

# Otto Strasser: The Life and Times of a German Socialist

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PRIOR to the outbreak of the Second World War, Otto Strasser was a leading activist in the National-Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). Distancing himself from the prevailing ideologies of both capitalism and communism, Strasser famously accused Adolf Hitler of betraying the socio-economic principles of the original Nazi programme and went on to become a leading opponent of the Third Reich. Along with his brother, Gregor, he believed that a form of German Socialism could provide an alternative future for the nation's long-suffering workers and peasants. As a result, he was ruthlessly pursued across several countries by Gestapo agents and became embroiled in a series of thrilling adventures. This is the story of how a Bavarian man with a sense of national freedom and social justice became one of the world's most intriguing revolutionary ideologues.

## **Preface**

*ANY book which concerns the life of a former Nazi activist is bound to attract some degree of controversy and in this respect mine is no different than its predecessors. Otto Strasser and his brother, Gregor, were leading lights in the National-Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), of that there is no doubt, but this fact should not preclude us from examining why they made the mistakes they did and how – in Otto's case, at least – these problems were effectively overcome. Two biographies about Otto's life have already been published in English, namely Nemesis? The Life of Otto Strasser (1940) and The Prisoner of Ottawa (1953). Both were written by the Times newspaper correspondent, Douglas Reed. One may well ask, therefore, why it should be considered necessary to write another biography. The answer is simple. Almost sixty years have passed since Reed first examined the complex life of our German subject and since that time a great deal has emerged; not merely in relation to the events that took place in Germany and elsewhere at the time, but also with regard to the political legacy of Otto Strasser that continues to endure to this very day.*

*For the liberal democracies that have effectively controlled the world since 1945, Otto Strasser represents something of a taboo. On the one hand, of course, he was a committed opponent of Adolf Hitler and spent over forty years of his life attacking the character of the man he once believed could save Germany from oblivion. But that fact that Otto was still a member of the NSDAP himself, albeit for a very short period of time, means that his character will inevitably be open to attack on that basis alone.*

*Otto's story has everything. In many ways, it is an exciting political thriller, but it is also a very moving and tragic tale that can tell us an enormous amount about the darker aspects of human nature. Otto Strasser has been a major influence on my life and I should have written this book twenty years ago. I hope you find his story to be as educational and inspiring as I have.*

**Troy Southgate**

**Winter 2010**

*I was more than a little concerned about those "youth football teams."*

*Yes, "youth football teams." For on the back cover of Troy Southgate's biography of Otto Strasser, one reads that Southgate "has managed several youth football teams in his local area." Now, this same cover also informs us that the author has been involved "with over twenty music projects," that he is the "editor of Synthesis webzine" and serves as the "Secretary of the New Right." This assortment of tasks would seem to be enough to absorb the time of most men. However, Southgate continues to turn out full length books on a variety of subjects, fiction and non-fiction. How to fathom that one fellow, even the most energetic, has accomplished so much can only be explained due to his neglect of some aspect of his ventures. This assumption forced me to conclude that it must be those youth football teams of Southgate's which have suffered.*

*Imagine then my surprise when on the back of Southgate's most recent work, Further Writings: Essays on Philosophy, Religion, History & Politics we read, "He has also coached and managed boys football teams at under-8 and under-11 level, helping them to go on to win local tournaments." There you have it. Even as a football coach Southgate has found time to excel.*

*(In passing, given our author's penchant for the "conservative revolution" we await his book on footballing tactics. Perhaps, he has devised a method to return to the 2 - 3 - 5 and is planning revenge on the Magyars for Wembley 1953!)*

*On to more weighty matters. Southgate has long been taken by the figure of Otto Strasser. Ever since his formative years in the National Front and continuing throughout the assorted movements he has led and contributed to since then, Strasser's thought and person have figured heavily.*

*An initial inkling why this is so may be gleaned from our volume's sub title, The Life and Times of a German Socialist. Strasser and, his older brother, Gregor came to their affiliation with National Socialism because they took its "socialism" to be serious. Hitler's failure to do so led to Otto breaking with the party in 1930. It also resulted in Gregor's murder at the hands of the Führer's agents in the 1934 Night of the Long Knives. This is the primary source of Southgate's Strasserism. In our author's understanding of nationalism, the people must form a true community, and true community demands economic care and justice. Or, as he quotes Strasser, "capitalism is ideologically linked to liberalism."*

*Here is where Strasser idealism begins but no means ends. He was a socialist, calling for mass redistribution of property, worker's co-operatives and nationalization of utilities but, unlike the standard Marxist ideologies, he was also a nationalist. As Southgate puts it, he was fearful of Germany being "sucked into a global abyss that would result in an eradication of her culture and civilization." And, unlike the mainstream socialist he was also a localist who foresaw, after an initial period of state enforced land confiscation and redistribution, a time when all families of the nation would have property of their own with some manner of self sufficiency. Of course, this redistribution would result in many people having less than they possessed currently. According to Southgate this process would "involve the State putting land and property in the hands of trusted groups and individuals." It would require that "people's lives (be) scaled down to a large extent" and "a general lowering of one's horizons."*

*Many of the details of Strasser's system sound quite radical to contemporary ears. (They don't call it "radical nationalism" for nothing, mind you!) Quoting Southgate, they include the abolishment of "all private property involving ownership of land and natural resources," canceling all existing mortgages," "de-urbanization" via "the large scale resettlement of the countryside" and much more. The details of this system are far more complex. The eleventh chapter of Southgate's work is a good place to begin a study of them.*

*There the reader will encounter not only Strasserite socialism but also his views on state education. It is to be "free" but would allow for only "a single type of primary school for children"*

*with a heavy emphasis on German history. The state structure is treated to an extended presentation as well. Strasser did support "a president for life" but would limit his power by establishing a Great Council comprised of representatives from the various German provinces and a Chamber of Estates to be elected by the people.*

*Throughout this section of the book we feel a distinct tension between Strasser and Southgate's desire for a simpler, more secure economic life, rooted in a sense of peoplehood and their belief in the "German" and, may we add, general European predilection for "independence and self expression." This is a difficult balancing act. Southgate claims that "although Otto was a statist himself, he had more in common with modern day libertarians than with the communists and Hitlerites of his generation." The yearning to see things this way is understandable but, to be honest, there is little in Strasserism of the libertarian or anarchist perspective (except in his idealization of rural life) and we will have more to say about this later on.*

*Strasser also differed from Hitler in his approach to other European nations. His path was not to engage in claims and attacks upon neighboring states. It would be of interest to go back and research Strasser's reactions to Hitler's arguments and steps re Czechoslovakia, Poland and the like. He also dabbled with the notion of an alliance with Russia as opposed to the west. Echoes of this were to be heard in the post war era from the likes of Francis Parker Yockey and those, who till this day, speak of some form of "National Bolshevism."*

*On the Jewish question, Strasser, although keenly aware of the real difficulties created by the supranational self-identity of this unique people, was convinced that Hitler's over the top approach to it did far more harm than good. He was always deeply repulsed by the Julius Streicher school of pornography, obsessive with matters Jewish. Gregor, in fact, expelled Streicher from the NSDAP many years before Hitler brought the latter to propagandistic preeminence.*

*One of the subjects which led to the final rupture between Otto and the party was his rejection of the "leader principle." In his last conversation with Hitler, over May 21st and 22nd of 1930, Strasser tried to explain that even leaders are human beings and that ideals must always take precedence. To the Führer this smacked of liberalism. The "leader," to Hitler was the idea made incarnate and, thus, would always be the final definer of what was correct ideology.*

*Of these ideas and many more the reader will learn in the volume before us. Yet, Strasser was not just a man of ideals. He was a courageous idealist, always ready to advocate for his notion of a just society, even when his life was repeatedly threatened for so doing. This dogged idealism continued even when, after the war, his loyalty to that which he believed forced him to live in exile from his beloved homeland for over twenty years.*

*After his final break with Hitler in 1930, Strasser founded, along with Herbert Blank and Major Bruno Buchrucker, the Black Front organization which continued a fervent opposition to Hitlerism in the name of, what its advocates saw as, true German socialism. This led, in the early 1930s to street violence against Black Fronters by the growing number of Hitler's supporters. Eventually, when Hitler came to power, it took only four days till the Black Front was outlawed. Later, after the Reichstag fire, the government rounded up thousands of Black Front supporters, herding them into concentration camps.*

*At this point Strasser, his life in danger from the Gestapo, was condemned to begin years of cat and mouse fleeing from the long clutches of the NS government. His path would take him to Austria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, Portugal, Bermuda and, lastly, Canada. Labeled by Joseph Goebbels as "Public Enemy Number One" with a half a million dollar bounty on his head, Strasser was never safe in continental Europe. There were repeated attempts made on his life, several of his colleagues were killed in the process. Reading of the details of his flights and many last minute escapes one thinks, perhaps, of the fictional Jason Bourne, whose miraculous escapes from the murderers of his own government and other malevolent forces have taken him*

through three films and eight novels. The difference between Strasser and Bourne, however, are many. The former had no near superhuman combat skills and the latter had no sustaining ideology. Moreover, Bourne is fiction. The exploits of Strasser were very real.

The details of this remarkable man's flight from Hitler, while still trying to maintain his dissident presence in Germany via clandestine supporters, pirate radio broadcasts and underground publications is fascinating. They are told in detail in Southgate's book. There is little doubt that the reader, his appetite aroused by Southgate's deft telling of this tale of danger and courage, will soon be visiting the library or surfing the internet in order to get a copy of Strasser's own works (*Hitler and I* [1940] and *Flight from Terror* [1943]) which offer, at greater length, the story of a brave man and those who went to any ends to try to have him killed.

In Canada, out of the reach of Hitler's agents, a man of lesser fortitude would have gone about setting up a calm life, content that he had fought the good fight and earned a well deserved rest. However, rest was not part of Strasser's extraordinary makeup. All the ideas he had fought for still had to be clarified and championed. For so long as Hitler was in power this meant opposing him and exposing what Strasser saw as his great evil to the world, in general, and the German people, in particular. From the time he left Germany till the end of the war Strasser authored nine anti-Hitler books in English and fourteen in German! This was accomplished with the Gestapo in hot pursuit and with a less than receptive welcome, for the most part, from the Allied governments. (Incidentally, Southgate provides us with a detailed biography of all things Strasser, books by Otto and Gregor themselves, as well as secondary works in many languages.)

Adding insult to injury in 1943, the Canadian government, seemingly clueless as to the nature of Otto's political beliefs, forbade him to publish on political matters during his stay in that country. Eventually he wound up living in a tiny apartment above a grocery store in the small village of Paradise in Nova Scotia. Even there, in extreme economic straits, supported by a tiny stipend sent him by his brother Paul, who lived in a monastery in Minnesota, he continued to struggle and dream of a just society in Germany and elsewhere. And, immediately after the war, his publications began to flow once again.

From 1945 to 1955 Otto Strasser struggled mightily to return to his native land. Despite the willingness of the Allied occupation to "rehabilitate" many former Nazis when they needed them, the one man who had fought Hitler long before the rest of the world was aware of a Nazi movement, was kept in exile.

Why did he so yearn to return? Southgate quotes a poignant comment which the exile made in 1950, when his hopes were raised yet again that a return to Germany was a possibility. "I have no illusions, either about the domestic or the foreign situation of Germany, but I can do no other . . . even the impulse to be of help has somewhat suffered through my experience of mankind. But there remains a feeling of duty and of dedication to task." Strasser was fifty three years old at that time.

In 1955, he was at last allowed to return. Southgate gives the painful facts of the legal nastiness that accompanied those ten years of post war exile. By the middle of 1956 Strasser was back in the political fray, founding a new political party, *Deutsche Soziale Union*. According to Southgate, the group had "links" with the Belgian radical nationalist, Jean-François Thiriart, a thinker of much creativity in his own right. With some connection with Yockeyites in London, these groups were blazing new paths in their rejection of the "west," America and its global, materialist capitalism with the same vehemence as they did Marxism. Southgate also makes passing reference to Thiriart's ties with "Black power advocates and revolutionaries in Latin America." The discerning reader will see here the germination of sentiments that would lay dormant until the days of the "radical" National Front of the late 1980s and its assorted offshoots.

Sadly, this last effort of Strasser's would go down in dismal defeat. In the 1958 federal elections

his party garnered a mere 0.1% of the vote. This was to be his final real effort in organized politics. An overture to join the NPD in the late sixties was rejected by Strasser. In 1969 he published his final work, *Mein Kampf: Eine Politische Autobiographie* in German. (Reviewer's aside -- Might this not be a work of some importance to translate into English?)

As could be expected he continued his journalistic efforts, publishing his newsletter, *Vorschau*, until two months before his death. The end came peacefully to this incessant battler, whom Southgate describes as the "great old man of German Socialism," in Munich on Tuesday August 27th, 1974.

Southgate notes in his Preface that there are two existing biographies of Strasser. They were both written by his long time friend, British journalist, Douglas Reed. Reed is himself a fascinating figure, clearly very respectful of Strasser and much influenced by the latter's thinking. He was a gifted journalist, novelist and historian, who has fallen out of favor due to the political thought control of our times. Reed was a virulent and early opponent of Hitler but, alas for his literary reputation at present, he felt there was a Jewish problem and, to make matters worse, was a very vocal supporter of the Ian Smith government of Rhodesia during its brief existence.

Twice did Reed take pen in hand to tell the story of Strasser. First, in 1940, when the latter was still in Europe, he wrote *Nemesis? The Life of Otto Strasser*. Later during Strasser's painful post war years in Canada, he authored *The Prisoner of Ottawa* (1953). These are both worthwhile works and may be found today on the internet at [DouglasReed.co.uk](http://DouglasReed.co.uk). Each captures the drama of Strasser's life and the radical nature of his views.

Southgate feels, though, we have need of yet another relating of Strasser's tale. He asserts that "sixty years have passed" since Reed concluded his portrayal of Strasser and a "great deal has emerged since then. Plus we are told that we know now much more about Strasser's "political legacy." We will return to the question of legacy in a moment. Regarding why this book is needed, though, this reviewer would beg to differ with Southgate. His book is needed, quite simply, because it is a far better work than those of Reed. Yes, there are areas where one will turn to Reed to supplement Southgate. There are areas where the earlier works offer us a bit more to chew on but, as far as a coherent, straightforward and fast paced rendering of the events and ideas of Otto Strasser, the current volume far outdoes those that came before. Reed is given to a bit of meandering and gets a bit chatty here and there. Southgate's is a narrative without fat but with all the necessary meat. My advice would be to start with Southgate then move on to Strasser's own autobiographical works and then, finally, sit down at the computer and print out Reed.

Let us be honest, though, neither Reed nor Southgate are detached academic observers of Strasser. The reader searches in vain in any of these three works for a negative comment about the man. Similarly, there is little attempt to offer questioning analysis of Strasser's political views. Perhaps Strasser was a man without major faults, personal or ideological but this reviewer would have liked to hear a bit more from dissenting perspectives.

Plus, the discerning reader will notice some contradictions in the details of our saga. For example, the story of the Gestapo murder of Strasser's underground radio expert, Rudolf Formis, in the Czechoslovakian town of Zahorie in 1935 is presented in quite different fashion in Strasser's own *Flight from Terror*, than it is in both Reed and Southgate.

In addition, there are fascinating, but all too brief, references in all the above works to the presence in the Black Front of a small number of Jews that Strasser was quite willing to work with. Southgate refers to one Helmut Hirsch, a Jew of the Black Front, who was given the task of blowing up the offices of *Der Stürmer*. He was smuggled into Germany to accomplish this task, caught and eventually executed. Strasser himself, in *Flight from Terror*, makes reference to an anonymous Jewish doctor, a Black Fronter, who "had thrown open his sanitarium to us" in

*Franzenbad, where the organization met clandestinely.*

*This must be balanced against the backdrop of a conversation Strasser had with Reed on this subject, which appears on pages 115-116 in Prisoner of Ottawa. There Reed writes that Strasser believed that "his endeavor would be to find, in agreement with the Jews, a means by which they could lead a dignified and worthy existence in the state, subject to the limits which their own religion, ineradicable traits and implacable refusal to assimilate dictate." These sources need further work to ascertain more clearly the totality of Strasser's position in this area.*

*(It is worth noting here that the American, Jewish paleo-conservative, Paul Gottfried, who has shown much receptivity to nationalist causes in the past, wrote a scholarly article, reasonably favorable to Strasser, as far back as the Spring 1969 issue of Modern Age. He concludes that the enduring positive legacy of Strasser is to be found in his "core rejection of liberalism" due to his "anxiety about the individual's estrangement from society and the desire to reabsorb him into a community".)*

*There remains yet the matter of the implementation of Strasser's economics as well as his relevancy to current political struggles. Strasser was a socialist. By this he meant that mass capitalism is inherently exploitative and unjust. Yet, the key area in which he differed with the communist (in addition to his being a nationalist and not an internationalist) is in his rejection of class warfare. He advocated, for example, joint ownerships of factories and large businesses by workers and owners. He wanted to redistribute property but only to a certain extent. At the end of the day, the unity of the people of their soul must be maintained. Neither worker nor owner should dominate. Class warfare, was in his mind, a sure recipe to tear apart the nation. Accordingly, after dutifully having served in the army during WWI, Strasser fought in the streets in the immediate turbulent days after WWI against both communists and industrialists.*

*This obviously has an attraction for those who wish to heal the wounds of any people, ground down by capitalism and faceless state socialism. However, the lingering question is how is this to be implemented? How much is to be taken away? What right does a man have to work and preserve the results of his efforts? Or, that of his ancestors? What sort of state and methods of coercion would be needed to effect a massive redistribution of wealth and property? Do not many men lead honest and productive lives in order to pass something of their resources on to their descendants? Would the state, under Strasserism, constantly intervene to limit men from doing so? How big is a business to become before it is to be split? Or a house? Or a property? At what point would a Chesterton or a Father McNabb or a Strasser say to a hard working Englishman that he had too much in the way of assets or property? These are questions for Strasserites to consider when they step beyond the drawing board of radical political journals and websites. Let the reader not misunderstand me. The above questions are not meant to contradict the assumptions of radical nationalism. They are raised to help it clarify what its practical goals really are.*

*There is another area which might be worthy of consideration. Strasser and Southgate are very critical of Hitler for having "sold out to the capitalists" and not sought to break up large German business and industries. He is also castigated for making allegiance with forces of "reaction," that is, social conservatism, aristocracy and the like. This is all well and good and, given Hitler's many problems, may be understandable. But let us look at some other examples of compromise. What if the Falange would not have joined the Carlists and the socially conservative elements of Spanish society in 1936? Would it have been better to allow Spain to continue to sink under the evil forces of communism, secularism and liberalism in order to leave Falangist ideals unsullied? These are difficult questions which do not admit of simple answers.*

*Also, for some future day is the question of Otto's religiosity. Raised a staunch Catholic it seems that Paul and even Gregor were far more involved with their faith than was Otto. What were Otto's spiritual assumptions? Perhaps, a more knowledgeable Strasserite can fill in this gap?*

Southgate tells us in his Preface that his book on Strasser is long overdue. He writes that "Otto Strasser has been a major influence in my life and I should have written this book twenty year ago." Later he offers the hope that Strasser's story "will inspire future generations of anti-capitalists to emulate the courage and determination of one of Europe's greatest revolutionaries." This leaves us with the two questions -- Has Strasser been that important to "revolutionaries"? And, should he be?

(Another brief digression - the reference to "twenty years ago" may be more than arbitrary. Southgate is always described on the back cover blurbs of his books as "a long suffering football supporter." Surely his suffering reached its apex twenty years before the publication of Strasser when Andy Gray could not contain a Lee Martin surge down the left side on a sunny afternoon at a Wembley Cup Final replay. Out of such suffering, perhaps, are literary endeavors shelved for two decades!)

The final chapter of the book is appropriately titled "The Strasserite Legacy." There reference is made to the many versions of radical nationalism that have found inspiration and insight in the ideas of Strasser over recent decades. Several German nationalist parties are mentioned as well as groups in France, America and Denmark. Special attention is given to the area of Southgate's greatest expertise, England. There Strasserism has found a rich field. Its spirit has been invoked repeatedly in assorted, albeit tiny, political factions. The first of these, the National Party, was led by former NF chairman John Kingsley Read. This group sank fairly quickly and the NF returned to the earlier leadership of John Tyndall.

(Brief digression -- Southgate in his discussion of Adolf von Thadden of the NPD describes him as an "agent provocateur" secretly working for British Intelligence (p. 169). In the case of Kingsley Read, about whom similar accusations have also surfaced, nothing of the sort is mentioned. This reviewer has no direct knowledge whatsoever of either man. But there are those who have claimed that von Thadden was working with government agencies to undermine the leftist radicalism of the late sixties. Kingsley Read was defended by radical nationalists who claimed he had been intentionally feeding false information to Searchlight. Tyndall was convinced the negative claims were true. This is all mentioned in passing to illustrate the tendency we all have to believe the worst of our political opponents but assume the best case scenario regarding our allies. This is a very human tendency. Fouls committed in our opponents' penalty area are usually seen as heinous, while those done by our own defenders strike us as innocuous. Perhaps Southgate has, indeed, examined the claims and counter claims in both cases and come to a dispassionate conclusion. If so, more power to him.)

It was in the '80s that Strasserism in the NF and its varied successors really hit its stride. Despite the ferocity of their battles with each other the politics of the NF, NFSG, TW, TP, ENM and NRF were all heavily influenced by Strasser.

The question remains whether the future lies with the sort of statist nationalism which would re-order the economic realm by force or whether that point in history has been passed, at least, for the present.

Southgate who drew so much upon Strasser in the past seems to be moving beyond him of late. Although concluding the volume before us by hoping that Strasser's "story will . . . inspire future generations of anti capitalists to emulate the courage and determination of one of Europe's greatest revolutionaries," one wonders as to the nature of this inspiration. The nation state has become increasingly irrelevant to our lives, except as its rapacious taxes, faceless bureaucracy and egalitarian coercions get in the way here and there. Of course, this bloated secular, totalitarian elephant is a pain but few people take its statements about anything seriously anymore. Politicians are viewed with utter disdain and the wars and projects of the state monolith have little to do with what most people find meaningful in their real lives.

*Southgate sees himself today as an anarchist of sorts. He is still a nationalist, not of the nation state but of the people. This is surely far closer to libertarianism than the state controlled socialism of Strasser. The reader may be wondering at this point why Southgate continues to speak of Strasser. Is this nothing more than pining after the heroes of one's youth, the way the older generation may speak of Matthews or Blanchflower?*

*This reviewer thinks not. Strasser is still very real to Southgate for two reasons. His fearless idealism and love of his people may yet serve as an inspiration to every nationalist of whatever denomination. On a more sublime level though Southgate is still nurtured by the essence of Otto Strasser if not by the precise forms that his ideas took. The love of one's people, of justice and compassion, of return to a life of greater simplicity and naturalness, these core beliefs of Strasser have and will endure even when the debates over nationalization of property and other specifics will long be forgotten.*

*Strasser postulated, in the sweeping fashion that many German philosophers do, that history always oscillates between two recurring and discernible eras. The first is one of "constraint," the other of "revolution." Or, as he puts it in another context, the one which "makes the community of like persons, the we, into the center of the universe" while the other, the spirit of revolution, sees the "self" and the "ego" as the appropriate core of life. He believed that the spirit of the individual had begun its most recent triumph in the 1789 French Revolution, and it was now declining to give way to a new spirit of community. The true fulfillment of this sense of solidarity he saw, neither in Nazism or communism, but in the "conservative revolution" associated with the likes of Ernst Jünger and Moeller van den Bruck.*

*It is far from clear whether this grand vision of history is true. Strasser could not have foreseen the global culture of today with its simplistic and decadent mind control. It would have been hard for him to envision the viciousness of "political correctness" and above all the invited mass invasion of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand by non-whites would have been unthinkable to him.*

*Southgate is correct in urging us to examine yet again the enduring aspects of Strasserism in these dark times and to seek to translate it into contemporary realities. In Troy Southgate's able pen the Strasserite heritage has found a profound and noble teacher.*

***Reviewed by Gil Caldwell, Trenton, New Jersey.***