Churchill: A Study in Brevity


Impressive as it may seem, Piers Brendon has spotted a real gap in the vast and increasingly redundant literature – witness the recent tomes from Ted Morgan and William Manchester – that continues to overwhelm the name of Winston Churchill. The need was for a readable short life, and in 226 pages he has plugged it to perfection. Next to brevity, his principal virtue is irreverence: his Churchill is no solemn statesman but always the impish, irrepressible schoolboy. Historical judgements, though they are shrewdly considered and based on wide reading – the wealth of unfamiliar sources is proof of that – are tossed off lightly and never allowed to interrupt for so much as a page the ceaseless flow of good stories. It is an exceedingly funny book, and a vivid portrait: a refreshing antidote to overblown Churchilliana of the 'Last Lion' school. Yet there is still perhaps one more book to be written: not another biography – the majestic official life apart, one must hope that Brendon has now closed that gap for the next twenty years or so – but a serious reassessment and summation of Churchill's ideas, achievements and place in history, drawing all the themes of his immense career together in a vivid, balanced, history, as his has. Would the result be just the result of a Kremlin directive. A number of seminal articles have placed the KPD's electoral success at the time of its 'social-fascist' line was at its most clearly that the resentment felt by unem

Working Class Heroes


After the Russian revolution, the Right in every European country felt itself threatened and went on the offensive. In consequence, the working class suffered defeat after disastrous defeat. The crushing of revolution in Germany and Hungary was swiftly followed by Mussolini's rise to power and the establishment of dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Poland. The worst was to come in 1933 with the triumph of the Nazis and their systematic annihilation of the most powerful working class movement in Western Europe. The existence of the Soviet Union as a focus of left-wing hopes and of the Comintern as a general staff of world revolution had served for nothing.

Indeed, the occasional behaviour by Moscow’s most loyal followers, the German Communists, was at the heart of subsequent recriminations about the working-class disunity which facilitated Hitler's victory. Outside of East Germany, little credence has been given to the Communists' own version of events. They claimed that Socialist betrayals of the workers between 1918 and 1923 had undermined mass loyalty to the bourgeois regime and that the authoritarian behaviour of the SPD in power, especially in Prussia, justified the KPD’s condemnation of the Social Democrats as 'social fascists'. In the West, such sectarian attacks on the SPD are held responsible for the failure to create a united front against the fascist threat and are attributed to blind servility to the dictates of Moscow. With minor variations, this view has dominated the historiography of the period ever since it was first propounded during the Cold War by KPD envoys like Arthur Koestler.

In recent years, however, historians of the German workers' movement have abandoned the exegesis of the ideological positions of its leadership in favour of a detailed sociological scrutiny of the lives of its rank-and-file. Accordingly, it is now clear that the resentment felt by unemployed, unskilled and poorly housed Communists for respectable, employed, well-housed members was not just the result of a Kremlin directive. A number of seminal articles have placed the KPD in the forefront of this trend and her book more than fulfils the hopes raised by them. Paining scholarship is transcended by incisive analysis and elegant prose into one of the most important contributions to the history of the Weimar Republic in recent years. Dr. Rosenhaft examines the curious paradox that KPD electoral success was greatest at the time when its 'social-fascist' line was at its most absurd and irrelevant. Her rich and subtle account of the impact of the depression on working-class Berlin reveals a Communist Party rather more sensitive to its militants' needs than the orthodox party would have us believe. The organisation of street gangs into neighbourhood defence units against the SA suggested that the KPD was hesitantly coming to terms with the new politics imposed by the economic crisis.

It is rather fortunate that Ben Fowkes' somewhat more conventional study of the 'high politics' of the KPD leadership should come on the heels of Dr. Rosenhaft's innovative work. Dr. Fowkes suffers by comparison yet his book is an immensely useful one, well-researched and lucidly written. It charts the KPD's ideological and strategic subordination to the Comintern and goes some way to compensating for its concentration on the leaders by means of an analysis of the class and geographical bases of the party. Equally revealing of working-class life in the Weimar period are the responses to a 271-question survey carried out in 1929. Erich Fromm's attempt to apply both Freudian and Marxist theory to the interpretation of the data thus collected is occasionally hampered by an assumption that the very act of reading a book is inevitably a political act but is never less than rivetting reading.
Arbeiter vs Angestellte. English translation: Technical staff/clerical staff.

I am hesitating as to whether to call the Angestellte "clerks" or "employees", I suppose slightly depending on what I hear about Arbeiter. Could it possibly be a dodgy abbreviation for Arbeitgeber? Charles Stanford.

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