

Review: *The Totalitarian Enemy* by F. Borkenau

By George Orwell

(1940)

Although this is not one of Dr Borkenau's best books, it contains a study of the nature of totalitarianism which deserves and in fact needs to be widely read at this moment. We cannot struggle against Fascism unless we are willing to understand it, a thing which both left-wingers and right-wingers have conspicuously failed to do—basically, of course, because they dared not.

Until the signing of the Russo-German Pact, the assumption made on both sides was that the Nazi régime was in no way revolutionary. National Socialism was simply capitalism with the lid off, Hitler was a dummy with Thyssen pulling the strings—that was the official theory, proved in many a pamphlet by Mr John Strachey and tacitly accepted by *The Times*. Blimps and Left Book Club members alike swallowed it whole, both of them having, so to speak, a vested interest in ignoring the real facts. Quite naturally the propertied classes wanted to believe that Hitler would protect them against Bolshevism, and equally naturally the Socialists hated having to admit that the man who had slaughtered their comrades was a Socialist himself. Hence, on both sides, the frantic efforts to explain away the more and more striking resemblance between the German and Russian régimes. Then came the eye-opener of the Hitler-Stalin pact. Suddenly the scum of the earth and the blood-stained butcher of the workers (for so they had described one another) were marching arm in arm, their friendship "cemented in blood", as Stalin cheerily expressed it. Thereafter the Strachey-Blimp thesis became untenable. National Socialism *is* a form of Socialism, *is* emphatically revolutionary, *does* crush the property owner just as surely as it crushes the worker. The two régimes, having started from opposite ends, are rapidly evolving towards the same system—a form of oligarchical collectivism. And at the moment, as Dr Borkenau points out, it is Germany that is moving towards Russia, rather than the other way about. It is therefore nonsense to talk about Germany "going Bolshevik" if Hitler falls. Germany is going Bolshevik *because* of Hitler and not in spite of him.

The question that really arises is not so much how the Nazis could start out to save the world from Bolshevism and end by becoming Bolshevik, as how they could do it without losing either their power or their self-confidence. Dr Borkenau points to two reasons, one economic, the other psychological. From the first the aim of the Nazis was to turn Germany into a war-machine, and to subordinate everything else to that purpose. But a country, and especially a poor country, which is waging

or preparing for "total" war must be in some sense socialistic. When the State has taken complete control of industry, then the so-called capitalist is reduced to the status of a manager, and when consumption goods are so scarce and so strictly rationed that you cannot spend a big income even if you earn one, then the essential structure of Socialism already exists, plus the comfortless equality of war-Communism. Simply in the interest of efficiency the Nazis found themselves expropriating, nationalizing, destroying the very people they had set out to save. It did not bother them, because their aim was simply power and not any particular form of society. They would just as soon be Reds as Whites, provided that it left them on top. If the first step is to smash the Socialists to the tune of anti-Marxist slogans— well and good, smash the Socialists. If the next step is to smash the capitalists to the tune of Marxist slogans— well and good, smash the capitalists. It is all-in wrestling, and the only rule is to win. Russia since 1928 shows distinctly similar reversals of policy, always tending to keep the ruling clique in power. As for the hate-campaigns in which totalitarian régimes ceaselessly indulge, they are real enough while they last, but are simply dictated by the needs of the moment. Jews, Poles, Trotskyists, English, French, Czechs, Democrats, Fascists, Marxists— almost anyone can figure as Public Enemy No. 1. Hatred can be turned in any direction at a moment's notice, like a plumber's blow-flame.

On the strategic aspects of the war Dr Borkenau is less satisfactory. He is too optimistic about the probable attitude of Italy, about the probable military effects of the Russo-German Pact, about the solidarity of the home front and, above all, about the power of the present Government to win the war and win the peace. Basically, as he sees and points out, what we have got to do is to put our own house in order— to oppose a humaner, freer form of collectivism to the purge-and-censorship variety. We could do it rapidly, almost easily, but it needs the eye of faith to see the present Government doing it.

I hope that Dr Borkenau will write a longer and better book on approximately the same subject. The present one, in spite of some brilliant passages, seems to have been hastily written and has faults of arrangement. Nevertheless Dr Borkenau is one of the most valuable gifts that Hitler has made to England. In a period when nearly all books on current politics have been compounded of lies, or folly, or both, his has been one of the few sane voices heard in the land, and long may it continue.

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