

# *Power and the Idealists: Or, The Passion of Joschka Fischer and its Aftermath*

by Paul Berman, Soft Skull Press, 2005, 311 pp.

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Also under review: *Imperial Ambitions: Conversations with Noam Chomsky on the Post-9/11 World* by Noam Chomsky, edited by David Barsamian, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, 227 pp.

Ever since the parties of the Second International split over the First World War, national security has divided left-wing opinion as no other issue. The end of the Cold War might conceivably have marked a resolution to these disputes. I recall hearing Martin Jacques, then editor of the British Eurocommunist monthly *Marxism Today*, put the best face he could on the revolutions of 1989 by pronouncing that they had expanded the range of left-wing opinion. They had in fact done the opposite, by demonstrating that the criticisms of one left-wing tradition, Communism, by Cold War liberals and social democrats had been right all along. But there was a widespread feeling that, with the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe, an impediment to left-wing advance in the West had fallen, if only by reducing the potency of defence policy as an electoral issue. (European social democratic parties had been severely damaged in the 1980s by their adoption of anti-nuclear policies. The French socialists were the important exception both in policies advocated and in electoral successes achieved.)

The Left's response to the conflicts of the last 15 years has, though, been a fissiparous as ever. But the divisions have cut across non-traditional lines. This has been especially true in Great Britain. When an aggressive populism with a discomfiting resemblance to National Socialism emerged in the Balkans, the old social democratic Right wing of the British Labour Party – the force that had helped create and supported the NATO alliance – was scarcely to be heard in defence of the victims. A stifling bipartisanship emerged at Westminster that deployed the language of realpolitik against proposals for humanitarian intervention. Among the few dissenters were representatives of the anti-militarist Left (along with the then leader of the Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown, who got the issue more right and earlier than almost anyone).

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The American writer Paul Berman has written a cogent exposition of the origins and development of similar fissures in the international Left, with particular reference to debates in Europe. Many readers of *Democratiya* will be familiar with Berman's 2003 book *Terror and Liberalism*. In it, Berman located a common thread in the modern – but ferociously atavistic – phenomenon of militant Islamism and earlier variants of totalitarianism that flourished in Europe in the last century. His new book, *Power and the Idealists*, extends that analysis, but combines it with the style of an earlier book still. Berman's *A Tale of Two Utopias*, published nearly a decade ago, comprised four long essays on the political journey of the *soixante huitards*, the rebellious generation of 1968.

*Power and the Idealists* takes the story on to the political ructions and international conflicts engendered by the destruction of the Twin Towers. Berman is a polyglot who has produced a rich, dense and discursive book. In the form of five connected essays, it roams across cultural history, political biography, philosophical reflection and personal anecdote (Berman is a leftist of the 1968 vintage). It provides a distinctive perspective on the political obligation to counter a new but still ominously traditional political force – a resurgent totalitarianism. Berman also gives a salutary account of the tragedy of the invasion of Iraq, in which what might reasonably have been presented as an anti-totalitarian struggle was tarnished by political incompetence and a bruising diplomacy.

The idealists of the title are those members of the 1968 generation who came to consider the dilemmas of exercising power – and especially force – for humanitarian ends. They include Daniel Cohn-Bendit ('Danny the Red,' whose anarchist background inoculated him against the romance with Communism that many of his comrades succumbed to); Bernard Kouchner, founder of Doctors without Borders; Régis Debray, who chronicled, and came to eye sceptically, the cult of Che Guevara; Adam Michnik, who knew totalitarianism at first hand; Azar Nafisi, author of a heroic account of the teaching of literature in theocratic Iran; and Kanan Makiya, author, under a pseudonym, of a remarkable account of Iraq's tyranny, *Republic of Fear*. Most prominent, they include Joschka Fischer.

The longest chapter, 'The Passion of Joschka Fischer,' was originally published in *The New Republic* a few weeks before 9/11; its analysis of the political trajectory of a European Left debating the uses of force could scarcely have been more prescient. Fischer was at the time Foreign Minister in Germany's Red-Green coalition

government, and was facing strong pressure to stand down owing to accusations about his political past.

Fischer was part of the generation of 1968. His political comrades included some who were caught up in the madness of the revolutionary violence of Germany's terrorist Left. There was no suggestion that Fischer had been active in those activities, but in January 2001 *Stern* magazine published five photographs dating from 1973 that appeared to show a helmeted Fischer beating up a policeman. The political controversy the photographs caused was a slow burner, but eventually became an international issue. Berman's long essay was an attempt – a valiant and successful one – to explain to that international audience the political evolution that had put the student radical of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the foreign ministry three decades later. It is, however, no conventional cautionary tale of an idealist seduced by the attractions of high office. Berman argues that Fischer's unconventional, even startling, action of deploying German troops in the Kosovo War derived in some way from the spirit of 1968. He says: 'The Kosovo War has sometimes been called the Liberals' War, because it was the liberal idealists, more than the conservative realists, who were keen on intervention. But I am not the first to point out that NATO's intervention could just as easily be described as the '68ers' War.'

Berman qualifies this by restricting the judgement to America's European allies, and runs through some of the personalities to whom that judgement applies. But he means it in an ideological and not only a biographical sense. For the lessons that Fischer imbibed in his long journey through, and on, the Left of the *soixante-huitards* were that not all uses of force by the Western powers were oppressive, while the seeds of fascism that he and his comrades had identified in the post-war Federal Republic were closer to his political home than he had realised.

Berman is lucid in describing the motivations and history of the part of the Left, symbolised by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, that gravitated towards violence and nihilism. He notes that after the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972, representatives of the far Left 'turned away in horror – not just at the killings in Munich and at the general strategy of Palestinian terror, but also at their own intentions of launching similar campaigns at home.' For Fischer, realisation of that truth seems to have come with the Entebbe hijacking in 1976, in which German terrorists allied to the rejectionist Palestinian cause seized an El Al jet and separated the Jewish from the non-Jewish passengers. The symbolism, at Munich, of Jews being murdered on German soil, and, at Entebbe, of

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young Germans selecting Jews to be slaughtered, was obvious and shocking. It was the opposite of the claimed revulsion from Nazism of the young radicals of 1968, and it initiated a political journey on Fischer's part.

Berman is right to draw the analogy between the violence of the Red Army Fraction and that of the previous generation of thugs and stormtroopers. The novelist John Updike made a similar point equally forcefully a couple of years ago in a New Yorker review of a modern German writer, Walter Abish:

Now sixty years have passed, the surviving participants in the Second World War are fewer and fewer, and Germany is populated by people who had nothing to do with the Nazi regime; millions of them are not even ethnically German. At times, Abish, like Fassbinder in some of his films, implies that there is something disgusting and scandalous in Germany's reconstituting itself as a viable capitalist democracy. Some young Germans have felt this also; the Baader-Meinhof gang, from an angle of leftist indignation, rephrased the insatiable shrill rage of Hitler and Goebbels. Whence this love of extremes, this intemperance?

Berman is also surely right to trace the idealistic slogans of the 1968 generation to their later applicability in a campaign to prevent genocide in the Balkans. As an explanation of the stand of a small part of the Left it is plausible and well-argued. But there comes a point, pretty much at the final step of the argument, where I at least find Berman too willing to forgive, and too eager to attribute wisdom to those (he cites opinion poll results at the time of the *Stern* photographs controversy) who look kindly on the New Left campaigners of Fischer's time.

Berman devotes a chapter to the Fischer affair's crossing of the Atlantic, and its influence in debate over the Iraq War. He cites a ferocious article by the *Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly (who was later killed in Iraq), who rejected Fischer's criticism of the proposal to go to war. Kelly, giving due credit to Berman's article in *The New Republic*, rehashed those parts of it that detailed Fischer's early associations with the German groupuscules. Berman is a little understated here in his criticisms of Kelly's use of his work; there is no question, however, but that Kelly, a fine writer and a brave journalist, did violence to a subtle and sympathetic argument in order to make a mean-spirited attack on Fischer. There was nothing in Kelly's column about the evolution of Fischer's thinking or the liberal interventionist ideas that Kelly himself supported, and that Fischer had acted upon in government.

Yet Kelly did have some sort of point. Fischer became one of the most important voices in Europe for a reputable foreign policy in contrast to the quietism that had acquiesced in the dismemberment of Bosnia. How he got to that position is of more than academic interest. But Berman oddly divorces his discussion of the 1968 generation from the practical reality of German (especially) and European politics of the time. The Red Army Fraction had few active members but a powerful mystique among radical students, who at least sympathised with the RAF's analysis even if they did not join in the violence. The analysis was founded on the notion that there was, as Berman puts it, a 'disguised Nazism apparently in command at home,' and a Nazi-like imperialism at work in America's intervention in Vietnam and Israel's triumph in the Six-Day War.

But the analysis was not only false: it got completely the wrong way round the failures, on the domestic front at least, of liberal democracy. By the time of Fischer's political journey, Germans had built a stable constitutional order on the ruins of barbarism and while divided from the east of the country by the imposition of Communist totalitarianism. German politics after the war was bitterly fought between two flawed statesmen – Konrad Adenauer, who did not see that the post-war democratic Left was as reliably anti-Communist as he was, and the Social Democrat leader Kurt Schumacher, who failed to realise that the cause of democratic socialism required allying with the United States in the Cold War. But these men represented a culture determined to defend Germany as a liberal democracy. Adenauer rescued German conservatism from its historic association with xenophobia, authoritarianism and anti-Semitism; Schumacher anchored what was still nominally (until 1959) a Marxist party in opposition to Soviet imperialism.

Yet Germany's early encounter with terrorism in the 1970s at Munich bore no trace of that anti-totalitarian stand. To inject sinew into Germany's response to terrorism was the real anti-fascist struggle of those times. The anti-Semitism of the terrorist Left was obvious long before Entebbe, with the bombing of the Jewish communal hall (the *Gemeindehaus*) in West Berlin on the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* in 1969. One of the partisans of the Red Army Fraction, Horst Mahler, who defended the murder of the Israeli athletes at Munich, is today not coincidentally a leading member of a far-Right party widely suspected of being implicated in the firebombing of immigrants' homes. On his German-language web site he carries the most odious political material you are likely to come across:

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as well as supporting Nazism, Mahler applauds 9/11 and the blow he considers was thereby struck against Jewish finance-capital.

The actual political violence of the terrorist Left was no real threat to democracy, but the excuses offered for it were surprisingly widespread. Still more damaging was the unwillingness even of those who denounced terrorism (Herbert Marcuse was one) to countenance the necessary fightback from government. Berman never says, but at the time Fischer and his associates were breaking from their own totalitarian temptation, liberalism had the practical task of combating terrorism organisationally and ideologically, and on the whole did it well. Intense debates about the wisdom of anti-terrorist legislation (the 'Lex RAF' of 1974) took place, but the dominant view was expressed by the political philosopher Wolfgang Kraushaar, in his essay '*44 Tage ohne Opposition*' ('44 Days without Opposition'): a state can be a state only when it has the capability to defend itself. Elsewhere in Europe, liberal theorists and statesmen recognised and challenged the allure of ideological apologetics for terrorism. The contemporary writings of Conor Cruise O'Brien, then a Labour member of the Irish coalition government, and a determined opponent of IRA terrorism, remain an outstanding example.

To delineate the arguments of a group of 1960s radicals and show their essential continuity with today's debates is a valuable achievement. Fischer is a much weightier and more reputable politician than Michael Kelly acknowledged or even realised. His genuinely fair-minded approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and his straight talking to Yasser Arafat on the need to abandon terrorism, are distinctive among European statesmen. But some of us – or rather, the philosophical traditions that some of us more readily identify with – got there first.

Berman gives a vivid account of the arguments among his selected group of 1968ers over the Iraq War. The diplomatic blunders of the Bush administration in prosecuting the case for a just and necessary war are well known, and so tragically are the frequent failures and sometimes disasters of an ill-planned occupation. What is less well known is that the UN, so far from being the bastion of corrupt practices and appeasement that many American conservatives believed, had undergone a distinct ideological shift in the 1990s with the experience of Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo. When jihadists murdered 23 members of the UN mission in Baghdad, including its head, Sergio Vieira de Mello, in August 2003, they were – by the lights of their perverse ideology – selecting a target that stood against everything they were trying to achieve. The cause of humanitarian intervention, symbolised in the

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figure of Bernard Kouchner, might have been pitched in a way that could appeal to this emerging consensus of supranational governance and NGOs. It was worth trying, and it is a legitimate criticism of Tony Blair – whom I will defend in most aspects of the Iraq War – that it was not tried by him at least.

But there were responsibilities on the other side too. Fischer was articulate, even impressive, in declaring – in English, and in public – to the US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, ‘Excuse me. I am not convinced.’ Yet Fischer, given where – geographically and philosophically speaking – he came from, and knowing what he did of the obligation to use power in defence of the vulnerable, might have gone on to form his own case about Iraq. It would have dealt with the continuity of Ba’athism with variants of totalitarianism of an earlier generation, and much closer to home. Fischer did not make that jump, whereas some of his comrades did. In his concluding chapter, Berman observes: ‘Skilful and clearheaded leaders [in the US] ought to have been able to bring together these people, the consistent or inconsistent Wilsonians of the world, at least sufficiently to keep the Atlantic alliance from fraying as badly as it did.’

Perhaps. But Fischer and his associates were a small minority in the European debate. European unity would still have foundered on the fact that removal of Saddam’s regime was seen as pre-emptive and aggressive by many European governments. European governments overall would probably have countenanced even less the liberal and humanitarian arguments favoured by Kouchner than they did the spurious claims of Saddam’s weaponry. For those who believe that regime change was the right policy in Iraq – on grounds of Western security as well as progressive principle – a rupture was bound to take place. The notion (Berman cites Fischer in private conversation mooted it) of a ‘vast strategic campaign to transform the larger Middle East’ had no prospect of being taken up by Presidents Chirac or Putin, and bore no relation to the arguments of the anti-war critics in European capitals and chancelleries.

Berman has written elsewhere that ‘the [Iraq] war was brought on ... by the mass totalitarian movement of the Muslim world – the totalitarian movement that, in its radical Islamist and Ba’athist wings, had fostered a cult of indiscriminate killing and suicide.’ So it was; and while the creation of a coalition to defeat it, as broad and effective as the coalition of democrats that prosecuted the Cold War, is essential, and the Bush administration made that extremely difficult, there is plenty of blame to go round.

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There are occasional factual errors in Berman's book. The scion of Marks and Spencer who was shot by Carlos 'the Jackal' in 1973, Joseph Sieff, did not die of his wounds, but astonishingly survived owing to the strength of his front teeth, which deflected the bullet. The name of President Mitterrand is spelt in two different ways in the book, the wrong one unfortunately more plentifully than the right one. But these are minor points, not least when compared with the other book under review.

Berman's particular strength as a writer is his ability to convey the essence of sometimes arcane debates succinctly and clearly. In describing the reaction to 9/11, he notes that 'in Western Europe, a number of writers and intellectuals rushed to their computers to compose essays accusing America of having brought these attacks upon herself: a commonplace of all modern political theory. (Massacres. Let us not be so naïve as to presume the innocence of the victims....).'

The parenthetical comment is not a parody, but an allusion to Noam Chomsky's slight but bestselling instant volume *9/11*, which maintained: 'We can think of the United States as an "innocent victim" only if we adopt the convenient path of ignoring the record of its actions and those of its allies, which are, after all, hardly a secret.' Berman included in *Terror and Liberalism* a scathing but fair summary of the essentials of Chomsky's political thinking. Anyone who doubts its accuracy may consult Chomsky's latest volume, *Imperial Ambitions*.

As with many of Chomsky's books over the last 15 years, *Imperial Ambitions* is a collection of transcribed 'conversations' with his longstanding interlocutor, David Barsamian, rather than a sustained work of political analysis. Both the form and the content illustrate one of the conundrums about this singular figure in the world of ideas. Chomsky occupies an important place in the history of American political campaigning, but no place at all in the study of political history. His advocates acknowledge this, while complaining of the injustice. (John Summers, who teaches social studies at Harvard, thunders: 'Chomsky is one of the most widely read political intellectuals in the world. Academic history pretends he does not exist.')

Chomsky's latest book exemplifies the weaknesses that infuriate those academic historians.

Whereas Berman's writings on the debates over the Iraq War are scrupulous in their accurate presentation of a range of views, Chomsky gives no credit at all for a conflicting intellectual case. I recently engaged in an exchange with Chomsky in



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Prospect magazine (November 2005 and January 2006, with a concluding letter from me in February 2006) in which he took exception to my claim that his political output is dominated by the notion that the US is comparable to Nazi Germany. (Rather extraordinarily, he responded by accusing me of misquoting an example of this notion from his first political book. He demonstrated this by leaving out the sentence I was actually quoting and substituting another. The subtitle of his article was, ironically in the circumstances, ‘the world’s top public intellectual responds to accusations of dishonesty.’) But in fact this conceit runs through *Imperial Ambitions* as it does the rest of Chomsky’s oeuvre:

The United States is invading Iraq. It’s as open an act of aggression as there has been in modern history, a major war crime. This is the crime for which the Nazis were hanged at Nuremberg, the act of aggression... The pretences for the invasion are no more convincing than Hitler’s.

You could have plausibly, though not necessarily correctly, argued a prudential case against the Iraq War. You could have argued, against the evidence of the erosion of the policy of containment, that coercive inspections and diplomatic pressure might have tempered a gangster regime and enhanced the prospects for political reform. But to depict Iraq as the victim of ‘the crime for which the Nazis were hanged’ is to place a casuistical stress on a doctrine of sovereignty that real progressives – men such as Kouchner – have understood as a defence of quietism and reaction. Chomsky is at least consistent. During the Bosnian catastrophe Chomsky was asked by Barsamian in another of these insubstantial volumes of interviews – *What Uncle Sam Really Wants*, 1994 – whether Serb encampments outside Sarajevo should have been bombed. Chomsky responded with a fantastically tortuous answer that concluded, ‘It’s not so simple.’ Douglas Hurd and John Major themselves could scarcely have come up with a feebler counsel of inaction.

It is not merely the prescriptions that are perplexing. Chomsky is the master of the bold historical declamation to which there is a lot less than meets the eye. No responsible historian, even in this stream-of-consciousness format, could risk his reputation with such judgements as, ‘The Cuban missile crisis was largely a result of a major campaign of international terrorism aimed at overthrowing Castro – what’s now called regime change, which spurred Cuba to bring in Russian missiles as a defensive measure.’ One wonders what Chomsky makes of the historical evidence that Castro scared Khrushchev witless by urging him to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the United States (on 26 October 1962 Castro sent a cable to

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Khrushchev urging such an ‘act of legitimate defence, however harsh and terrible the solution would be’).

Chomsky adopts a similar practice with recent events too. He remarks:

In England last year [2003] the government investigated the BBC because it claimed that a reporter had gone too far in criticising a completely deceitful government dossier... What right does the government have to carry out an inquiry into whether the media are reporting the facts the way it wants them to be reported? The very fact that the inquiry took place is a function of the very low commitment to freedom of speech in England.

Chomsky’s casual insults against entire nationalities are not novel (in his hagiography of Chomsky, Robert Barsky quotes his hero’s reflections on ‘the highly parochial and remarkably illiterate culture’ of, as it happens, France). But what may surprise some readers, certainly in the UK, is that Chomsky is here referring to the Hutton Inquiry. The inquiry was established not to regulate public-service broadcasting, but – according to its own remit – ‘urgently to conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr [David] Kelly,’ the scientist whose tragic suicide caused the gravest of political crises for Tony Blair. The restrictiveness of its remit was actually criticised by Opposition politicians, who felt it was thereby allowing the Prime Minister to elude accountability.

Chomsky’s popularity as a public intellectual is immense, and his books are well represented in the politics and history departments of any substantial bookshop in the UK or North America. Why this should be is a matter of some wonderment, but anecdotal evidence suggests that a large proportion of Chomsky’s audience comprises those of college age. There will surely be many readers of this book across university campuses who will read Chomsky’s description of the British government’s nefarious designs on the right to free expression with incredulity and righteous anger. At least they will be halfway to a considered appreciation of *Imperial Ambitions*, for which incredulity is the appropriate response.

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