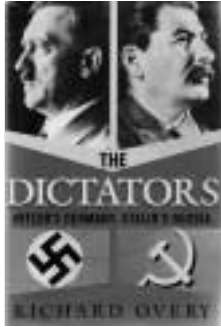

Book Reviews

The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia

by Richard Overy

W. W. Norton • 2004 • 849 pages • \$35.00

Reviewed by Richard M. Ebeling



Throughout the 1930s the Nazi and Soviet regimes did all in their power to insist that they were ideological enemies, diametrically opposed to each other in every conceivable way. There were critics of totalitarianism who emphasized the similarities

in the two systems, but theirs was a minority view among many intellectuals, especially on the political left, during the decades of the Cold War and after.

When the masterful and detailed study of twentieth-century communist regimes, *The Black Book of Communism*, was first published in France in the 1990s, for instance, one French leftist tried to rationalize the human cost of socialist tyranny by arguing: “Agreed, both Nazis and communists killed. But while the Nazis killed from hatred of humanity, the communists killed from love.”

Nazis, it seems, had bad intentions and used bad methods. Communists, on the other hand, had good intentions—they loved their fellow man and wanted to create a utopia for him—they just made an unfortunate error in selecting less-than-desirable means. Oh, well, back to the drawing board!

Richard Overy's recent work, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*, is the most detailed and methodical study, so far, of what the two totalitarian regimes shared in common and in what ways they differed. Indeed, there are few aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union that do not receive meticulous analysis from the author.

It is in the concluding chapter of the book that one discovers what Overy considers the most fundamental premises of the two regimes. Both the Nazis and the communists, he argues, were guided by the spirit of sci-

entism: the misplaced application of the methods of the natural sciences to the arena of human life. Marxian socialists were convinced that they could deduce the “laws” of historical development that necessitated the inevitable triumph of “the workers” over their capitalist exploiters. In addition, they believed that once the revolution had been orchestrated, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” had the ability to remake man and transform society into a collectivist paradise.

The Nazis also believed in the power of science, but in their case it was a “racial science” that defined different human groups and their hierarchical relationships to each other. Through application of eugenics, a purified “master race” could be socially engineered, with “the Germans” being the superior breed meant to rule the world.

Communism and Nazism, therefore, were variations on the same collectivist theme, in which the individual and his identity as a person were determined by either his “class” or “race.” Both were paranoid in their outlook on life. Nazis saw racial threats everywhere, in the form of inferior groups that could defile Germany's blood purity. Communists saw class enemies surrounding and threatening the existence of the Soviet workers' state. Vigilance at the borders and secret-police terror internally were essential for the regimes to preserve either the master race or the proletarian paradise.

Hitler and Stalin were convinced of their unique and irreplaceable roles in making history. Hitler believed that just as there is a master race among humanity, so there is a master leader within the master race, who through intuition, insight, and will power knows what is needed to assure the rightful place and destiny of the German people. Fate had called him to that task. Following in Lenin's footsteps, Stalin believed that socialist victory was impossible without professional revolutionaries who served as the vanguard of the proletariat. Among the vanguard there was the necessity for one determined leader to head the movement, with “history” having assigned Stalin this momentous duty.

For Hitler and Stalin, their ruthlessness and disregard of human life were essential to fulfill their role as leaders of the Nazi and communist causes. What was,


perhaps, most dangerous in both men was that they believed in what they were doing to bring their versions of utopia into existence. Hitler and Stalin were “true believers.”

The power of “scientific” social engineering was present in everything that they commanded for the reconstruction of German and Soviet society. Stalin introduced five-year central plans in 1929; Hitler imposed four-year central plans in 1936. Nothing was outside the orbit of control and command, from the most mundane consumer goods to the redesigning of whole cities and the wider countryside. Art, literature, music, sports, and leisure were all used to mold the tens of millions of subjects under their power into the desired shape for a beautiful tomorrow.

As Overy carefully recounts, there was little that was random in the Nazi and Soviet use of terror and imprisonment. Those, too, were planned with a purpose in mind. They targeted the designated “enemies of the people” to isolate and destroy all who opposed “the brave new world” in the making. But those arrested and sent off to concentration camps in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were also viewed as forced labor for building the Nazi and Soviet societies. The victims were all part of the same central plan, whether for work or extermination.

Overy also highlights the degree of popularity that both the Nazis and communists achieved in German and Soviet society. The secret police were tiny fractions of those populations. With little prodding people willingly spied and informed on their friends, relatives, and neighbors. Both regimes promised and seemed to deliver a new ideal of “equality” in which devotion and hard work in the service of “the cause” assured that even the lowly could find status, position, and reward, now that the old class distinctions were swept away. The state monopoly over news and information succeeded in persuading millions of the truth and justice of the regimes under which they lived. The “masses” in both countries passively or actively worked for the system, with little resistance or opposition.

The Nazi and Soviet regimes have passed away, their cruelties fading in memory. Yet one wonders—if such ideologies could once before mesmerize so many, could they not do so again? Under the right circum-

stance, could not the appeal of utopia drag humanity once more into a vortex of destruction? 

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The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America

by Stephen Cox

Transaction Publishers • 2004 • 409 pages • \$39.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Jude Blanchette



It is a curious footnote in the history of the libertarian movement that three of its leading inspirations voted for Franklin Roosevelt for president. The irreverent H. L. Mencken voted as much against Hoover as he did for FDR. Ayn Rand, like many, bought into Roosevelt’s rhetoric of fiscal discipline. But Isabel Paterson knew better, or at least she should have.

Born in 1886 on an island in the middle of Lake Huron, the frontier of untamed Canada left an indelible mark on Paterson. After working for a series of newspapers on the American west coast, she migrated east—to New York City—where she eventually found her way to the *Herald-Tribune* and ultimately to nationwide fame. While ostensibly a book-review column, her weekly “Turns With a Bookworm” provided a regular forum for her views on just about everything, from a libertarian perspective. Signed I.M.P., “Turns” became one of the most influential literary columns in America.

Paterson’s name survives today, however, primarily because of *The God of the Machine*, her magnum opus written in 1943. For the aspiring libertarian, it has almost become required reading. Written during the dark epoch of World War II, it, along with Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* and Rose Wilder Lane’s *The Discovery of Freedom: Man’s Struggle Against Authority*, was one of the three books published that year which helped ignite the modern libertarian movement. The book is a magisterial attempt to chart the course of human energy, both free and unfree. In Paterson’s writing, we see great passion, wit, and verve. To her, Plato’s *Republic* was a “paper scheme,” while “Most of

the harm in the world is done by good people, and not by accident, lapse, or omission.” Her belief in human freedom was as strong as her distaste for socialism, interventionism, and the welfare state, and it is no wonder she converted so many to the cause of liberty.

Yet there has been comparatively little written on Paterson. Stephen Cox’s new biography corrects this intellectual sin of omission.

Charting the course of her life from the wilds of Canada to the hubris of intellectual cocktail parties in New York City, Cox weaves an intricate picture of this iconoclast’s life. For those who came to Paterson through *The God of the Machine*, Cox’s book reminds us that she was firmly established as an important libertarian intellectual even before its publication. Her columns covered war, peace, trade, and socialism from the stance of a libertarian individualist fighting the tide of collectivism.

Cox, a professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego, understands that *what* Paterson wrote was equally as important as *when* she wrote it. If alive and writing today, Isabel Paterson would be an important and courageous thinker. She was all the more so given that she was virtually alone in her politics—doubly so, considering her gender—during the New Deal and world war. She proudly proclaimed her belief in “the Rights of Man, personal liberty and private property” when the literary world was infatuated with the “new man” of the Soviet Union. This, along with her strong position against entry into the war and her dislike of militant anticommunism, won her enemies on all sides. Like Mencken, she traveled in a world hostile to her ideas, and her unyielding belief in liberty and limited government marginalized her in many people’s eyes.

Much of the material for the book was drawn from Paterson’s personal correspondence, and that consequently gives it a strongly partisan feel—with Cox firmly ensconced in Paterson’s corner. Some of Cox’s conclusions seem a bit strained. For example, he asserts that Paterson was *the* guiding force behind Rand’s political development. He writes, “If there was a crucial, external influence on Rand’s political development, Paterson was that influence.” His evidence to support this statement is weak—an inscription in Paterson’s copy of *The Fountainhead* that reads, “You have been

the one encounter in my life that can never be repeated.” This is certainly a touching sentiment, but it’s hardly enough evidence to support the contention.

That small point aside, *The Woman and the Dynamo* is a valuable addition to the history of the libertarian movement. While it is not the final word on Paterson, it should serve as a springboard for further research into a woman and her writings, which are still highly relevant half a century later.



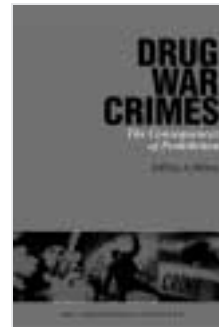
Jude Blanchette (jblanchette@fee.org), the Henry Hazlitt Adjunct Scholar at FEE, is writing a biography of Hazlitt.

Drug War Crimes: The Consequences of Prohibition

by Jeffrey A. Miron

Independent Institute • 2004 • 101 pages • \$15.95 paperback

Reviewed by George C. Leef



In perhaps no other public-policy question is the United States more hopelessly in the grip of a conventional wisdom that is utterly and egregiously wrong than drugs. Most Americans, no matter their political affiliation, are adamant supporters of the “war on drugs.” Try suggesting that the war might be stupendous folly and you’ll most likely run into vehement opposition replete with ad hominem attacks.

It is hard to get people to examine their ideas—“prejudices” might be a better word—about drugs, but in *Drug War Crimes*, Boston University economics professor Jeffrey Miron has put into the public discourse an attack on the conventional wisdom that is impossible for any serious-minded person to brush off. Written with a professional economist’s careful attention to costs and benefits, both seen and unseen, the book relentlessly challenges all the beliefs that support the criminalization of drugs.

Miron begins by toting up some of the principal costs of our anti-drug crusade. Government spends more than \$33 billion annually on it. Arrests for drug-related infractions exceed 1.5 million per year. The United States now has well in excess of 300,000 people behind bars for drug violations. If they’re even aware of

the cost, drug-war supporters contend that we would experience a disastrous rise in drug use—which is assumed to be a life-ruining event—and therefore worth it. Prohibitionists assert that “drug use causes crime, diminishes health and productivity, encourages driving and industrial accidents, exacerbates poverty, supports terrorism and contributes generally to societal decay,” Miron writes. Those beliefs are carefully reinforced by spokesmen for the drug war. Our author takes on all those claims and shows them to be erroneous.

Consider, for example, the widely held idea that drug use causes crime. Statistics show that in 35 cities monitored by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2000, at least 50 percent of adult men arrested for crimes tested positive for drugs. That’s enough to frighten the typical citizen into supporting the drug war. After all, who wants more crime? But Miron points out that those statistics don’t show that drug usage *causes* criminal behavior or that the arrestees were under the influence of drugs at the time of the crime. “The methodology used in these analyses would also demonstrate that consumption of fast food or wearing blue jeans causes criminal behavior,” Miron observes with appropriate sarcasm.

Another mistaken belief that leads to support for the drug war is that any drug use almost inevitably leads to addiction and an increasingly dissolute life. That notion causes people to view drug use as so dangerous as to warrant the extreme measures the government employs in its attempt to prevent anyone from using any illegal drug in any amount. Miron shows that belief to be unfounded. Drug use may be addictive, but is not necessarily so and many drug users lead perfectly normal lives. True, some users suffer adverse health consequences, but, the author observes, “A critical problem with standard depictions of the health consequences of drug use is reliance on data sources that are systematically biased toward those who suffer the worst consequences.”

For all our costly enforcement efforts, Miron shows that drug prohibition has little impact on the incidence of drug use, mainly because drug producers and sellers can evade law enforcement so easily. Yet the costs extend beyond the obvious ones already mentioned. One of them is increased racial tension because drug enforcement is so often targeted at minority areas.

Another is a great increase in violence. Miron argues that without drug prohibition, homicide rates in the United States would fall by half. A third is the non-availability of drugs, particularly marijuana, for medical reasons, thus causing much avoidable pain and suffering. By the time our author is done with his analysis of costs and benefits, it is clear that the war on drugs is an exceedingly foolish policy.

Miron advocates legalization rather than any of the halfway alternatives sometimes advanced. He concludes by saying, “American tradition should make legalization—i.e., liberty—the preferred policy, barring compelling evidence prohibition generates benefits in excess of its costs. As I have demonstrated here, a serious weighing of the evidence shows instead that prohibition has enormous costs with, at best, modest and speculative benefits. Liberty and utility thus both recommend that prohibition end now: the goals of prohibition are questionable, the methods are unsound, and the results are deadly.”



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The Morality of Everyday Life: Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition

by Thomas Fleming

University of Missouri Press • 2004 • 270 pages • \$44.95

Reviewed by Brian Doherty



In his new book, *The Morality of Everyday Life: Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition*, Thomas Fleming, longtime editor of the fine paleo-conservative journal *Chronicles* (to which I have contributed in the past), essays a multipronged assault on the style of moral reasoning that has, in his telling, dominated the Western world from the Enlightenment on—to our detriment.

“The unexamined life may well be worth living,” he writes, “so long as it is lived in accordance with traditions that are consistent with human nature and encourage the fulfillment of human needs. But it is precisely those traditions that have been destroyed by

rationalist ethics. When a tradition of thought leads to moral dissolution, social chaos, and music and poetry that speak only to professionals, it may be time to wonder how people lived and thrived before they were called upon to be citizens of the world, dedicated to absolute standards of right and wrong.”

The rot in modern moral thinking, Fleming writes, spreads from its arid universality, its refusal to recognize the moral significance of the specific roles and circumstances of a human life as it is most richly lived: as child, parent, spouse, neighbor, laborer, countryman.

While Fleming is decidedly not a libertarian, his book could be read as a defense of libertarianism as a political philosophy (though not an all-encompassing moral one).

Fleming laments, properly, that modern states try to impose universal moral demands that violate the proper boundedness and rootedness of human moral obligation. For example, both foreign aid and affirmative action enforce care for others over one’s own family. We cannot right all the wrongs and fill all the lacks of the world; but if everyone acted on the ancient moral obligation to care for themselves and immediate family, and then their local community, we could in effect abolish those wrongs and lacks.


Alas, Fleming thinks libertarians (with their vision of universal human rights to be free from violence and coercion, and universal obligations to refrain from violence and coercion) are just one more platoon in the modern philosophical army wrecking the sustaining traditions of the ancients. Still, the libertarian political vision fits most snugly with Fleming’s vision of proper human morality.

In a world of particularity and variety on the family and tribal level, we need an overarching political theory that allows different moral visions to live together in peace. Fleming notes, “Where Descartes or Locke looked at the everyday world and saw nothing but a few universal rules reducible to a mathematical formula, Aristotle and the writers of the Old Testament discerned an intricate network of peculiar obligations arising from specific circumstances and experiences.” The libertarian political ethic will not actively interfere with this network and its obligations.

When you openly celebrate a jumbled, particularistic moral philosophy not based in rationality, but in tradition, you’ll end up inconsistent. Fleming is against foreign aid, condemned as a way for the state to benefit others at the expense of yourself and your family. But he is for tariffs that benefit other producers at the expense of your and your family’s consumption.

Fleming presumes the self-evident value of small, localized cultural traditions over those of the global, commercial modern West. While one might share this as an aesthetic value, he doesn’t do much to convince the skeptical that this is a matter of moral philosophy. But the sort of rationalism that would involve “convincing” has no role in Fleming’s moral vision. He ultimately presents an intellectual defense of nonintellectual localized preference and prejudice, a love of tribalism as an intellectual construct while showing mostly contempt for his own “tribe,” contemporary fellow Americans.

Ultimately, the localism and tribalism that Fleming celebrates, the families and small communities that he insists are the proper grounds for human well-being, have their best chance of surviving and thriving in a libertarian polity—if the individuals that are part of the localities and tribes and families and communities want them to. Certainly, the “globalism” that a universal free market allows can corrode old ways—but not by force. As Fleming skillfully points out, it’s the contemporary state that wars against local values and uniqueness, on many fronts.

Fleming’s moral vision needs libertarianism. Once you grant that the state has the right or the obligation to interfere with others for the sake of some greater good, all smaller communities and interests are in danger of being crushed. Libertarian political philosophy may be universal and rational, but only it allows room for the widest play of local and individual variance and seemingly irrational attachments. The only catch is—and this should be morally bearable, even for those skeptical of universal, rational moral philosophy—they have to be freely adhered to, personally chosen. 

Brian Doherty (bdoherly@reason.com) is a senior editor at Reason magazine and author of *This Is Burning Man* (Little, Brown).