

Eric Hobsbawm on the Spanish Civil War: an anti-historical tirade

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Eric Hobsbawm recently wrote an article in the *Guardian* about the Spanish Civil War, partly in memory of the 70th anniversary of that war, and partly to trail his forthcoming book *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism*.

To read the views of a historian widely regarded as a Marxist on one of the formative events of the twentieth century should be a worthwhile experience. The Spanish Civil War is coming into renewed historical focus as new documentation has emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while the anniversary has reinvigorated old memories and provoked interest among young people. From Hobsbawm, however, we have not new reflections on the material that is now available from both the Soviet and Western archives, nor a re-examination of his youthful experiences in the light of new evidence and mature judgement, but a savage rear guard action that aims to defend the old Kremlin orthodoxies.

For Hobsbawm, the Spanish Civil War was a war of intellectuals, poets, writers and artists, who flocked to the anti-fascist cause, only to be badly let down by the workers and peasants of Europe, who refused to respond to the appeal of the left. “[T]he drift in Hungary and Russia,” he writes, acerbically, “not to mention among the German diaspora, was sharply to the right.” While in France, “The 1936 election gave the combined radicals, socialists and communists barely 1 percent more votes than in 1932.” As for the Spanish workers and peasants, they demonstrated a fatal, if endearing, predilection for “local initiative, spontaneity, independence of, or even resistance to, higher authority,” which ill accorded with the overriding need for “structure, discipline” and “centralisation” that was needed to win the war against Franco.

The myth of the Spanish Civil War as an intellectuals’ war or a poets’ war is one that has been assiduously cultivated since the defeat of 1939 because, during the long victory of fascism in Spain, those that remained loyal to the parties and organisations responsible for that defeat preferred to replay the old propaganda images rather than assess the political lessons of a betrayal. So, 70 years later, we have from Hobsbawm: “Alas, unlike in the second world war, the wrong side won. But it is largely due to the intellectuals, the artists and writers who mobilised so overwhelmingly in favour of the republic, that in this instance history has not been written by the victors.” He concludes: “in creating the world’s memory of the conflict, the pen, the brush and the camera have had the more lasting triumph.”

But why was it that intellectuals and artists responded to the Spanish Civil War in the way they did? Many wars have created vivid images of struggle, pain and suffering, but the visual and literary images that emerged from the Spanish Civil War, although they contained plenty of all three, also continue to inspire in a way that the artistic expressions emanating from other wars do not.

The reason is that these are not merely images of war in general, but images of a war fought in defence of a proletarian revolution. The artists who created those iconic twentieth century images were inspired by that revolution and by the workers they met in Spain. It was a revolutionary

impulse that led them to create such enduring images. Their artistic works continue to speak to subsequent generations because they evoke social, political and economic issues which remain unresolved to this day. Consequently, the poems, the films, the novels and the photographs which the Spanish Civil War produced still resonate in the twenty-first century. Even recent artistic works that faithfully evoke the spirit of the time, such as Ken Loach’s film *Land and Freedom*, can have a powerful impact because they conceptualize unspoken themes that are, for the most part, excluded from mainstream artistic works as they are from official political life. Capitalist society in 2007 is still in as much need of a revolutionary transformation as it was in 1937.

When Hobsbawm condemns the spontaneity and resistance to higher authority shown by workers and peasants in Spain he is expressing his fundamental opposition to revolution. “The only choice,” he writes, “was between two sides, and liberal-democratic opinion overwhelmingly chose anti-fascism.” The only people who cannot see that, and who could not see it at the time, are those who look at the Spanish Civil War from a “Trotskyist sectarian angle.”

This is the charge that was levelled at their opponents by the Stalinists at the time. Many of them paid for it with their lives. Hobsbawm repeats it and passes it off as objective history.

One could be forgiven for thinking, from the venom with which Hobsbawm attacks him, that Ken Loach was personally responsible for the defeat of the Spanish Republic. And George Orwell, author of *Homage to Catalonia*, which records his own experiences in the Spanish Civil War, also comes under sustained attack. Victor Gollancz was right to refuse to publish the book, Hobsbawm fumes, and Kingsley Martin of the *New Statesman* was right to run hostile reviews when it was published, since it could only divide the left. No one was interested in it anyway. “Only in the cold-war era did Orwell cease to be an awkward, marginal figure.” With this sneering remark Hobsbawm implies that Orwell was serving the interests of Washington and the CIA when he tried to expose the crimes of the Moscow bureaucracy in Spain. It is an old lie and one that has been hawked about ever since 1938 when *Homage to Catalonia* revealed the way in which Stalin suppressed the revolution in Spain.

Hobsbawm is repeating a long-standing slander characteristic of those who still retain an admiration for the Kremlin bureaucracy and a loyalty to its political perspective. Jeff Sawtell of the British Communist Party attacked Loach’s film in his review for being “like some ancient relic of the Cold War.” George Galloway, the British Respect Member of Parliament, denounced Orwell and Loach in a *Counterpunch* article for sullying the memory of a “golden generation of the British left who went to fight fascism in Spain.” Hobsbawm, with all the prestige of a distinguished university career behind him, can translate the same calumny on to the pages of the *Guardian* and present it to a wider audience.

What Loach and Orwell, two men whose works are separated by half a century, have in common is that they are artists with a certain degree of

integrity, which finds expression in the power of language in Orwell's writing and the clarity of vision in Loach's film. The same quality leads them both to give a truthful representation of key events in the Spanish Civil War and makes them both targets for Hobsbawm's fury. It is all very well for the Spanish Civil War to be an intellectuals' and artists' war, but poets must have the right line before Hobsbawm awards them any laurels.

What is that line? It is, first and foremost, that no revolution was taking place in Spain. The Spanish Civil War was about the defence of a democratic republic from fascism. It was part of a broadly based cross-class struggle that should have united all the Western democracies alongside the Soviet Union. This was the policy of the Popular Front that Stalin launched as an international perspective for all affiliated parties at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, although the French Communist Party had already initiated a Popular Front some months before. Popular Front politics meant that Communist Parties renounced the objective of socialist revolution and instead worked in a bloc with liberal, republican or social democratic parties and committed themselves to the defence of their own nation-states.

Hobsbawm traces his own political history to that period, when he rode on the back of a French Socialist Party film truck with his uncle Ernest through the streets of Paris on Bastille Day, 1936. He describes the experience in his autobiography *Interesting Times*. Workers were celebrating the recent victory of the Popular Front in the elections of that year and, what the Communist Party had told them was, the success of the massive factory occupations that summer. The young Hobsbawm was euphoric, "The Popular Front was almost designed for the young," he recalls. Afterwards he wandered through the streets "as though floating on clouds," dancing and drinking until dawn.

Stalin's turn to the Popular Front was a response to the rise to power of Hitler in Germany. Fearful that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union, he attempted to forge alliances with the Western democracies. His overriding aim was the national defence of the Soviet Union and the position of power and privilege that the bureaucratic ruling caste had attained. The interests of workers in the rest of the world were to be subordinated to that objective. World revolution was off the agenda. Communist parties were told to direct their efforts to persuading their governments to adopt foreign policies favourable to the Soviet Union rather than overthrowing the state. Just before the young Hobsbawm enjoyed his blissful Paris dawn, the French Communist Party had called a halt to a general strike with revolutionary implications so as not to endanger the Popular Front alliance.

If we want to know why the Popular Front did not win more support, as Hobsbawm complains in his *Guardian* article, we do not have to look much further than that. With the inauguration of the Popular Front, the Communist Party declared itself to be a conservative political force dedicated to maintaining the status quo. This was the party that Hobsbawm joined. In Spain the Communist Party was small, with relatively little support in the working class prior to 1936. It grew primarily by recruiting the urban middle class who were opposed to Franco but appalled by workers' control, in the rural areas the village bosses and small landowners who rejected collectivization, the army officers and the professional classes. It became the party of order and defence of private property, and it became the party that strangled the revolution.

Did Hobsbawm make the mistake of clinging to youthful Parisian enthusiasms? There was no mistake. It might seem that Hobsbawm's adherence to the Moscow line in 1936 was also a response to the threat from fascism. Even his continued membership in the Communist Party after 1956, when some of the crimes of Stalin were revealed and many others left the party, might be seen as an understandable, if misplaced, loyalty to the mass organisations that were still led by Stalinism or to the

Soviet Union as the inheritor of the traditions of the October Revolution. What his autobiography makes clear, however, is that what attracted him to the Popular Front and to Stalinism in the first place was a profound hostility to revolutionary politics.

He confesses that even as a child he had a love of authority. "I developed," he writes in his autobiography, "the instincts of a Tory communist, unlike the rebels and revolutionaries drawn to their cause by the dream of total freedom for the individual, a society without rules." It was an instinct he preserved throughout his university days. He remarks on his election to the exclusive Cambridge Apostles club that "even revolutionaries like to be in a suitable tradition." His election, he is at pains to tell his readers, had nothing to do with communism. No other party members were Apostles in his time at the University.

Young Eric learned an important lesson on the back of his uncle's film truck—the best mechanism to control a revolutionary movement was the Stalinist party. Hobsbawm's instinct for order and the antipathy to revolution that had drawn him to the politics of the Popular Front came into their own decades later, when the right wing of the Labour Party were struggling to expel the Militant Tendency. In his autobiography, Hobsbawm expresses his satisfaction that when Labour leader Neil Kinnock "secured the expulsion of the Trotskyite 'Militant Tendency' from the party, its future was safe."

Hobsbawm came to play a key ideological role in the Labour Party during that period as Labour turned to the right and eventually transformed itself into New Labour under Tony Blair. With calculated understatement, Hobsbawm comments, "in those difficult times it was particularly useful for the opponents of the sectarians to be able to cite support from someone known to most activists in the party—at least to those who read books and periodicals—and with a long and incontrovertible track record on the far left as a Marxist."

One could not sum up Hobsbawm's account of his role better than he does himself. Except that he is a little too modest. Hobsbawm's work in the Communist Party's theoretical journal *Marxism Today* was to prove crucial in the reorientation of Labour, especially his lecture 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' For all his Mitteleuropean roots, Hobsbawm is so deeply anglicised by his education that he necessarily plays down the role of ideas in politics. In Britain, it is simply not acceptable for intellectuals to play an influential role in public life and, with unerring judgement, Hobsbawm framed his intervention in the political struggle within the Labour Party in the only terms that could possibly be acceptable—as "a Marxist historian's survey of what had happened to the British working class over the past century." His was not an overtly political, theoretical, or philosophical intervention. It was, or appeared to be, simply a factual account of the rise of Labour and the reasons for it; reasons which he insisted no longer pertained in the modern global economy.

In throwing his ideological weight behind the campaign against the Militant Tendency, Hobsbawm was being true to the Popular Front politics in which he had been trained. The members of Militant were perhaps among the most loyal and dedicated activists that the Labour Party ever had. Their organisation was founded by individuals who had broken from the Fourth International, who nevertheless still claimed an adherence to Trotskyism. But in truth they had long since become committed to reformist politics. Their crime was to continue calling for reforms as the Labour Party began to renounce its own historic programme and, not least, to mention the name of Trotsky. As Trotsky himself recognised, his name was a synonym for revolution.

When the ideologues of the Popular Front denounced "Trotskyists" they were perfectly well aware that the parties and organisations they condemned were often not affiliated to the Left Opposition and had deep-going differences with Trotsky. This was certainly the case with the POUM—the Workers Party of Marxist Unification—which bore the brunt of

Stalinist attacks in Spain and which Hobsbawm continues to denounce. Stalin would brook not even partial opposition to his anti-revolutionary line.

There is now an immense wealth of documentation available which demonstrates the extent to which the Soviet bureaucracy and the leaders of the Communist Parties internationally were dominated by the struggle against Trotskyism in the 1930s. That bloody struggle, which involved the condemnation of old Bolsheviks and oppositionists in the Moscow Trials, and their summary executions in the Lubyanka cellars, is the obverse of Hobsbawm's youthful Popular Front carnival in Paris.

In his *Guardian* article, Hobsbawm professes to consider Stalin's struggle against Trotskyism "wrong," and yet everything in the article is a continuation of it. We are told, "The dissident Marxist POUM," who were the victims of Stalin's anti-Trotskyist struggle in Spain, "are irrelevant here and, given that party's small size and marginal role in the civil war, barely significant." If they were really so irrelevant why did they have to be spied on and their leader Andres Nin tortured to death by the Soviet secret police?

The number of actual Trotskyists in Spain was even smaller, but they were hunted down and slaughtered. What Stalin feared was that under conditions in which the working class had seized the factories and the peasants the land, the Spanish Republic had collapsed in the face of a fascist-backed revolt by the army, and effective power was in the hands of revolutionary committees, the revolutionary programme that had won a mass following in Russia in October 1917 would have the same effect in Spain. Spain became the training ground for a network of spies, provocateurs and assassins who were despatched all over the world to crush any signs of revolutionary opposition to the Kremlin. Ramon Mercader, who assassinated Trotsky in 1940, was trained in Spain.

Hobsbawm's account of the Spanish Civil War in the *Guardian* represents a rewriting of history on a mammoth scale and in a miniature space by a man whose reputation as a Marxist and historian will guarantee his words an authority that they do not deserve.

The conclusions reached by Hobsbawm are based, not on an objective study of the historical record, but on his long training in the Stalinist school of falsification. In peddling the old lies on the pages of the *Guardian*, he is giving ammunition to all those cynical former liberals who, when great class struggles emerge in Britain and elsewhere, will repeat his groundless assertions as though they were pearls of wisdom dropped from the mouth of a great old revolutionary.

Hobsbawm is a fluent and prolific writer, but he is not profligate with his political interventions, which are timed and targeted with precision. His *Guardian* article has a political, rather than a purely historical character and should be seen in the same light as his "Forward March of Labour Halted?" as a political rallying call. His article is a timely warning to the dominant financial oligarchy and their hired pens that the great danger to their system comes not from Islamic fundamentalism, but from the working class armed with the revolutionary programme of the Fourth International.



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