the first European “test of a ‘people’s
democracy,’” or Soviet puppet state. But the Spanish Republic did not succumb wholly to Soviet
dictation. And the war was won by Franco. Superficially, Hobsbawm’s Stalinist allegations may
appear just. Many “counter-factual” theories have been advanced suggesting that the anti-Franco side
lost because of a lack of arms, and could only have won with more Russian-imported weapons and
functionaries, and Russian-imposed “discipline.”

Then, the argument goes, the Hitler-Stalin pact would have turned Spain into an ally of Berlin against
France, and handed Gibraltar to the Germans. Such musings are amorphous and banal. An anti-
Franco victory in Spain might have inspired the French to better resist the Germans during the
Second World War, but whatever may be hazarded as alternative history, the Spanish anti-Stalinists
knew and proclaimed the truth. To paraphrase another ex-POUM writer, Joaquim Maurín
(1896–1973), who died in exile in the U.S., the Spanish war was lost when it ceased to be perceived as
a fight between Franco and the left and was seen by the Spanish supporters of the republic as a war
between Franco and Stalin.

Few Spanish leftists, although they fought against Franco for three years, shared the rigid political
culture of the Russians, or were prepared to see it introduced as a compulsory experiment on their
soil. The Spanish revolutionary movement, with its Western flavor, including an association with
high modernism in art, threatened the dense and dull uniformity characteristic of the Russians. After
World War II, the POUM militants inside Catalonia abandoned their radicalism and joined the
moderate Socialist party. The former pro-Soviet Communists are a negligible force in today’s Spain,
gaining no more than seven percent of votes nationally; seldom are they praised for their role in,
effectively, betraying the Spanish Republic.

The Catalonians have remembered the martyred Nin by erecting memorials and naming streets and
schools after him, while dedicating a small public square in Barcelona to Orwell. One may hope, then,
that the perspicacious A. N. Wilson is right, and as the opponents of totalitarian leftism are
remembered, its repulsive hacks, with Hobsbawm worst epitomizing them, will be forgotten if not
derided and disparaged in the manner they deserve. Hobsbawm attacked Orwell with lies, while the
admirers of Orwell may respond with truth.

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