

Rebecca West And the God That Failed

The recent rediscovery of Rebecca West's masterful study of Yugoslavia, Black Lamb and Grey Falcon (1941), has brought deserved recognition to one of the more remarkable minds of this century. As her biographer here shows, West's early stand against communism made her an isolated voice of conscience on the British Left.

by Carl Rollyson

In *The God That Failed*, published in 1950, Arthur Koestler and five other writers told how they came to join or fall within the orbit of the Communist Party. All had once experienced a sense of outrage at injustice and a need to identify with a cause and an ideology that they believed represented the wave of the future, a god to whom they could tender their absolute devotion.

At this late date—after many memoirs like those in *The God That Failed*—there is little need to rehearse why these and other writers became disillusioned with communism. We have a literature of debates about John Dos Passos's shift from left to right, the testimony of those who recanted their communism before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and more recently, Susan Sontag's apostasy in 1982, accompanied by her coinage of the expression that communism is fascism with a human face. If Francis Fukuyama's announcement of the end of history means anything, it is that the god not only failed but died. The future that communism supposedly foreshadowed, and the interpretation of history it offered, have lost all credibility, despite revenant rumblings in some of

the old communist haunts.

In memoirs such as *The God That Failed*, we have been schooled to believe in a paradigm—call it the Arthur Koestler paradigm—of the intellectual true believer whose disenchantment with the communist utopia leads to an apocalyptic vision of darkness at noon. The trouble with the paradigm is that it concedes that at some point, however briefly, communism was a seductive ideal. We expect the 20th-century intellectual, except for the staunchly conservative thinker, to be enticed—even corrupted—before he or she recovers.

But what of Rebecca West? She occupies a position that is highly unusual, if not unique. She had the honor, and also the misfortune, to declare communism a dud as early as 1918—even before Lenin had consolidated his power. She was only 25 years old, the author of *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), a classic of World War I fiction, and of *Henry James* (1916), an incisive and witty study that helped to place that author in the canon. George Bernard Shaw observed that his British colleague handled a “pen as brilliantly as ever I could and much more savagely.” As early as 1912, she had been taken under the wing of H. G.

Wells, Ford Madox Ford, and the Fabian socialists. A militant feminist, she had rocked the Edwardian world with her savage and witty essays in the *Freewoman*, a radical weekly of which Wells quipped that it existed “chiefly to mention everything a young lady should never dream of mentioning.” Indeed, the young author’s pseudonym, taken from the heroine in Ibsen’s play, *Rosmersholm*, embodied the cause of political protest and seemed a desirable alternative to Cicily Fairfield, her real—and impossibly genteel—name.

If West displayed a precocious independence of mind, it was largely because

once said, when she did not have a “rough idea of what is meant by capitalism, socialism, individualism, anarchism, liberalism, and conservatism.” Her Scottish mother, Isabella, an accomplished pianist with an acerbic wit, often took her to public lectures, and both of her two older sisters became involved in the Fabian movement.

West learned very early how to take the measure of people and their ideas. Her conservative father, an Anglo-Irish journalist named Charles Fairfield, brought home intellectuals, artists, and politicians, including several Russians. She saw then that Marxism was just another “rainbow,” as she said later. “*Das Kapital* is a dreary book, except for that chapter of wild praise for the achievements of the bourgeoisie.” Her father had been tutored by the Reolus brothers, anarchists who had been thrown out of France. Among her family’s friends were many Russian refugees and revolutionaries who came to argue with Charles Fairfield and to be shrewdly observed by his precocious daughter. She knew at eight what socialists such as the Webbs never figured out: that it would not do to patronize the Bolsheviks. She knew they were much more cultivated, more on the spot, and far more dangerous and sophisticated than the Webbs could see. That realization “rather cut me off from the left-wing movement of my time,” West dryly remarked.

But West’s views did not turn her into a young fogy of the Right.

She flayed the conservative opposition throughout the second and third decades of the century, irreverently suggesting, for example, that Prime Minister Herbert Asquith would make an excellent butler. Her first published article trumpeted her defiance of the status quo in blunt language rarely employed by male writers, let alone by a woman not quite 19 years of age: “There are two kinds of imperialists—



Rebecca West in 1921

the world of ideas was a part of her life from her earliest years. She was born in London in 1892 but educated at George Watson’s School in Edinburgh. At 16, a bout of tuberculosis ended her schooling, yet she never really regretted her lack of a university degree, possibly because she received a first-rate education at home. She could never remember a time, she

imperialists and bloody imperialists.”

Yet never for a moment did West consider the 1917 revolution in Russia the harbinger of hope. To this day, significant elements of the Left have never forgiven her for being correct. Her position cost her friends and earned her enmity. It was damned indecent of her not to have had at least some initial enthusiasm for the great experiment.

But this is to get ahead of her story, one that is not widely known or understood. The common impression of her is that after starting out well as a flaming feminist and socialist—and in 1914 bearing a son, Anthony West, out of wedlock with H. G. Wells—West let down her side: she turned conservative, married a rich man in 1930, retired to a country estate, and by the time of her death in 1983 was a supporter of Margaret Thatcher. In other words, West is consigned to the left-to-right slot.

In fact, Rebecca West never deserted the Left; it was the Left that repudiated her. In late 1917, as reports filtered into England about the Bolshevik seizure of power, West wrote disdainfully of the revolutionary movement’s “orgiastic loquacity.” A year earlier, she had denounced the trade unions for seeing things only in terms of the class struggle and ignoring the German invasion of Belgium and the Kaiser’s threat to England. She believed in national purposes and traditions—not in supranational ideologies that led, as she later argued in *The Meaning of Treason* (1948), to the betrayal of rational, democratic values.

One of her finest moments of intellectual integrity came in 1924, when the anarchist Emma Goldman visited England. West admired Goldman’s campaigns in the United States for freedom of speech, and now Goldman sought to awaken the British Left to Soviet atrocities. West lined up speaking engagements for her, and made sure that she met Bertrand Russell,

H. G. Wells, and many prominent socialists. The Left at first feted Goldman but then quarantined her when she made it clear that the Soviet system could not be ameliorated. It was not just a matter of protesting this or that failing of communism, it was time to junk it, Goldman argued. But that is what the Conservative Party recommended! gasped the Left.

West responded with a preface to Goldman’s *My Disillusionment with Russia* (1923), observing that to “reject a conclusion simply because it is held by the Conservative Party is to be snobbish as the suburban mistress who gives up wearing a hat or dress because her servant has one like it.” To pretend that the Soviet Union was a “conscientious experiment in communism” was sentimental rubbish, West declared, and socialists who shut their eyes to its evils degraded the socialist movement, which would rot from within, she predicted, if it did not oppose a government that deprived its citizens of the “elementary rights of free speech and assembly.” Neither Goldman nor West advocated intervention in Soviet affairs: “We must let each people seek God in its own way,” West proposed. Her concern was that in propping up the Soviet Union as a positive model, socialists would lose their credibility, their ability to reckon with “real facts,” and become “tedious liars about life.”

Isn’t this precisely what happened? Didn’t the Left discredit itself by willfully ignoring, or rationalizing, or denying Soviet oppression? It angered West that the British, who had developed their own tradition of socialism, should enslave themselves to the Soviet model.

West lacked the tactical and temperamental sense to acquire acolytes or to attach herself to movements such as Bloomsbury, and she was not afraid to turn her corrosive and uncompromising wit on friends as well as enemies. At *Time and Tide*, a British weekly to which West contributed for more than three decades, a colleague observed (anonymously): “It is

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probable that if there is ever an English Revolution there will come a point when the Reds and Whites will sink their differences for 10 minutes while they guillotine Miss West for making remarks that both sides have found intolerably unhelpful.” Her editor at the *Evening Standard* remarked that people saw her as a “caustic, bitter, twisted woman with a tongue like broken glass, fierce, mocking, inhuman.”

Although West wanted a home on the Left, she was never willing to play by the house rules. She thought Stalinism a greater threat than McCarthyism, and when she said so in 1953, her series of articles in *U.S. News & World Report* was subjected to a firestorm of criticism from liberals. If West did not fiercely attack Joseph McCarthy, she was regarded as pro-McCarthy and conservative. But to the hysterical claims about the danger of McCarthyism (she conceded McCarthy did abuse the system), she replied that focusing on him merely diverted attention from the menace of the communist conspiracy. He was not murdering people; the communists were. And in Europe the myth of McCarthyism was used as an anti-American weapon to suggest that America now had a dictator, the puffed-up senator from Wisconsin.

Not surprisingly, West’s main criticism of McCarthy was ignored. She argued that the real danger in McCarthy was that his reckless attack on the federal bureaucracy weakened faith in government. She did not see how modern life could be governed without bureaucracies, and while she supported their reform, she distrusted politicians who seemed to run against government itself.

West wrote an admiring review of Whittaker Chambers’ *Witness* (1952), but unlike him she could not embrace the conservative cause. (Chambers, for his part, came up with perhaps the most trenchant description of her temperament: “Rebecca West is a Socialist by habit of mind, and a conservative by cell structure.”) She shied away from William F. Buckley, Jr.’s invitations to write for *National Review*,

although she was Buckley’s guest and often his sympathetic reader. Early on, she was one of Winston Churchill’s fiercest opponents, finding him to be a politician without principle, saying that his career proved that there were some souls for whom the devil did not care to pay a price. Yet she gloried in his prosecution of the war, saying he had brought back the age of the Elizabethans. Like the majority of British voters at the end of the war, she voted to remove him from office, believing he had served his usefulness. Yet even as she helped vote in a Labor government, she was highly critical of it in her private letters and conversations, just as she criticized big-government corruption in the New Deal but praised Roosevelt’s efforts to lead the nation.

What appealed to West was patriotism—not mindless loyalty, but a critical devotion to the national ideal. She once wrote that every nation should be chauvinistic in the sense that it should believe it has something unique to contribute to the world—but, she added, thank God the whole world was not England or, perish the thought, the Soviet Union! Not enough readers have been exposed to the biting humor and the wisdom of such remarks—too many of which are still buried in periodicals, having never appeared between hard covers.

West’s early and persistent criticism of communism cost her dearly. The South African novelist Doris Lessing, responding to my biography of West (published in the United Kingdom in the fall of 1995), wrote to me that she thought West had been

consistently and bravely critical of communism, at a time when this meant she was subject to the usual denigration and slanders. I remember it all too well. It wasn’t just a question of “the comrades” but a climate of opinion which extended far beyond the extreme left. Orwell was a target and so was Rebecca W. It must have been hard to stand up to it, particularly as she was sensitive and hated being considered negligible, yet she did, standing by her guns. And of course she was right, and her critics so very wrong.

That climate has not entirely changed. When I began work on my biography of West in 1990, I was puzzled at the paucity of good work on her. Other than Victoria Glendinning's excellent short biography,* there are reviews, a few introductory studies, a handful of perceptive articles, but no in-depth study of this major 20th-century writer. In academic circles, it has been quite all right to approve West's early socialist articles, collected under the title *The Young Rebecca* (1982), but her mature work has been ignored. There are many reasons for this neglect, and one of them surely is her politics.

West's hostile readers might want to dismiss her as a career anticommunist who at best has served her purpose and is only of historical interest. But in addition to her considerable legacy as a novelist, literary critic, and biographer, there is a political body of thought that deserves book-length treatment. Her masterwork, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), is a monumental study of Yugoslavia as well as her definitive pronouncement on feminism, marriage, the history of Europe, and that of Western civilization. What is happening in the former Yugoslavia would not have surprised her, for she realized that although Tito had suppressed national and ethnic rivalries, he had not addressed them. Indeed, communism, with its bogus internationalism, attempted to deny people their heritage—not just the national political rights of Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, but those of Macedonians, Albanians, Hungarians, Italians, and Slovenes.

For Rebecca West, history could not be understood in terms of ideology, of ideas that could be superimposed on tradition. Instead, she allied herself with writers such as Burke and Tocqueville, precisely those thinkers whose worth has

risen as Marxism has bankrupted itself. Both Burke and Tocqueville believed in the character of a people, that the French major in being French just as the Americans major in being American. There is no political god, only political legacies that people can extend and improve upon.

West emphasized the need for improvements in the legacies; this is why she regarded herself more as a liberal than as a conservative. But she shared common ground with conservatives in that she treasured conservation and was willing to support a government that was 30 percent right as opposed to one that was 15 percent so. (I cite her figures.) In other words, she could live with the terribly flawed aspects of the positions she supported, recognizing the truth, however small, in other positions, and not pretending she had found her god.

There remains a puzzle. How did West get it right so much sooner than others? Why did she never express even sympathy for the Soviets? For one thing, she did not confuse means and ends. She was not willing to overlook crimes in the Soviet regime because its ends (so people thought) were good. If the means were evil, the ends would be evil. To take away human rights and civil liberties was to take them away—they would not return on a better day.

West also believed in her own intellect and her assessment of human character. She could not brush off Emma Goldman the way Susan Sontag brushed off Czeslaw Milosz's *Captive Mind*: "When it came out in 1953, I bought the book—a passionate account of the dishonesty and coerciveness of communism, which troubled me but which I also regarded as an instrument of Cold War propaganda, giving aid and comfort to McCarthyism." As Rebecca West would say, this is the logic of the status-conscious suburban housewife.

But what gave West the wherewithal and courage to stand by herself? Here biography helps. Her father, though a brilliant archconservative, taught his

*Glendinning's *Rebecca West: A Life*, published in 1987 by Knopf, was supposed to be followed by a fuller biography, to be written (at West's request) by Stanley Olson. But Olson died before he had done much research or writing, and I decided to write the second biography after West's Yale University archive was opened in 1989.

child to have faith in her own arguments and insight. And in fact, she came to reject many of his own pet ideas, especially his antifeminism. Yet what she absorbed and retained from Charles Fairfield was an unflinching intellectual rectitude. He was a man who was not afraid to go it alone, as her fictional portrait of him in *The Fountain Overflows* (1956) shows.

But Fairfield left his daughter a darker legacy, one that taught her to yearn for and yet to beware of the god that failed. He had been a brilliant man but an aloof father, with an Anglo-Irish aristocratic bearing, a contempt for his wife's lowly Scottish relations, an insatiable appetite for other women, and a penchant for gambling away the rent money. West was only eight years old when he abandoned the family, going off to Africa in search of his fortune. He returned to die in Liverpool, virtually a pauper, when West was 13. She never saw him again after he left home. Though she never ceased longing for his return, she never stopped blaming him for the hardship his desertion had caused her, her mother, and her two older sisters, as her writing attests. Godlike male figures abound in West's fiction, where they take the form of characters such as the adulterous Edward Rowan, an Anglo-Irish politician who fails Laura Rowan and her mother in *The Birds Fall Down* (1966).

The mad King Lear, arbitrary but grand, demanding that his daughters love him even as he destroys the possibility that their love can be freely granted him, haunted West's imagination. His story was both a familial and a political metaphor—as she makes clear in her great study of politics and literature, *The Court and the Castle* (1957), a book the distinguished critic John Wain ranked beside T. S. Eliot's finest prose. West hated Cordelia for not rebelling against her father as West had rebelled against Charles Fairfield. Yet she could no more forsake

the idea of authority, traditionally invested in the male, than could Cordelia. Like Shakespeare, West was drawn to characters who had treason in the blood.

If *The Meaning of Treason* is West's most profound study of the god that failed, it is because it fuses her own biography with the main story of her book, an account of the traitor, William Joyce (1906–46), popularly known as Lord Haw-Haw. Joyce grew up in a home torn by religious differences (he had a Protestant father and a Catholic



William Joyce—the infamous Lord Haw-Haw—whose treason inspired some of West's best writing

mother) but devoted to the British Empire. William's father, Michael, had made himself most unpopular in his native Ireland because of his pro-Unionist politics, and William adopted his father's allegiance—to the point of enlisting in the British army before he was of age. There was something extraordinarily pure and touching about William's patriotism. During his brief army stint, his fellow recruits made sport of his earnestness by whistling "God

Save the Queen,” knowing that he would jump out of bed and stand to attention.

Yet William knew there was something in his family history that might cause others to doubt his allegiance to the British Empire. He had been born in Brooklyn, New York, and feared that the British authorities would consider him an American citizen, even though his father had brought the family back to Ireland (and destroyed evidence of his own U.S. citizenship) when William was still a boy. Ironically, William’s treason trial would hinge on the issue of his citizenship: did England have the right to try him once his American citizenship was established?

However complicated its sources and twisted its expression, Joyce’s devotion to Britain was passionate. And even though it led him to embrace fascism and street brawling, such patriotism was something with which West could identify. Like Joyce, moreover, she too was the product of mixed parentage, was precocious, and possessed a sharp tongue that often got her into fights.

West’s earliest memories of her father’s conservatism, of reading writers such as Kipling, of revering the Royal Family (memories that came flooding back to her when she met the queen during the war), equipped her to amplify Joyce’s biography. She presented him as a sincere soul, an excellent tutor of young children, who perverted his own desire for distinction into an identification with totalitarianism, when England did not recognize his abilities, when its own fascist leader, Oswald Mosley, failed to treat his deputy, William, with the respect that he had worked so hard to earn. In West’s telling, Joyce turned on England as if on a lover who had spurned him, leaving the country at the beginning of the war to serve Hitler as a means of seeking a way to return triumphantly to London.

Exactly how William Joyce transformed himself from British patriot to traitor, from a conservative to a fascist, can never be

fully explained. Yet West provided an entirely plausible account. With psychological brilliance, she extrapolated a narrative that equates the intensity of Joyce’s desire to be accepted by the British with the intensity of his fascism, a powerful new ideology that would restore an effete England to Joyce’s idealized and heroic version of it. Indeed, Joyce is depicted as Britain’s insidious alter ego, invading British homes with an intimate, cocksure radio voice.

For West, family life determines the individual, and in her evocation of Joyce’s background she remarks that he was being “strangled by the sheer tortuousness of his family destiny.” Like West, Joyce was the “apple of his family’s eye,” and, like her, he reacted to his family’s confidence in his exceptional abilities with an extraordinary rebelliousness, as if his own genius were paradoxically inhibited by the family’s claim on him. Joyce invested fascism with an international character, West argues, so that fascism sanctioned his betrayal of family and country in a way that other British fascists, such as Mosley, could not abide.

Those passages in which Joyce’s character melds with West’s become apparent when she shifts to suppositions. She has him embarking for Germany: “One day his little feet twinkled up the area of his basement flat near Earl’s Court. His eyes must have been dancing.” Such passages are bereft of evidence but full of her utter identification with her subject, her ability to show what joy it must have been to Joyce to turn traitor.

Rebecca calls William Joyce “the revolutionary,” a term she uses to define one who both hates order and loves it, who will destroy so that he might create a superior order. It is here that West took her stand in the postwar world against revolution, reaffirming what she had said 20 years earlier about the Russian Revolution—that it was bound to restore the tyranny of tsardom. One cannot murder society in order to save it. The transformation of Joyce into the quintessential Rebecca West character is achieved in a single

sentence: “He was not going to be king.” Every dynamic character in her fiction and nonfiction sooner or later is measured in terms of royalty. Joyce’s kingly attributes suggest to West that he is a symbol of humanity, that he has it in him to want simultaneously to live and to die. Like one of Shakespeare’s heroes, he achieves tragedy in his struggle. His example marks an “end to mediocrity.”

It is an empathetic portrait, yet West affirms the court’s decision that William Joyce must hang. All of her later writing is an effort to reconcile herself to authority and to study how badly things go wrong when those such as Joyce will not submit to be governed. Even though he was not a British subject, she thought it right that he should be tried as a traitor. She carefully threaded her way through the legal arguments, affirming the rightness of the principle that allegiance draws protection and protection draws allegiance. William Joyce, in other words, conducted himself as a British subject, traveled abroad on a British passport, had a claim to be protected by British laws and the British government—and by the same token was liable to be tried by them.

The very lengths to which West goes to justify this conclusion, however, sug-

gest that it was a near thing in her own mind, that her own sympathies and the court’s judgment could have gone the other way. A part of her clearly believed that the individual has a right to throw off allegiance, a matter the lawyers debated for days during Joyce’s trial. West concedes at the end of *The Meaning of Treason* that there is a case for the traitor and that all men should have a drop of treason in their blood. Otherwise, how can the status quo be challenged, how can a nation avoid the fatal complacency that can lead to its demise? Thus West presents herself as a hanging judge, with qualms. No more than Joyce did she ever see herself as acceptable, an Establishment figure.

But if her sense of herself as an outsider was as strong as Joyce’s, she always resisted the easy solution. She never had to visit Russia to be disillusioned. She never went through a conversion experience with communism. It never represented the rainbow or an eschatological hope. Her father brought history home to her when she was just a little girl. She had revolutionaries in her home for dinner. At table, she heard their arguments and saw them for the word-spinning zealots they were, and she knew for the rest of her life that there are visions of better worlds that are not worth the price.