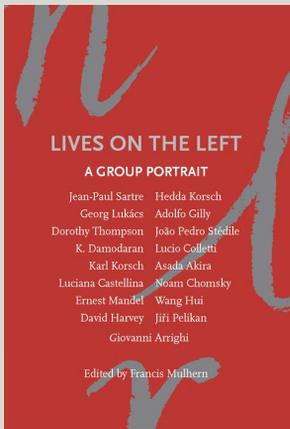


# Ernest Mandel

## The Luck of a Crazy Youth [1995]

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*Ernest Mandel (1923–95) was internationally recognized as one of the outstanding Marxist economists of his time. Whether in the scholarly mode of Marxist Economic Theory or the didactic register of the companion Introduction, his authoritative and lucid expositions won many thousands to his understanding of their world. His masterwork, Late Capitalism, proposed a striking new account of the dynamics of the capitalist economy, in a study whose predictive power was quickly corroborated in the generalized recessionary wave that set in at the turn of the 1970s. In recognition of this achievement, Mandel was invited to give the Marshall lectures in the Economics Faculty of the University of Cambridge—a large acknowledgement on the part of Keynes’s institutional heirs.*

*Far fewer of Mandel’s readers in, say, the USA, France, West Germany, Switzerland and Australia would have been aware that he was at one time or another officially barred from their countries, as a threat to national security. This was in his political role as one of the foremost leaders of the Fourth (Trotskyist) International, which he had joined in his home city of Antwerp shortly after its inception in 1938. In his five decades at the heart of the FI, Mandel combined the roles of thinker, teacher and polemicist, organizer and leader with unusual distinction. (He appears from time to time in these capacities in Adolfo Gilly’s recollections elsewhere in this volume.) No less gifted as a public speaker than as a writer, he was fluent in half a dozen languages, and ready to travel to any country that would admit him. In later life he also held academic positions in the Free University of Brussels.*

# Ernest Mandel

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## *The Luck of a Crazy Youth*

*You were ten years old when Hitler seized power in Germany and sixteen when the Second World War broke out. It was surely an awful time to be young, especially for someone like you, from a Jewish background. What are your first memories of that period?*

Well, strangely enough—but this is probably part of a special mentality, not very close to the average—I have no bad memories at all of that period. On the contrary. I have rather a memory of tension, yes, excitement, yes, nervousness, but not at all of despair. Absolutely not. This has something to do with the fact that we were a highly politicized family.

*Your father was an activist?*

At that time my father was not an activist. He had been an activist at the time of the German Revolution. He had fled from Belgium to Holland in the First World War because he didn't want to do his military service. He was already a very left-wing socialist and he had met Willem Pieck—who was later president of the German Democratic Republic—in Holland. When the German Revolution broke out they went to Berlin together. He worked for some months in the first press agency of Soviet Russia in Berlin. He knew Radek personally and met a lot of other people. And so I found on our bookshelves a fantastic collection of old publications—books by Marx, books by Lenin, books by Trotsky, the International Correspondence (*Inprecor*) of that time, Russian literature and so on. He dropped out of politics around 1923. His life was very much attuned to the general ups and downs of world revolution. When Hitler came to power he got a shock. He was very conscious of what that would mean for the world. I remember—it's perhaps my first political memory, I was nine years old in 1932—at the time of the so-called Papen putsch when the Social Democratic government of Prussia

was eliminated, and Severing, the Minister of the Interior, together with the chief of the police, made this famous or infamous statement, *Ich weiche vor dem Gewalt*—‘I yield before violence’. A lieutenant and two soldiers had entered his office and he dropped all the power they had accumulated in the fourteen years since 1918. He dropped it in just five minutes. This news appeared in the social-democratic daily paper of Antwerp, our home town. My father made very sharp comments. He said it will end very badly: this is the beginning of the end. I remember that very well. And then when Hitler came to power we had some of the first refugees come to our home, also some members of our family and some friends. The years 1933 to 1935 were terrible years in Belgium; it was the depth of the crisis and people were very hungry. Of course it was much worse than today, much worse. The Belgian queen became popular simply because she distributed bread and margarine to the unemployed. One of the refugees who came to our home told us, as if it was normal, that they had sold their bed in order to buy bread in Berlin. They were sleeping on the ground because they had to buy bread. These were terrible times. My father also went through some bad periods, but we never were so badly off as that. We never went hungry but we saw our standard of living drop dramatically in that period. These years 1933, 1934, 1935 were a bit less political.

*Your political engagement began when the war broke out?*

Much earlier than that, 1936 was a turning point for me, and for my father. Two things came together, the Spanish Civil War and the Moscow trials. These events had a major impact on us. The working-class movement in Antwerp and in Belgium played an important role. The Spanish Civil War evoked a tremendous wave of solidarity. I remember well the demonstration of May Day 1937. There were perhaps a hundred thousand people in the streets, and the people coming back from the International Brigades in Spain and people collecting money. They were received by an ovation which I will never forget. Prior to the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, it was the biggest international event we had ever had in Belgium. Then there were the Moscow trials, which were a tremendous shock for my father. He had personally known several of the defendants of the first trial who were functionaries of the Comintern. Radek was one of the main defendants of the second trial. My father got angry beyond description—beyond description—and on the spot he organized a committee of solidarity with the Moscow trial defendants. He got in contact with a small Trotskyist group in Antwerp. They met at our place and I became, at the age of thirteen, a Trotsky sympathizer—not a member because the organization was not so stupid that it would let a child of thirteen into its ranks. But I was present at meetings, listening, and was considered a bright youngster so they didn’t oppose my listening. I was fifteen years old when I was formally admitted. And it was an

interesting moment because this was a little after the founding conference of the Fourth International.<sup>1</sup>

*When was that?*

In 1938. The Young People's Socialist League of the United States, the youth organization of the Socialist Workers Party, sent a man called Nattie Gould to speak to us about the founding conference.<sup>2</sup> I still see him before my eyes. He toured several Western European countries to give a report on the founding conference and explain the work of the SWP. He came to Antwerp and to our place where the Antwerp cell of the organization met. I think that it was after that meeting that I was formally admitted as a candidate member. Then there was a certain vacuum, the most difficult period probably in our country. In 1939 everybody was sure the war would break out. We were very isolated. We distributed a leaflet on the main streets of Antwerp—it was not such an intelligent way to act, because of the climate.

*What did the leaflet say?*

It was against the war. It said the war is coming, but this is not our war and so on and so forth. It was not received very well and was written in a very abstract and propagandist way. I didn't write it and don't take any responsibility for it!

*But did you distribute it?*

I distributed it, obviously.

*You were fifteen when you distributed your first leaflet?*

I was nearer to sixteen. That was a very difficult time, probably the most difficult time we have had. Our organization comprised two sectors in Belgium. One was a little mass base we had in one of the coal-mining districts where there were around six hundred members who had come to us from social democracy. We had the absolute majority in one mining town and the response of the employers was to immediately close down the pit in that town and it never opened subsequently. All those miners who voted for the extreme Left were victimized for their political engagement. Before the war, during the war, after the war, they were never employed again. Comrade Arthur Scargill will recognize this. There's nothing new under the sun.

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<sup>1</sup> The conference took place near Paris in September 1938.

<sup>2</sup> The US section of the Fourth International.

*When did you join the resistance?*

Well, the group that I have been talking about dropped out as soon as the organization had to go underground. Their leader was killed by the Stalinists with the slanderous accusation of collaboration with the Nazis. This was just a lie. After the war these comrades—I have to call them that, though they were not Trotskyists any more, but oppositional socialists, left socialists—they ran for the municipality and again got the absolute majority. So that is an indication that they were not collaborators with the Nazis: this was a ridiculous slander. With the loss of these people we reached a low point of the organization. We had perhaps a dozen or two dozen members in the winter of 1939–40, just before the German invasion. The organization was underground. The atmosphere in the country was terrible. The German army invaded on the tenth of May, and military operations were concluded with the capitulation on the twenty-eighth of May. The country was occupied and the first weeks produced total disorientation. Henri de Man, the leader of the Socialist Party, remained as assistant prime minister. He capitulated before the Nazis. He made a public appeal to collaborate with the occupation. Part of the trade-union apparatus supported him. As for the Communist Party, it published a legal newspaper. Because of the Stalin–Hitler pact they were prepared to submit to the Nazi censorship. All these events were a shock to us. We were very weak and very small. Then we heard of the murder of the Old Man, the murder of Trotsky. The Belgian papers published the information around the twenty-first of August. Immediately one of the legendary figures of Belgian Communism, a comrade Polk who had been a founding member of the party, a member of the central committee in the twenties and who had become a Trotskyist, a left oppositionist, came to my father's house. He was crying. He had known the Old Man personally. Others came too. There were seven or eight people who all said the same thing. The only way to answer this assassination was immediately to restart the organization, to show this dirty murderer that he just can't suppress ideas and he can't suppress a current of resistance. We decided to rebuild the organization and sent people to other parts of the country.

*Was this done clandestinely?*

It was totally clandestine. We found out that the comrades in Brussels were thinking along exactly the same lines. Within a couple of weeks we set up the skeleton of an organization. We started to publish our first illegal newspaper before the end of the year, 1940. We set up a little illegal print shop, and all that started to function, I must say, rather well under the circumstances. There was a small illegal organization and we had a good response in some workers' quarters because, in a certain sense, we had a monopoly.

The Communist Party was not at all identified with resistance. The Social Democrats were identified, rather, with collaboration. I must add immediately that resistance was not so popular. Most people still thought the Germans would win the war. They were in the best of cases abstentionist and passive. In the worst of cases they wanted to get on the side of the victors.

*You were still isolated?*

After the winter things changed. The defeat of the Germans in the Battle of Britain had something to do with that. The experience of the winter was very bitter, very hard. Food rations were very low, so there was much discontent among the workers. The first strikes broke out in March. Then the Communist Party started to change. It's not true that they waited until the attack on the Soviet Union. As soon as they saw some movement, movement of a mass character, they acted cautiously in order not to be cut off completely from events. They did not wish to give us and other new resistance groups a monopoly, because that would have been the price for doing nothing. And of course when the attack on the Soviet Union took place, then they were bolder. Then it became more difficult for us but at the same time the general scope of the mass resistance enlarged. I must say that I never doubted for a single day that the Nazis would lose. I can say that with a certain self-satisfaction when I look back. I was a young man, not very mature—very foolish from many points of view—but I must say that I never doubted that one day the Nazis would be defeated. Of that I was absolutely convinced. This led me into some crazy actions.

*You distributed leaflets to German soldiers?*

Yes, but that was not the most crazy thing to do. That was rather correct. When I was arrested for the first time, I managed to escape prison. I was caught a second time, and escaped from the camp. The third time I was caught I was brought to Germany. I was very happy. I didn't understand at all that there was a ninety-nine-point-nine per cent chance that I would be killed.

*Because you were both a Marxist and a Jew?*

A Jew, a Marxist, a Communist and a Trotskyist. There were four reasons to be killed by different groups of people, if you can put it like that. I was happy to be deported to Germany because I would be in the centre of the German Revolution. I was just saying, 'Wonderful, I'm just where I want to be.' It was completely irresponsible of course.

*And you did try to escape again?*

Well, this also is a story of folly. The fact that I am still alive is really the exception to the rule. In a certain sense, again, I can say with satisfaction that my outlook helped—I shouldn't exaggerate because there was just luck in it too. But through political behaviour and I think a correct approach to a certain number of basic problems, I could immediately establish good relations with some of the guards. I did not behave like most of the Belgian and the French prisoners who were very anti-German. I deliberately looked for politically sympathetic warders. That was the intelligent thing to do even from the point of view of self-preservation. So I looked for Germans who were friendly, who gave evidence of some political judgement. I immediately found some former Social Democrats, even a few old Communists.

*Amongst the guards in the concentration camp?*

Amongst the guards, yes. It was not a concentration camp, it was a prison camp. I was sentenced, so this was already an advantage. In a concentration camp you had the SS, the worst people. In these prison camps you had functionaries of the prison system, like in a British prison. So you had some people who had been there since the twenties or thirties; I thought some of them would be Social Democrats because Social Democrats had been ministers of the interior for so long. And that was exactly the case, as I found out. Also amongst the prisoners I tried to find some young Germans—many of them, more than you might think—who were Leftists and were anti-war. I found them and made friends. My first friend there was a very fine person who had been condemned to life imprisonment because he had spoken against the war. He was the son of a socialist railway worker in Cologne. After seeing that he could have confidence in me, he gave me his father's address and the address of friends of his father, saying 'If ever you escape go to their place, they will help you, they will put you on a train, you can go back to your country.' So I developed a plan. But the whole thing was crazy anyway, you understand. We worked in an unforgettable place—one of the largest plants in Germany, perhaps it was even the largest.

*What did you produce?*

Gasoline, synthetic gasoline for the war machine, for the airplanes and the tanks. That was like a microcosm of Europe. You had the Russian prisoners of war, Western prisoners of war, political prisoners, and inmates of concentration camps, civilian forced labour, and civilian free labour, some German workers. There were sixty thousand people working there. It was like a microcosm of European society under the Nazis. And there was a group of Belgian workers, even some from Antwerp, from my home town. I

befriended them and I asked them to give me clothes so that I could change out of my prison uniform. I looked at the electric security fences around the camp and found that they were turned off for specific reasons in the morning when they had to change the watch in the towers. I saw that and I just climbed over the wall, over that wire. I had gloves, but I was absolutely crazy, absolutely crazy.

*The sort of crazy act that saved your life.*

In a certain sense. It was a terrible risk that I would be caught and shot immediately. In fact unfortunately I was caught. I had three days of freedom, which were very exhilarating, very intoxicating. I obtained some fresh fruit for the first time since I had been in prison. A German woman gave me apples and pears, and that made me very happy. I knew the way to the border near Aachen. But I was caught in the woods on the third night. I was again very lucky. I started to talk to the *garde du chasse*, who had arrested me. I said to him, 'Listen, have you seen the newspapers? The Allies are already in Brussels, they will be in Aachen soon. If you kill me now you'll get into big trouble very soon. Better put me in prison without too much trouble.' He understood and was rather sympathetic. He even gave me a big loaf of bread. I don't want to boast; what I did was elementary. Of course, I gave a false name. I didn't give the exact name of the camp from which I had escaped, so they took me to another prison. But they eventually found out, and after two weeks I was held in very bad conditions, in irons and so on, because they knew I was an escaped prisoner. But I was much safer there despite the conditions. The commander of the camp from which I had escaped came to see me in the prison—a terrible, dark cell—and he said to me, 'You are a rare bird. Do you know that if you had been brought back you could have been immediately hanged?' I said yes. So he just looked at me in total amazement. But of course in this new prison he couldn't hang me. I was already under sentence so they kept me there in Eich from October 1944 until the beginning of March 1945. Then I was transferred to another camp for three weeks and liberated at the end of the month.