

Books

How to think like a 1930s statesman

We forget how visceral the fear of Bolshevism was, driving western Europe into the arms of the Führer

By *Simon HEFFER*

THE SPECTRE OF WAR
by *Jonathan Haslam*

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★★★★★



Jonathan Haslam, the noted Sovietologist, understands perhaps better than anyone alive the effect the Russian revolution of 1917 had on the recalibration of international politics. The main message of his magisterial new book is that nothing was ever the same again, and that those – like Neville Chamberlain – who sought to understand what happened after 1917 by using the templates that existed before it were doomed to go wrong.

International communism – directed after 1917 from the Kremlin, first of all by Lenin and then, after 1924, by his infinitely more barbaric successor Joseph Stalin – bore a heavy responsibility for bringing about the Second World War. The savagery of Bolshevism, manifest immediately after 1917, not only helped breed Hitler every bit as much as Germany's humiliation by France at Versailles, but helped manufacture a state of mind in the west, especially in Britain, that saw Hitler as a bulwark against the Bolshevik creed. To adopt an Americanism from the post-war period, while many statesmen and others of influence in the west saw Hitler as a bastard, they did at least consider him to be *their* bastard. Nothing, they felt, could be worse than Bolshevism: an idea that the ovens of Auschwitz and the Nazis' innumerable other bestialities would eventually challenge.

The deliverance of Eastern Europe into Soviet vassalage for 45 years after the Allied victory led not, of course, to a reconsideration of the benefits of Nazism (for there were not any) but to a realisation that, in the bestiality stakes, Stalin was every bit Hitler's equal. Hitler attempted to murder a whole race, and his ideological opponents; Stalin attempted to murder whole classes, and his ideological opponents. Because Hitler held power for just over 12 years, and Stalin for over 28, the latter's toll of carnage was even higher than the former's.

It was as well for Hitler, when he sought to build his international fan club after coming to power in 1933, that the next few years coincided with one of Stalin's nastiest phases: the systematic starvation of Kulaks in the Ukraine who objected to having their farms collectiv-

ised, followed by the internecine purges, the show trials, the executions of those whose loyalty (not to the cause, but to its figurehead) was deemed inadequate.

When the movers and shakers of London, Paris or Berlin compared the rather vulgar Führer with Stalin and his works, it was no contest. In 1936, when that charming Herr Ribbentrop arrived in London as ambassador, it was just 18 years since the Romanovs had been machine-gunned in the cellar in Yekaterinburg and thrown down a mineshaft, and the Russian ruling class had either been hanged from lamp-posts or had fled for their lives to the West. Hitler and his gangsters seemed the bulwark against rampant Bolshevism. It took rare Englishmen – Churchill, of course, but also Duff Cooper and Anthony Eden – to see an evil in Hitler with which there could be no compromise.



As Haslam shows, the story of the early years of the Soviet Union was something of a study in failure. The important thing from the leadership's point of view was to establish the revolution across the former possessions of the Romanovs (that was Stalin's special determination), and then to export it. It took the crushing of the Kulaks and the purges to achieve the first goal, but exporting revolution proved considerably more difficult.

There were high hopes, in the immediate aftermath of the Armistice, that the first successful transplant of the Bolshevik rootstock might be in Germany; but there were splits and factions there, and the message itself became unpopular. Germany, unlike Russia, had prospered before the war because of capitalism; and there was not, even in the grim years after 1918, a critical mass of Germans willing to overthrow that system.

The Nazis were always nationalists, rather than socialists. Their ethos, which offered the Jews as scapegoats, did not gainsay capitalism. To all but the Jews and other "enemies", capitalism promised prosperity, security and above all a recovery of the pride of the German people. The Marxist-Leninist message was cruder, more downward looking, and sought to remove the individualist spirit on which German genius and culture had always thrived. It could not match Hitler's rabble-rousing message of national self-interest.

Other attempts to export Bolshevism, as Haslam shows, failed too.



ART BOOKS

POTENTIAL SPACE

"Child's play" is shorthand for easy, but the irony is that it is endangered. The stream of social media on smartphones, the hyper-planned leisure of middle-class lives, the precarious situation of the displaced – all leave little room for what photographer Nancy Richards Farese calls "those moments when your pillow-fort becomes a kingdom". Her life-affirming book, *Potential Space: A Serious Look at Child's Play*, takes us everywhere from refugee camps to rural America to these little boys in downtown Havana. *MW Editions, £50*

The General Strike should have provided an opening in Britain in 1926, but when a cheque arrived from Moscow to help the workers' cause, Walter (later Lord) Citrine, the acting leader of the TUC, sent it back. Efforts to undermine parts of the British empire failed, too. After 1931, the Soviet Union tried to exploit the struggle between China and Japan over Manchuria, but Japan prevailed. A brief flourish of hard-Leftism in France under Leon Blum in the mid-1930s came to nothing, and France would run quickly in the other direction when it was invited to join its Russian allies in protecting Czechoslovakia against Hitler's designs in 1938. Amateurism led to the Soviet Union's disciples being demolished by Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

The Romanovs had just been machine-gunned in a cellar and thrown down a mine

Haslam makes a powerful case, and a largely irrefutable one, that Chamberlain's loathing of Soviet Russia led to him ignoring a potent alliance that could have brought Hitler to heel. But Chamberlain was determined, under the tutelage of his utterly third-rate adviser Sir Horace Wilson (whose knowledge of foreign affairs was almost non-existent), to do nothing to provoke Hitler into thinking Britain was a potential enemy of the Third Reich.

Chamberlain had, foolishly, not realised that the Russian revolution had changed everything; that it, coupled with the Versailles settlement, created the climate in which the Germans could elect a monster such as Hitler; and that monsters such as Hitler did not do business with their international peers in the manner that had prevailed before 1914. It was never going to happen that Chamberlain would put his trust in Stalin and his crew and, by the summer of 1939, when he half-heartedly made overtures about doing so, it was too late.

But then, if a united front against Hitler over Czechoslovakia had succeeded in 1938, where would that

have left Europe? Russian hegemony in the East would surely have been unstoppable, and might have gone far further west than what became known as the Iron Curtain, given what would have been the temper of a Germany humiliated for the second time in 20 years. Haslam quotes Rex Leeper, a senior British diplomat, who reflected after the launch of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 that, if the Red Army could repel the Nazi onslaught, "the relief and consequent enthusiasm felt for a Russian victory will make many people forget the excesses and brutalities of Communism". And so it proved.

In his conclusion, Haslam notes that "the lesson of the interwar years is that in political life the extreme can all too easily become mainstream". Never, he implies, has it been so vital as now "not to ignore contemporary history... History does offer warnings, if we care to recognise them for what they are." He builds his argument on a life of deep scholarship, aided by his command of the necessary languages. It may be a cliché to say this is a book every intelligent person ought to read, but it really is.