

Times of London
25 January

Review: Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History by Richard J Evans — on the wrong side of history

The grand historian's wilful blindness to the evils of Marxism is shameful, says AN Wilson

AN Wilson

Eric Hobsbawm was probably the most widely read British historian of his generation. It was apt that, as the most beguiling of communist intellectuals, he was born in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution. Right up to his death in 2012 he enjoyed the approval of the academic establishment; teaching for many years at Birkbeck, University of London, while achieving the status of a rebel, a Marxist whose vision of history made a successful appeal to the hearts of young student readers who did not know any better.

However, his best-known work, *The Age of Revolution*, as the present biographer tells us, was loosely cobbled together from lecture notes at Birkbeck and would not even pretend to be a work of primary scholarship. Sir Richard Evans, regius professor emeritus of history at Cambridge, considers Hobsbawm's *Industry and Empire* to be a "masterpiece", but its account of the Industrial Revolution in Britain is a muddle. He attributed the success of the Industrial Revolution to the world power of the Royal Navy. It is true that the success of British trade owed everything to sea power. Yet the Industrial Revolution stemmed not from Captain Hornblower, but from the personal ingenuity of such inventors and entrepreneurs as James Watt, Matthew Boulton and Josiah Wedgwood. Hobsbawm confused the origins of British success with its means of world domination.

Being a Marxist, he never weighed the significance of individuals in the great movement of events, even though, paradoxically, as this biography shows, he had prodigious individual influence. As Evans says, Hobsbawm was very widely read, and it is more as a herald of communism than as a scholar that he will be remembered. "Intellectuals are the chorus in the great drama of the class struggle," he wrote as a student, and he believed this to his dying day. His best book was *Captain Swing*, a study of mob violence, which he wrote in collaboration with the French scholar George Rudé in 1969. Evans says that "most of the detailed research [was] carried out by Rudé". The sentence would probably be truer if the word "most" were changed to "all".

Hobsbawm had personal charm and, as a writer, an easy manner. His books sold in enormous quantities in translation, especially in South America. Many of the sloppy half-thoughts of the Left, in this country and abroad, owe more than is sometimes realised to a perusal in student days of Hobsbawm's eminently readable, left-wing hogwash, in which the Americans always

come out as the villains of history and the Soviet and Maoist mass murders are glossed over, or even condoned. "The innocent reader has no idea why the matter tastes so good," Hobsbawm gleefully wrote, "and digests Marxism as if it was a stimulating spice."

Evans, like most western liberals, uneasily half-believes that the Marxists might have been correct in their analysis of history. Such liberals want to believe that the Marxists were liberal at heart. Evans claims that Hobsbawm may have been a communist as a man, but on the page he was more nuanced, more like Evans. No evidence for this viewpoint is produced.

Indeed, Evans is honest enough to include some absolutely shaming moments. Although eventually persuaded to condemn the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, Hobsbawm initially described himself as "approving, with a heavy heart, of what is happening in Hungary".

When he appeared on Desert Island Discs in 1995, Hobsbawm accompanied his choice of Billie Holiday singing *He's Funny That Way* with some comradely reflections on history. If, asked Sue Lawley, there had been a chance of bringing about world revolution by the sacrifice of millions more lives, would it be worth it? He replied with an unhesitating yes. Interviewed on television by Michael Ignatieff, Hobsbawm was asked whether, had he known in 1934 of the millions being forcibly starved by Stalin, this would have altered his desire to be a communist. "Probably not," was the chilling reply. Had the Soviet Union turned out to be the beginning of the world revolution, added Hobsbawm benignly, "the loss of 15, 20 million might have been justified".

Hobsbawm was understandably regarded with suspicion by those labelled by Evans as "the Right". Hobsbawm was bugged and watched by MI5 during his army service and later in life. When, at the age of 80, he was made a Companion of Honour, there were some raised eyebrows, and no explanation is offered in this book as to why an old Stalinist should have wished to receive such a bauble from a hereditary monarch whose relatives were murdered by the Bolsheviks. His own answer was that he would not have been able to look the old comrades in the face had he accepted a knighthood. "CH is for the awkward squad," was his (surely delusional) claim.

The explanation for the high regard in which Hobsbawm was held was more to do with what the biographer calls the "legendary" dinner parties given by Hobsbawm and his wife, Marlene, in Nassington Road, Hampstead. England in general, London in particular, is a Liliputian, parochial place and those who move amiably among its chattering classes are grossly over-esteemed.

Hence this doorstep of a book, some 785 pages. An over-zealous researcher, Evans does not know how to sift material. Instead of telling us that Hobsbawm was a well-read child, we have more or less every book the teenage Eric borrowed from the Edgware public library, and this prolix approach is followed throughout Hobsbawm's not especially interesting life. Clearly, for Evans, Hobsbawm was a historian in the grand league of Gibbon, Von Ranke, Harnack and

Burckhardt, but nothing in Evans's hundreds of sloppily written pages persuaded me to think he is right.

The fascinating story that this book does not sufficiently explore is how the liberal intelligentsia came to endorse the Marxist world view. If Hobsbawm had meant what he wrote and said, and if a Stalinist revolution in Britain had occurred, then nearly all the guests eating Marlene's delicious dinners at Nassington Road would have been sent to the gulag, and Social Democrats such as Evans would probably have been shot. Hobsbawm went on plugging the party line to the end, although whether it was the dinner-party line or the Communist Party line, probably no one, by the time he was 90, quite knew. The Internationale was played as the useful idiots filed out of Golders Green crematorium. Probably they shared the generous view of the historian Tony Judt that Hobsbawm was one of the Last Romantics.

Others might be reminded of the culpably silly liberals of the 1860s who allow the release of the Devils in Dostoevsky's classic novel of that name. Far from thinking that Hobsbawm deserved to be taken seriously by British universities and honours committees, these readers will think of the population of Eastern Europe condemned to 50 years of miserable enslavement after 1945; they will remember the millions who died in the gulag, in Ukraine, in China, countless more than were killed by Hitler. For them, the preparedness of a comfortably placed British don to sit in a warm drawing room in north London justifying such horrors can create only feelings of nausea.

Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History by Richard J Evans, Little, Brown, 785pp, £35