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Richard J. Evans. *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 800 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-045964-2.

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Eric Hobsbawm's Life

When Eric Hobsbawm, fourteen years old and recently orphaned, arrived in Berlin in 1931, he described himself as a Communist soon after reading some poems by Bertolt Brecht. One of his high school teachers told him "you clearly do not know what you are talking about. Go to the library and look up the subject" (p. 32). The book he discovered was the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848). As the distinguished Oxford University historian of twentieth-century European history, Richard Evans, writes in his biography of Hobsbawm, this helped to anchor the boy's newfound identity. Hobsbawm had entered the city in arguably the darkest period in its history, with the Weimar Republic overwhelmed by violent political clashes and soon, the National-Socialist takeover. All this made a lasting impression on Hobsbawm, shaping his deep conviction of fascism as the primordial evil. He would, however, be deeply influenced by the strong, dynamic engagement of young people in the resistance to National Socialism. His allegiance to the Communist Party resulted from a combination of political and personal reasons, for instance, shame about his family's poverty: "only by turning this completely around and becoming proud of it did I turn this around" (p. 35).

One of the thrills of this biography is that it indeed is "a life in history." Hobsbawm's life and convictions were shaped by history, and Evans provides exactly the right context to situate him in it, making the book also a history of twentieth-century European and British history. Lucky for Hobsbawm was that his father was an English national, which made him a citizen of the British Empire as well. His uncle was forced to leave the continent because of the Great Depression, and he and Eric moved to London in March 1933, in time to escape what would follow during the next years in Germany. Evans recounts in superb style the young adolescent's subsequent development in Germany, clashes with his uncle, and, after stints trying to write German poetry, his transition to what would become his great vocation: history. Hobsbawm remained something of an oddity as an émigré Jewish Communist at Cambridge University. Nonetheless, he made a lasting impression on everyone he met because of his stunning brilliance and erudition. His political convictions, however, hampered the beginning of his academic career. With his intellectual gifts, an appointment at some point to a professorship at an Oxbridge college would perhaps have been a question of time; Hobsbawm's career during the 1950s was disrupted due to the intervention of the British security services (MI5),

which kept extensive records on him. His activism as a conscript during the war had aroused their suspicions, notably, his attempt as an army librarian to distribute leftist propaganda among British soldiers.

After the war, Hobsbawm's radical past continued to interfere with his development as a public intellectual. His popular talks for the BBC unnerved authorities during Britain's version of the McCarthy era, which though not as strong as in the United States still marked this period. Hobsbawm would go on to write a series of important and influential books on topics varying from social movements (notably, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* [1959] and *Bandits* [1969]) and economic history, to histories of entire eras (*The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* [1962], *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* [1975], *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* [1987], and *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* [1994]). Each was characterized by a multidisciplinary approach similar to that used by the French Annales school. For each book, Evans provides a succinct analysis of their conception, content, critical reception, and merits in the light of current historiography, and in this way provides an overall introduction to Hobsbawm's work.

At Birkbeck University in London, Hobsbawm taught evening classes to students quite different from the upper-class students at Cambridge with whom he had attended school. Suspicions about his membership of the British Communist Party followed him there, and only gradually did his interest in an academic career come to outweigh his commitment to political activism. Nonetheless, he continued to support political struggles wherever and whenever he could, and he was especially engaged with social movements in Latin America. What helped the decision to become a full-time academic was his increasing alienation from the British Communist Party, although he would never formally withdraw from it. Hobsbawm began as a devoted Soviet-oriented Communist, who turned a blind eye to the atrocities of Stalinism. Evans, to his credit, does not spare Hobsbawm when he recounts this distasteful period, and rather than issuing superfluous moral judgments, tries to explain to the reader how it was possible for intellectuals like Hobsbawm to have held such beliefs; the young Hobsbawm viewed the struggle with fascism as one between socialism and barbarism, whereby he discarded unwelcome information as capitalist propaganda. This became ever more difficult for him, however, as revealed by the MI5 transcripts that Evans makes use of. Transcripts of the wiretapped offices of the British Communist Party reveal that party leaders distrusted Hobsbawm perhaps even more than the secret services, constantly objecting to critical essays, commentaries, and discussions. Especially after the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, Hobsbawm in turn became ever more critical of them.

Hobsbawm was, nonetheless, one of the party's greatest assets, given its own marginal place within British society. He was one of the few intellectuals who dared to openly be a member. Increasingly Hobsbawm's politics were reoriented toward the British Labour Party, without, however, jettisoning his Leninism or an unduly rosy picture of the October Revolution. Following Vladimir Lenin's famous dictum that as situations change, one must change strategies, for Hobsbawm socialism meant pursuing governmental power, and for that, the Labour Party was the obvious candidate. How to do so was the subject of his many morning bus ride discussions with Michael Foot, Labour Party leader between 1980 and 1983. In this way, Hobsbawm became an intellectual godfather to New Labour, his actual dislike of Tony Blair notwithstanding.

Still, the question remains, why did Hobsbawm stick with the Communist Party until the bitter end? Besides his general stubbornness and penchant for the provocative, it would have meant a betrayal to humanism itself. Frustrating for Hobs-

bawm was the tendency especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall for interviews to dwell on the ideological underpinnings of his Marxist views. While he sometimes acknowledged areas in which he had been mistaken, he often stubbornly stuck to his convictions. This, for Evans, was the essential tragedy of Hobsbawm's life; the incredible energy and talent exhibited in his writing was undone and his credibility doubted with the total collapse of the social system for which he had so doggedly advocated.

Evans has written a wonderful and balanced biography, which shows the private Hobsbawm and his existential struggles as well as the public persona. Critical when warranted and admiring when fitting, its analytical and stylistic qualities provide good reading.