Ernst Niekisch

23 May 1889

Trebnitz, Province of Silesia, Kingdom of Prussia, German Empire

Died 23 May 1967 (aged 78)

West Berlin, West Germany

Ernst Niekisch (23 May 1889 – 23 May 1967) was a German writer and politician. Initially a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and of the Alte Sozialdemokratische Partei (ASP), he later became a prominent exponent of the National revolutionary branch of the Conservative Revolution and National Bolshevism.

Early life

Born in Trebnitz (Silesia), and brought up in Nördlingen. After studying at a teaching seminar, and completing a one-year voluntary military service with the Bavarian Army, he was appointed a public school teacher in Augsburg.[1] From 1914 to 1917, he served with the Imperial German Army during WWI.

He joined the Social Democratic Party in 1917, returned to Augsburg as a teacher. and was instrumental in the setting up of a short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919.[1] Indeed, for a time at the start of the year, after the resignation of Kurt Eisner and immediately before the establishment of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, Niekisch wielded effective power as chairman of the central executive of Bavarian councils, an interim governing body.[2] He left the SPD soon afterward and joined the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) for a time before he returned to his former party.[1] He served a brief spell in prison in 1925 for his part in the abortive Bavarian coup.[3]

Nationalism

The eagle symbol of National Bolshevism

In the 1920s, he stressed the importance of nationalism and attempted to turn the SPD in that direction. He was so vehemently opposed to the Dawes Plan, the Locarno Treaties and the general pacifism of the SPD that he was expelled from the party in 1926.[1]

Upon his expulsion, Niekisch joined the Old Social Democratic Party of Saxony, which he influenced to his own nationalist form of socialism. He launched his own journal, Widerstand (Resistance),[1] and he and his followers adopted the name of "National Bolsheviks" and looked to the Soviet Union as a continuation of both Russian nationalism and the old state of Prussia. The movement took the slogan of "Sparta-Potsdam-Moscow".[1] He was a member of ARPLAN (Association for the Study of Russian Planned Economy) with Ernst Jünger, Georg Lukács, Karl Wittfogel and Friedrich Hielscher, under whose auspices he visited the Soviet Union in 1932.[1] He reacted favourably to Jünger's publication Der Arbeiter, which he saw as a blueprint for a National Bolshevik Germany.[1] He also believed in the necessity of a German-Soviet alliance against the "decadent West" and the Treaty of Versailles.[4] The attempt to combine ultranationalism and communism, two extreme ends of the political spectrum, caused Niekisch's National Bolsheviks to be a force with little support.[5]

Third Reich

Although anti-Jewish and in favour of a totalitarian state, Niekisch rejected Adolf Hitler, who he felt lacked any real socialism, and Niekisch instead looked to Joseph Stalin and the industrial development of the Soviet Union as his model for the Führerprinzip.[1] Writing in 1958, Niekisch condemned Hitler as a power-obsessed demagogue who was an enemy of the elitist spirit that Niekisch advocated.[6] He was particularly ill-disposed towards Joseph Goebbels and, at a meeting between the two facilitated by their mutual friend, Arnolt Bronnen, Niekisch and Goebbels had almost come to blows.[7] Bronnen would break from Niekisch in 1932 after the latter published the pamphlet Hitler – ein deutsches Verhängnis, with Bronnen considering the attack on Nazism a personal insult.[8] In the immediate aftermath of the Reichstag fire, his house was searched for evidence of any involvement, but that was not pursued.[9] He also discussed his opposition to the new regime with Ulrich von Hassell although Niekisch did not join the German Resistance.[9]

Despite his criticisms of Nazism, he was allowed to continue editing Widerstand until the paper was banned in December 1934.[9] He was allowed to visit Rome in 1935 and held meetings with Benito Mussolini, who told Niekisch that he considered Hitler's aggressive stances towards the Soviet Union to be foolish and would later discuss opposition groups with the Italian Consul General while Italo-German relations were somewhat strained.[9]

In 1937, Niekisch and dozens of his colleagues were arrested by the Gestapo for writing articles against the regime. In 1939, Niekisch was found guilty of 'literary high treason by the Volksgerichtshof, along with fellow National Bolsheviks Joseph Drexel and Karl Tröger, and sentenced to life in prison.[1] Following the intervention of his former ally, Jünger, his family could retain his property, but not secure his release.[9] Niekisch remained in prison until April 1945, when he was liberated by the Red Army. By then, he had nearly gone blind.[1]

Later life

Embittered against nationalism by his wartime experiences, he turned to orthodox Marxism and lectured in sociology in Humboldt University in East Germany until 1953 when, disillusioned by the brutal suppression of the workers' uprising, he relocated to West Berlin, where he died in 1967.[1]

Legacy

Subsequent to his death, Niekisch was one of a number of writers, including the likes of Oswald Spengler, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Vilfredo Pareto and Carl Schmitt, whose works were promulgated by the likes of the Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne and others involved in the Conservative Revolutionary movement.[10]

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See also

Karl Otto Paetel

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