

Review: David Rousset's "The Other Kingdom" - The Concentrationary Universe

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***The Other Kingdom* by David Rousset, Reynal and Hitchcock. \$2.75.**

Before the war David Rousset was a French intellectual who adhered to the Trotskyist movement. He weighed 209 pounds. These two statements may involve a rather odd juxtaposition, but in a moment you will see the connection.

When the Nazis overran France, Rousset worked in the underground. He edited bulletins giving news reports to the underground workers who had no other source of reliable information. He engaged in the most dangerous and from the Nazi point of view the most unforgivable activity of all: he helped the revolutionary socialists who were making contact with anti-Nazi groups in the German army. When the Gestapo caught him, Rousset was sent to Buchenwald where he remained for 16 months until the end of the war.

When Rousset was released he weighed 114 pounds – and he had gone through the modern Inferno, that ultimate terror which modern society has ended in, that terror which is its consummate expression. Concentration camp – the Nazis named it well; for it is the concentration of all the barbaric and retrogressive tendencies of modern society.

The Other Kingdom is a brief, fragmentary record of Rousset's experiences and also a beginning toward a sociological comprehension of the concentration camp. It is an utterly terrifying and horrible book, even though it does not recount nearly as many horrors as other reminiscences of former camp inmates. It is rather uniquely terrifying and horrible because it explains, because it does not merely see the camps as irrational outbursts of evil nature. When the Nazi atrocities are seen as part of a calculated policy of German imperialism, they become the ultimate in terror. For then we see them as part of this world, as a logical and necessary development from the disintegration of capitalist society.

Without hesitation I want to say that Rousset's book is by all odds the very best that has been written on the subject; it not merely shocks, it informs. Without equivocation Rousset places the concentration camps within the framework of capitalist society. He writes:

"The existence of the camps is a warning. German society, both because of the strength of its structure and the violence of the crisis that demolished it, underwent a decomposition that is exceptional even in the present state of world affairs. But it would be easy to show that the most characteristic traits of both the SS mentality and the social conditions which gave rise to the Third Reich are to be found in many other sectors of world society – less pronounced, it is true, and not developed on any such scale as in the Reich ... It would be blindness – and criminal blindness, at that – to believe that, by reason of any difference of national temperament, it would be impossible for any other country to try a similar experiment. Germany interpreted, with an originality in keeping with

her history, the crisis that led her to the concentrationary universe. But the existence and the mechanism of that crisis were inherent in the economic and social foundations of capitalism and imperialism. Under a new guise, similar effects may reappear tomorrow. There remains therefore a very specific war to be waged ... And the German anti-Fascists, interned for more than ten years, should be our valuable comrades in arms in such a fight."

Concentration Camp Bureaucrats

The most revealing fact adduced by Rousset is that it was not the SS alone which inflicted the brutality on the prisoners. It was the SS which of course represented the actual police power in the prison. But the acts of brutality – the beatings, the torture, the routine misery – were often left by the SS to their agents among the prisoners. Within the concentrationees' ranks there was established a bureaucracy which, though totally subservient to the SS on top, still had a great deal of power over the prisoners below. These bureaucrats gained special privileges: they had more food, they did not have to work and they had the delicious privilege of beating the wretches who were their fellow prisoners. Even among the damned there arose distinctions of rank and privilege!

The SS knew what it was doing. It understood that where hunger and misery were prevalent, it could secure for itself the loyalty of a section of those subjected to this hunger and misery by slightly alleviating its plight. The SS was following the age-old policy of ruling classes: divide and rule; but it was following it in a particularly terrible and inhuman situation.

The prisoners themselves were prevented from establishing genuine solidarity. How could men who worked like beasts from dawn to dusk, who were perpetually concerned above all else with dreaming of more bread and avoiding the lash and the fist – how could men reduced to this condition effectively develop a sense of solidarity?

Distinctions of nationality, of camp rank, of politics were all exploited by the SS to get groups of prisoners off against each other like raging beasts.

But the main distinction within the ranks of the prisoners was between the greens and the reds: The greens were the vast majority of prisoners, the criminal and flotsam and jetsam the Nazis had picked up, while the reds were of course the politicals. (By the time Rousset arrived in Buchenwald most of the German anti-Nazi prisoners had been killed off.) Between the greens and the reds a deadly struggle broke out for control of the camp administration. The Nazis tended to favor the greens because they were more "trustworthy" and less scrupulous, but the reds had one decisive advantage: they were better organized and more efficient. And in many camps there were labor projects to be organized and work quotas to be reached; as a result the politicals gained control of some camp administrations toward the end of the war.

Intercamp Morality

It should not be imagined that the politicals in any way resisted the Nazis when they came to "power" in the camp administration. Had they indicated the slightest attempt in that direction, they would have been immediately murdered off. Such a move would have simply been a gesture of suicide. For the politicals to take over camp administration meant to follow the basic orders of the Nazis – work quotas, overall discipline, etc. – but allowed them to circumvent the Nazis on other matters. They could treat their fellow prisoners somewhat more humanely than did the brutal greens; they could try to save an occasional prisoner whom the Nazis had picked out for destruction. It was a bitter choice with which the politicals were confronted: cooperate, a sense, with the Nazis in order to ease the lot of the prisoners and save some of their skins or to adopt the gestures of absolute morality and commit suicide en masse.

In an excerpt from a forthcoming book by Rousset which continues his fascinating discussion of the concentration camps in greater detail (printed in the latest issue of *Politics*) he discusses this problem. At one point a camp administration of politicals faced the problem of trying to save a group of 37 men whom the Nazis had brought to the camp with the evident intention of murdering them. The politicals decided that at most they could save three of the 37: a bitter choice but under the circumstances unavoidable! To talk of morality or moral choice under such conditions seems nonsense; there was a certain very narrow choice but it lacked the basis in freedom without which morality becomes meaningless. The truth is that the conditions of life in the camp forced the prisoners to choose between wretched and miserable evils; the only way to avoid this was death. And if one believed, as did the politicals, that they represented an important cadre for the post-Hitler period, then death was a luxury – I mean that literally – which they could not afford.

This is one of the questions which Rousset discusses in his book. There are others, equally fascinating: why didn't the Nazis kill the concentrationees off immediately? Why did they kill them off gradually and slowly? But I shall stop here. I think enough has been said in this review to indicate to readers, the absolute indispensability of this little book to anyone who is in any way concerned with the problems of our time.

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For Rousset's book I have only the greatest admiration. For his talents as a writer, for the portrait of himself as a human being which emerges from the book I also have admiration. It might therefore seem best to end this review by expressing the humility which we in America must feel toward those European comrades who have suffered as has Rousset.

Yet I should be avoiding a very important responsibility if I were to do that. The unfortunate and sad truth is – how terribly painful it is to say this! – that Rousset's book leaves one wondering about one essential question: Stalinism. Were it merely mere difference of opinion on some tactical question, it would be best in reviewing *this* book to remain silent. But on Stalinism one cannot.

Rousset praises the heroism of the German Stalinist prisoners. That is understandable; no doubt they were heroic. But there is nowhere in his book, which discusses the Stalinists if only in passing, the slightest suggestion of a fundamental and critical opposition to the Stalinist movement. He writes of them as if they were "the Communists" rather than as a movement in the service of a totalitarian state as vile as that of the Nazis and one which maintains to this day concentration camps as terrible as those of the Nazis. What makes this silence even more disturbing is the reports which have come from France about theories developed by the group of intellectuals to which Rousset adheres – theories about Stalinism representing the revolution, even if the "bureaucratically" consummated revolution. Such theories, we say categorically, can only result in the death of whatever hope there is for the reconstitution of a genuine socialist movement.

I do not wish to make any accusations. I do not know. But the conjunction of this strange ambiguity in Rousset's book and the reports about his group make for a highly disturbing situation. For a man like Rousset, with his background, his talents and his sense of humanity, to express *in the slightest degree* any deviation from his previous anti-Stalinism would be nothing short of tragic.

I hope my uneasiness on this matter is unwarranted. But I think this uneasiness cannot be dissipated until Rousset speaks out plainly and frankly.

Irving Howe

P.S.

* "The Concentrationary Universe". From The New International, Vol. XIII No. 7, September 1947, pp. 220-221. September 1947:

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/howe/1947/09/rousset.html>

* Transcribed & marked up by Einde O'Callaghan for the Encyclopaedia of Trotskyism On-Line (ETOL).