

Richard J. Evans, Eric Hobsbawm, A Life in History

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Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm, A Life in History* (Oxford University Press 2019)

HINTS FOR POTENTIAL readers of this worthwhile book. First, this is “a life in history,” not an exhaustive analysis of Eric Hobsbawm’s writings. Its subtitle, a “life in history” has multiple meanings: as biography, as the life of a great historian, and as a social history of a leading intellectual from childhood through advanced age. The book is very long (662 pages of text, many more with references), but eminently readable. Finally, it is neither pro- or anti-Marxist and will not sharpen one’s polemical skills in either direction. Richard Evans is a distinguished British historian and social democrat who seeks to understand Hobsbawm developmentally using literally all available sources – Hobsbawm’s diaries, interviews with colleagues, friends, and family, police records, the press, international contacts, literary agents and publishers, and others.

Evans is particularly interested in Hobsbawm’s formative years – nearly half the volume. How does an unusually gifted person become an infinitely curious, multi-lingual cosmopolitan with deep attachments to Marxism and an intellectually independent scholar and superb writer? Hobsbawm’s own *Interesting Times* provided a starting point, but Evans adds much more.

Hobsbawm, was a Polish-Jewish naturalized British citizen, his mother Viennese and a published novelist. Born in Alexandria while his father worked for the Egyptian telephone company, he and the family moved to Vienna after 1918 and then faced economic difficulties. During this period, at age 14, Hobsbawm was orphaned and moved again to Berlin to live with relatives. The dying days of the Weimar Republic were the beginnings of Hobsbawm’s. Social democracy and liberalism had both failed, leaving

militant opposition to the rise of Hitler by German communists as perhaps the only remaining choice to a passionate adolescent. Evans suggests that the communist movement served as “family” to an orphan who became an omnivorous reader of Marxian texts and world literature. The young Hobsbawm also became an apprentice “fieldworker,” travelling, experiencing, questioning, contacting people, following up hunches, and, in general, “Hoovering” data to fill his evolving historical frames.

After Hitler took power, Hobsbawm and his guardian-relatives moved to the UK where yet again he faced a new environment. An excellent student, he was accepted at Cambridge in 1936, bearing the reputation of someone “who already knows everything” and winning a scholarship generous enough to finance new travels around Europe. At this point he also joined the British Communist Party. Having evaluated most of Cambridge’s historical community in unflattering terms, he eventually found a tutor suitable to his interests in economic history (Mounia Postan). He also became a successful student journalist, an “Apostle” (member of an exclusive group of young intellectuals, many also communist), and received highest honours upon graduation. Following Evans, we discover a young man functioning successfully in a prestigious, somewhat hostile and often socially pretentious new world and also expanding his earlier commitments. Soldiering in World War II, his next stage was a waste, however. As a communist he was stashed away in the UK in places and jobs where he had little contact with other soldiers and was overseen by MI5. After war’s ending, he returned to Cambridge for a doctorate and then sought university employment, with initially disappointing results. Publishers refused his book projects, top universities would not hire him, and his first marriage broke down.

The academic setbacks were explainable by rejections of Hobsbawm's communist affiliations and Marxist approaches and the fact that Hobsbawm was a synthesizer and not an archival researcher when being the latter was a necessary rite of professional passage. Eventually he secured a job at London's Birkbeck College, which specialized in working and mature students, where he would remain for four decades giving lectures that became the backbones of his mature books. Writing as "Francis Newton," he also became a noted jazz critic and explorer of the lower depths of Bohemian London, both while participating in the stellar Communist historians' group and helping found the eminent journal *Past and Present*.

Hobsbawm's years of prominence did not begin until his mid-40s, with the 1959 publication of *Primitive Rebels*, a comparative book about "social bandits," on the wrong side of modernization and the practices they tried to resist the inevitable. The book revealed how penetrating his immense curiosity, harnessed to rigorous sociological categories, could be. By this point he was fully formed intellectually and ideologically and had stabilized his personal life with a fulfilling second marriage and fatherhood. From 1962 to 1994 (by which point he was 77), he published four immensely important "Age of..." books – *of Revolution*, *of Capital*, *of Empire*, *of Extremes*. Together they analyzed the evolution of – mainly European – capitalism from the French Revolution until the end of the USSR, as epochs of economic development and political class struggles between those in control and those subject to them. The books are convincing Marxian confrontations with "mainstream" historical overviews, even if the histories almost always concluded with capitalism on top. The boss class always finds its ways – sometimes horrific – to block the advances of workers, almost no matter

what and how sophisticated the workers were. The books sold millions of copies in multiple translations, were essential for students, historians, and motivated readers, and remain prized in classrooms the world over. Interspersed with them, as Evans underlines, Hobsbawm published highly influential and controversial articles, among them "The Forward March of Labour Halted" (*Marxism Today*, September 1978) which has turned out to be an important prophecy for our current period.

Evans provides useful summaries of these works, but he is quite as interested in Hobsbawm's life around them. With the huge successes of the *Age of* books, "life in history" took a rosier turn. The books brought in substantial amounts in royalties and advances – Evans gives us ample details of this – making Hobsbawm prosperous, comfortable, and an international intellectual celebrity. All this helped him travel even more than he had, allowed him to constantly recharge his already extraordinary cerebral data bank, live comfortably in Hampstead (and Wales over summers), frequent and befriend important left political and academic figures, and receive innumerable honorary doctorates. He was also welcomed into the British establishment – a Companion of Honour in 1998 and membership in the Athenaeum Club, among other distinctions. Given his extraordinarily difficult childhood and the undeserved slights of his early professional life, only the most hair-shirted and/or envious among us would reproach him for this. When he died, he was buried in Highgate Cemetery, not far from Karl Marx, under a headstone bearing only his name, the dates of his birth and death (1917-2012), and a single word, "historian."

Evans' book has been widely and positively reviewed. A minority of reviews, alas, want us to remember that the Cold

War is far from dead, and a few of them unable to see much in Hobsbawm beyond that he was a Communist. At a moment when most Communist Parties are moribund or defunct, this is undoubtedly a method of discounting one of the world's most widely read contemporary historians without acknowledging the importance of his life and work. Hobsbawm never gave an inch to anti-communism, often to a fault. He joined the CPGB following youthful experiences and commitments in Berlin. His CP membership was important at Cambridge in giving him contacts and a community that shared his values and later, in the British CP historians' group and the *Past and Present* team. He stuck with the party until it expired in the 1990s. Through these years, however, he remained his own man, neither zealot nor disciplined militant, often publicly refusing to be tied to the party's twists and turns. His connections with the party were deeply sentimental, deriving from his personal history, and the CPGB leadership was often unhappy with him, sometimes denouncing and more than once coming close to expelling him. Charles de Gaulle, reflecting about what to do about Jean-Paul Sartre's presences at the barricades during the 1968 student rebellion, decided that "one does not put Voltaire in jail." The British CP leadership seems to have had a similar response to expelling Eric Hobsbawm.

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Martyn Ives, *Reform, Revolution and Direct Action amongst British Miners: The Struggle for the Charter in 1919* (Chicago, Haymarket Books 2016)

IN DECEMBER 2019, the British Labour Party suffered a cataclysmic defeat in a General Election that led to a Conservative Party majority of 80 seats in the House

of Commons. A significant aspect of the election result was the defeat of candidates in former coal mining districts in places like Bolsover, Mansfield, Leigh, Blyth Valley and Wrexham, that had returned Labour Members of Parliament for much of the previous hundred years. The immediate aftermath of the election led to much debate within the movement of the causes and consequences of the collapse of the Labour vote in what were widely perceived as "traditional working class" localities. Martyn Ives provides a reflective, analytical, and empirically grounded study of the tumultuous year of 1919, another significant period for the politics of the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), the wider labour movement, and future development of social democratic politics. This is a substantial and expansive work drawing on national MFGB records, the papers of district coal mining unions, and an extensive array of local newspapers and related sources. It has a sweeping focus that explores the high politics of government policy and trade unionism and the micro-politics of a range of British coal communities.

The author correctly argues that the events surrounding the battle over the nationalisation of coal and political crisis that surrounded the Sankey Commission, that was created to look into the problems of the industry, have not been fully explored in the historiography. For Ives, the Sankey Commission and the dramas that unfolded in the coalfields shaped the future policies of both the MFGB and the Labour Party and effectively stifled socialist alternatives for transforming the politics of trade unionism. The argument here is not that 1919 represented a 'lost British revolution', but neither was the hegemony of Labour gradualism in the twentieth century inevitable. The book challenges historiographical orthodoxies through a deep reading of the sources at both the national and local levels,