

## Eric Hobsbawm: the Marxist intellectual who altered history

**Richard J Evans's biography portrays a man who enthralled readers but remained controversial to the end**

Kathleen Burk

Eric Hobsbawm was an international phenomenon of his time. A leading proponent of the new "social history", he also upended the modern historical century with his proposal for the "long 19th century" (1789-1914) as a new period, and his focus on themes, not chronology, thus throwing the "British political tradition overboard". Hobsbawm, who died in 2012 aged 95, was a leader of, and the last significant member of, a group of Communist historians who were a dominant historical force for several decades. Indeed, he became an icon for leftists everywhere, a public intellectual, as popular in Brazil as in Britain. But most important to Hobsbawm himself was his deep and enduring loyalty to Marxist ideas, the Communist party and the Soviet Union. Even after 1956, when news of Stalin's slaying of millions through starvation or the purges leaked out, he refused to condemn the Soviet dictator and publicly justified these deaths.

In short, Hobsbawm was a complicated man. As such he is a suitable subject for a wide-ranging and deep biography which Richard J Evans, an eminent historian of Germany, has delivered on the basis of full access to his subject's huge private archive, a number of interviews, and material from another 17 archives.

A self-described "Marxist intellectual", Hobsbawm decided to become a historian to make a living. He read phenomenally in several languages and fired off ideas like a sparkler, but he was not by instinct an empirical historian. As he put it: "I would like most to describe myself as a kind of guerrilla historian, who doesn't so much march directly towards his goal behind the artillery fire of the archives, as attack it from the flanking bushes with the Kalashnikov of ideas." He wrote more than 30 books which sold millions, but was equally well known for his voluminous number of essays, newspaper articles, lectures and interviews.

Hobsbawm was born in 1917 in Alexandria, a symbol of the cosmopolitan nature of his background and future. His father was from Whitechapel in London's East End, making Hobsbawm a British subject, whilst his mother was from Vienna. Both were Jews, but Hobsbawm refused to don the mantle of an observant Jew until his funeral, when, at his request, the Kaddish was said. The family was not well off and sometimes changed residence or country. This did not bother him overmuch; what cracked his life was the loss of his parents. He was an orphan at 14, and the lack of a family ate at him. When he was sent to Berlin in 1931 to live with his aunt and uncle, a substitute was found in the Communist party. As a party

member, he revelled in the camaraderie and fellowship. More importantly, he found a philosophy, Marxism, and a cause, bringing the communists to power.

In 1933, his father's unemployed brother decided to return to Britain with his family, taking Hobsbawm and his sister Nancy with them. In October 1936, when he arrived at King's College, Cambridge after winning a scholarship, he found to his disappointment that the students were largely non-political and certainly not leftwing. However, there was the Socialist Club, dominated by communists, and he joined and would remain a member until he died.

Conscripted into the Royal Engineers in 1940, he soon came to the attention of MI5, the domestic intelligence service, which had been sent reports on the new recruit by one of his senior officers. Access to these reports is put to good use by Evans, who provides the answers to questions Hobsbawm later asked himself, such as why he never became an officer and why it was so difficult to find an academic job. He finally found a permanent home in Birkbeck College, London, which then as now is devoted to teaching mature part-time students with classes held from 6pm-9pm. This left him with the days free for research and writing, of which he took full advantage. A brake was put on his productivity only when he became a father. "I am now married and with two tiny children . . . and the degree to which this diminishes productivity is quite astonishing," he wrote to a fellow historian. "I dream of solid Victorian comforts when husbands didn't have to take turns with wives in feeding infants in the middle of the night, etc."

Still his productivity remained impressive, but it takes more than that to make an important writer. Hobsbawm's significance goes beyond the structure of his books. In his writings on European history, he covered the whole range of the continent's civilisation, from politics to the economy, and social and cultural life. He also placed Europe within a broader global context. The absence of chronology might have been disturbing to non-academic readers, but he wrote with verve, flashing insights, arresting ideas and clear prose. As he set out in one of his most popular books, *The Age of Revolution*, the economy — or the mode of production — determined everything else. In this manner, he brought a Marxist interpretation to a wide readership, but without labelling it Marxist and thereby losing some readers. It could make a reader feel that she or he was part of a new way of looking at history, and this caught up many who bought and read book after book of his.

For the profession, part of his importance was his involvement in forging a new type of history — social history, the history of society in its widest ambit. In his big thematic books, *Age of Revolution*, *Age of Capital* and *Age of Empire*, covering "the long 19th century", he paid less attention to politics and more to the economy and society. But interspersed with these was a series of books on the "losers" rather than the winners of history, *Primitive Rebels*, *Labouring Men*, *Bandits and Captain Swing*. These books opened a whole new area, approach and focus, and helped lead to social history being considered not only the best, but, according to some, the only type of history anyone should bother writing.

Evans pays attention to this, but even more to Hobsbawm the individual, to his modes of thought, his inner life, his personality and his interactions with others. His concern is to explain,

rather than accuse or defend. Hobsbawm wrote that he came to history through Marxism rather than the other way around. His main interest lay in Europe, with Latin America a close second, and he ignored China, was dismissive of the US, and wholly uninterested in Africa.

On a personal level, Hobsbawm could be warm, loyal, generous and kind. But he was also arrogant. He “never liked being bested in matters of knowledge”, he could be a “cranky, irritable man”, he did not suffer fools gladly, he was contemptuous of political correctness and he did not mince his words. Most of all, he was a public intellectual of rare ability and range — in his ideas, his writings and his audience. He made a huge impact on millions of people around the world, and it is this that Evans, in this honest and riveting biography, makes clear.

*Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History, by Richard J. Evans, Little, Brown RRP£16.99, 785 pages*

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