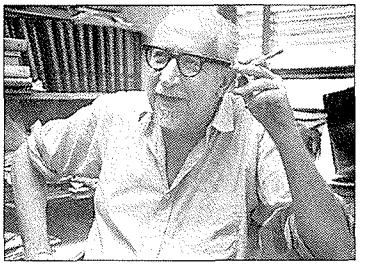
OTHER TITLES

History

A REBEL IN DEFENSE OF TRADITION: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald. *By Michael Wreszin. Basic Books. 590 pp. $30*

Dwight Macdonald was probably contrary in his cradle. Of principled opposition, intellectual independence, and educated crankiness he went on to make a life's work. Born in Manhattan to upper-middle-class parents in 1906 and educated at schools appropriate to his class, Macdonald became one of the more conspicuous political, social, and cultural critics in America, and frequently of America, from the 1930s until his death in 1982. In this first biography, Wreszin guides the reader along the dizzying course of Macdonald's shifting political enthusiasms: the flirtation with communism, the embrace of Trotskyite socialism, the unremitting anti-Stalinism, the enduring opposition to totalitarianism and nationalism and the state, the pacifism, the ill-concealed impatience with the masses, the deep cultural conservatism. Perhaps it's no surprise that, by the end of his life, Macdonald had become a radical even a Republican could love.



After graduating from Yale University in the late 1920s, Macdonald worked for Henry Luce's *Fortune*, using the capitalist forum to write sympathetically of communists. During the 1920s and 1930s he believed that liberal democracy in the Western world was finished, a casualty of the World War. Dictatorship was no alternative (though he did retain some reluctant admiration for the dictators of the time). That left Macdonald seeking some third way between contending forces, as he was often to do in life, like Moses negotiating the Red Sea.

But he was rarely as successful as Moses. He opposed World War II, for example—both sides were brutal and reprehensible—and argued for a pacifist middle course. But as evidence of the Holocaust began to emerge, he had no choice but to cast a cooler eye on Germany than he was naturally disposed to do.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that, though he was entirely serious about his politics and founded and edited for its five-year life in the 1940s an influential journal of the noncommunist Left that was even called *Politics*, Macdonald was not a profound or original political thinker. By the 1950s he abandoned politics altogether and moved to the *New Yorker*, where his criticisms of America were framed by glittering commercial endorsements of the very way of life he censured. And it is as a cultural critic, a Savonarola against masscult, midcult, and kitsch, that he is best remembered. The merging of high and low culture, the homogenization, the leveling of all values, standards, and distinctions struck him as another form of totalitarianism.

He chose his targets well. The permissiveness of Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* was an abdication of responsibility by an educated elite and encouraged an ignorance of tradition; it mirrored "a plebeian attitude toward language." The "revised standard version" of the Bible gave up the grandeur of the King James version and substituted a blandness all too symptomatic of American cultural life at midcentury. Macdonald compared the revisers' work to the bombing of Dresden.

Style was everything to him: An idea did not exist apart from the words used to express it. The possibility that the Bible—a book of faith, after all—might be comprehended more easily in its plain new dress by millions of people would not have occurred to him, and might have been ridiculed if it had. In fact, a good deal seems not to have occurred to him, which is why he frequently appears naive and a bit ridiculous, in his personal life no less than in his politics. By the 1960s and 1970s, Macdonald was smoking pot and protesting against Vietnam and fellow-traveling with the youth movement, his belly hanging bare over his belt and a cocktail serving as compass.

Wreszin's biography takes Macdonald from cradle to grave and moves him dutifully through all the crowds and controversies between. But Macdonald may be a 300-page subject trapped in a 500-page book. The length would be forgivable if Wreszin wrote with Macdonald's own

mischievousness and wit. ("The Ford Foundation is a large body of money surrounded by a lot of people who want some.") Perhaps only an autobiography would have done the man justice. If he had lived to read this book, he would no doubt have been flattered by all the attention, well deserved after all. And then, honest Dwight to the end, he would have turned on it with his rapier.

THE BIRTH OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY. *By Zeev Sternhell with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri. Trans. by David Maisel. Princeton. 338 pp. $29.95*

Fascism has never received the respect it deserves—or so Sternhell has spent nearly two decades arguing. A professor of political science at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he maintains that fascism is neither a bizarre by-product of World War I nor a thoughtless Middle-European detour into authoritarianism. Rather, it is a full-fledged ideology in its own right. Formed by the confluence of the 19th century's two major ideologies, socialism and nationalism, fascism must be analyzed with all the analytical rigor applied to its major rivals, liberalism and communism. Moreover, Sternhell sees in the cultural milieu of fin-de-siècle Europe—its nihilism, its disgust with the universals of Enlightenment thinking, its festering national and racial chauvinism—a seedbed for the political ideals that were eventually to make ex-socialists such as Benito Mussolini into dictators.

Sternhell's previous book, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (1986), generated a storm of controversy and brought on one successful libel suit, primarily because Sternhell suggested that French intellectual life in the 1920s and '30s was rife with fascism. His new book has already provoked a similar controversy in Italy, although this time his analysis is focused on the movement he believes initiated the final descent into fascism—syndicalism. If socialism is fascism's godmother on the Left and nationalism its godmother on the Right, syndicalism is its disreputable father, of troublesome origins and questionable intentions.

Launched in the 1890s in France as a trade-unionist ideology not too different from Marxism, syndicalism rapidly mutated under the influence of sometime-revolutionary and future royalist Georges Sorel. Under his direction, it became an antipolitical movement that called for direct action by workers, demonized capitalists (but not capitalism), and championed moral regeneration rather than economic transformation as the avatar of revolution. Sorel imagined that workers would be moved to violence not by a sensible platform of reform but by a chiliastic call to arms, with apocalypse to follow—or what he called the General Strike.

How did syndicalism's passionate advocacy of class warfare turn into a desire for war between nations? How did a putatively leftist desire to transform a whole society for the sake of social justice evolve into a national socialist manifesto for authoritarian social engineering? Sternhell argues that such tendencies lay barely dormant within Sorel's own theories. The General Strike blurs easily into national mobilization for war, while an acceptance of capitalism's inevitability lends itself to quietism on questions of class and the economy.

But Italy in the teens was also characterized by fiscal insolvency and jingoistic chauvinism, which produced a renewed faith in such sources of communal authority as the army and the church. Sternhell provides a strikingly simple quacks-like-a fascist test: Those leftist intellectuals who abandoned Marxist calls for economic transformation and spoke of "moral elevation," "ethical transformation," and the purging of "parasites" instead of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie were, or were on the way to becoming, fascists.

This book is so densely documented that patches of comparatively thin analysis stand out. It is quite strange, for example (though many critics will say it is not strange at all), that in making his case for the intellectual complexity and coherence of fascist ideology Sternhell should have so meticulously documented its leftist origins while leaving so murky its rightist wellsprings. He remains conspicuously silent about the Catholic corporatism and old-guard Italian conservatism that did so much to put fascism into power and that, as Sternhell rather grudgingly admits, "finally produced a regime from which all elements of socialist origin were banished."

Still, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* adds up to compelling intellectual history. Sternhell forces us