

Review of 'Otto Strasser: The Life and Times of a German Socialist' by Troy Southgate (2010)

This book is hagiographical, polemic, based on limited sources and has some small editing issues but it is still well worth reading.

Otto Strasser is presented here by Troy Southgate as a 'German Socialist', neatly eliding the fact that he was very much a national socialist with an early association with Hitler's NSDAP.

His brother, Gregor, was murdered in the infamous Knight of The Long Knives and Otto barely escaped with his life, suffering danger, poverty and indignities for well over the subsequent decade.

Indeed, the account of his desperate attempts to stay one step ahead of the German Army in France in 1940 links in the memory with Koestler's account of the chaos of those days and that superb romanticisation of the era in Curtiz' 'Casablanca'.

This book is a reminder that interwar German nationalism has since been oversimplified in the West and in Germany because it has been convenient to do so. It is a useful source for understanding yet another strand of that German Idealism that has proved such a burden to Europe.

It can also be recommended as providing some fascinating insights into what it was like to be a German nationalist in the 1920s. Most books on this era take an Olympian view as if any nationalist was by nature a fool for participating in the first steps towards an 'inevitable' Gotterdammerung.

Of course, hindsight is a glorious thing but there was no necessary march from defeat in 1918 to the death camps. The opposition to Hitler might, had circumstances been only slightly different, triumphed over a man who never had the full support of the majority of the German people or his own Party.

One of the saddest elements in the book is the determined bureaucratic attempt of the Allies to ensure that their own people sustained a blame game at the expense of the German people – an attitude that permitted the Allies to engage in bombing operations that were, bluntly, war crimes.

Thus evil begets evil ...

Even taking account of Southgate's attempt to rehabilitate the man, Otto Strasser comes across as decent and likeable if perhaps a bit of a political nerd. I am prepared to believe that he was the nicer man in his unfortunate contretemps with the aged HG Wells in Bermuda while in exile.

But being a decent man is no guarantee of political competence or of being right nor of that decency not being overwhelmed by circumstances if he, his brother, the Black

Front and the SA had ever come to power.

Perhaps we might wish that his kind had triumphed over Hitler within the NSDAP (certainly many shtetl Jews would likely have survived the next two decades) but it would not be a particularly nice place to live if you had an ounce of independence or lust for freedom – or been Jewish for that matter.

Strasser must be characterized as part of the conservative Catholic resistance both to capitalist modernization and to an ‘a-moral’ international socialism which was associated, not entirely without reason, with those Jews who had abandoned any faith in God and turned to politics.

Strasser stood against capital and for the workers (Strasserites would back strikes where Hitler would cut deals with industrialists) and against international communism (although National Bolshevism would sustain a theory of common Eurasian working class interests).

This strand of German nationalism was fed by the same streams as Belloc and Chesterton in the UK.

Some analogy would be with the sclerotic catholic authoritarianism (in practice, rather than in full accordance with Strasserite theory) of Franco or various East European traditionalisms. Whatever Strasser was, unlike Hitler and Mussolini, he was not a cynic - probably his undoing.

The difference from the ‘nice’ Catholic conservative revolutionaries of Merrie England was Strasser and his generation’s experience of defeat on the Western Front and of economic collapse first in the wake of war and then after the Great Depression.

This led to attitudes that involved far more than the scapegoating of the Jewish community but anti-Semitism certainly came as part of the package.

Strasser comes out of this a little more creditably than most national socialists – but only just! A dash of implicit tolerance of anti-Semitism from Southgate in ‘apologia’ is a little uncomfortable to read.

Otto represented a very real alternative to Hitler – redistributionist, corporatist, welfarist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist – as well as a position that had room for the Catholic ideal of one nation under God. But he was also naïve when faced with the gangster politics of his opponents.

Such German Idealism as Strasser’s is of its time and place. Some of it survived the war as the social compact that still remains at the heart of the democratic German State, an ideal of corporatism shared by Christian Democrats and Social Democrats alike and consciously denying its inconvenient part-parent.

Because we demand that the Nazi era be ‘sui generis’, a peculiar eruption of evil and a simplification of history into the standard American-style narrative of black and white, we fail to see that the Nazi State of Hitler and his gang only arose as most

effectively brutal player in a longstanding game.

Nor did German history suddenly end in 1945 and start anew. Book burning did not end with Hitler. Even under the Christian Democrats in the immediate post-war period, communities were engaged in the burnings of 'grimoires' and of other material that they disapproved of.

There is an essential continuity to German history. The importance of this short and readable book is that it reminds us of that continuity. It stops us from convenient simplification.

It helps us question the standard narratives we have grown up with. It does not, however, threaten to turn us into national socialist sympathisers after the fact.

Strasser himself got the worst of both worlds. The Nazis tried to kill him more than once. The Allies, and especially the time-servers who managed to get themselves into power as 'democrats' by the late 1940s, found it convenient to label him a Nazi because of his threat to the post-war Federal deal.

Whatever you think of the man and his politics (I would oppose them as absurdly essentialist), his treatment by the Allies and by the post-war German Government was as dodgy as we have come to expect from liberal democracies when dealing with what they consider to be existential threats.

The recent supply of Wikileaks material on the known innocence of large numbers of Guantanamo Bay victims tells us a lot about the moral turpitude of bureaucratic liberalism.

This book tells us that this essential lack of integrity has been going on for an awful long time. The hiring of Nazi rocket scientists is but a part of a wider engagement by the West with the cruel realities of power.

Former Hitlerites were convenient partners but working class national socialists who defied Hitler were not - this tells us something about liberal priorities. A force that might ally with the Soviets on a nationalist platform was clearly not tolerable - again comprehensibly at that point in history.

Southgate's account of Strasser's treatment in the 1940s does not entirely fill me with indignation - you play the game, you take your chances - but it adds to the mounting evidence that our 'own side' is pretty morally bankrupt when judged by its own claimed standards.

As for the politics, Southgate lays out Strasser's pre-Gleichschaltung position in great detail in a central section of the book. I refer you to the book. Southgate believes these ideas still have merit.

I do not agree with him. Strasser's ideas were a conservative petit-bourgeois response to radical modernization, based on a deeply flawed idealistic philosophy. But, whatever they were, they were not 'evil'. Dull and impractical and potentially sclerotic, yes - but evil, no!

To label all national socialist thought as 'evil' rather than misguided is as absurd as considering all Marxist thought to be stupid or all liberal thought as benign. Things are far too complex for such easy judgements on any ideological formulation.

The great flaw in all idealism is its philosophical universalism (albeit that national socialism embeds this in the nation or, in Hitler's case, in a spurious notion of race) but this is a flaw that is fully shared by the philosophes of the Enlightenment and by Marxist scientific materialism.

All European politics in the wake of industrialization has been infected by some form of idealism or reification. Millions have died as a result. As villains go, in a world of holocausts, gulags and Vietnam, Strasser and similar types like Walther Darre are not in the highest ranks of evil-doers.

Today, he is of somewhat fringe interest. National Bolshevism had a brief flurry of publicity in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in Russia but it was really the security apparatus's pet.

The more interesting Eurasian ideology is traditionalist and has been carefully managed to buttress National Putinism.

Southgate, whose own political trajectory has taken him through most of the Radical Right groups of consequence on the fringe of British politics, contemporaneously with my abortive trajectory through the mainstream 'official' Left, has now ended up as leading theorist of National Anarchism.

National Anarchism is another relatively fringe operation that suffers from the historic links of many of its members with harder and nastier organizations but it is one which is intellectually interesting.

However, interesting is not important when the Radical Right is as full of squabbles and splitters as the Marxist Left.

The Radical Right and the Official Left increasingly look like two sides of the same coin of political essentialism even if National Anarchism probably gets it right on the bureaucratic State.

Southgate himself owes a lot to Strasser, though one suspects that Otto would not easily have comprehended the diminishing of the national state in the theory.

The sensitive liberal should be warned here that this book is designed to be part of a strategy of engagement with the outside world and that the publishing house has the Strasserite logo on its spine of hammer and sword, a homage to the Bolshevik hammer and sickle.

But the political philosophy of Strasserism is dated. It does not really stand up to philosophical scrutiny. Yet Southgate has every right to re-present him to the world after half a century or more of neglect. In that context, this is a good introduction.

Why it should be read by anyone who purports to understand modern history should be clear by now – it is a vaccine against simplistic victory narratives and it shows how basically good men could join, in good faith, and then be crushed by, vicious movements.

The national socialist movement was vicious enough to offer death to Otto as the price of failure but do not believe for a moment that leading factions in liberal democratic parties are not ruthless in their own way about ideological dissent. We all know the record of the Communists in this respect.

Otto Strasser was a cul-de-sac in European history and politics but his story offers an instructive tale and the book is recommended for those interested in political thought and European history.

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