



ERNST VON SALOMON: REVOLUTIONARY, CONSERVATIVE, LOVER

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In *The Outlaws* (1930), Ernst von Salomon recounts his mad political adventure in the aftermath of the Great War. His literary character became emblematic of the German Conservative Revolution and the work a prophecy for the lost generations. His lesson: nihilism can be defeated by a passion more vivid than the torments of history. The ostracized (outlaw) then finds his salvation in the experience of war to which the elevation of the spirit follows.

The Outlaws opens with a quotation from Franz Schauweker: "In life, blood and knowledge must coincide. Then the spirit arises." Therein lies the lesson of the work, which opposes knowledge and experience and eventually discovers that these two opposites inevitably attract each other. A question then arises: should we let these two attractions cancel each other out, collide, destroy each other and with them the one who experiences them; or should we resolve the tension in creation and reflection.

In love with a Germany in tatters, spurned by History in the latter days of the First World War, in which his youth prevented him from participating, Ernst von Salomon embodied the conservative revolutionary passion in action when he chose to join the Corps Francs to continue the struggle. But if Dominique Venner was able to describe this mythical epic as a nihilistic adventure, Salomon's unreasonable obstinacy appears as an authentic quest for meaning that continues throughout his journey as a warrior and then as a militant. Despite the prevailing disarray and aimlessness from which some hotheads seem to suffer, the marginalized Salomon yet expressed the instinct to reclaim a beloved nation. In his eyes, only revolution could restore Germany to its former splendor; the one for which it had been taught to die.

A Passionate Revolutionary

Ernst von Salomon was just 16 years old when the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918; the age of madness, of ideas to be cut to the bone and of passions that prevent resignation. If confusion is the first feeling that the author confesses at the opening of *The Outlaws*, hope immediately follows and it is this permanent tension between two contrary tendencies that makes the relentless struggle his reason for living. For the author's life, at the beginning of his work, seems to be based solely on the pursuit of his ideal, which he undoubtedly already foresees as a mirage, but which he nevertheless refuses to abandon. Thus he confesses: "Also we were ready to act under the only impulse of our feelings; and it did not matter much that one could show thereafter the rightness of our acts. What mattered was that in those days acts were done." It is not the reason, it is not the idea which guides the aspirant in love

with Germany and vexed by a humiliating peace, but a sentimental rage which he does not control. From there, the revolutionary instinct is born; a destructive instinct by essence, which has as its sole objective the overthrow of the established order, including the inner order, spiritual and moral, of the one it animates. It is a question of experiencing the world by experiencing oneself, of experimenting before claiming to know.

Movement before anything else; all-out action appears to be the only way to salvation; the only conviction of this frustrated generation being that nothing good can emerge from the era of parliamentarism and the reigning bourgeoisie. Perhaps he does not understand it yet, but it is against the immobility of systematic thought, whether liberal or Marxist, that it is important to fight. And if we speak of salvation, it is not only a collective salvation in the restoration of German greatness. The war, then the defeat, and the conditions of peace have morally destroyed the individual. The movement is thus the condition of the survival of each one, a vital attempt to find meaning: "In the attack we hoped to find a deliverance, a supreme exaltation of our forces; we hoped to be confirmed in the conviction of being equal to any destiny, we hoped to feel in us the true values of the world. We walked, nourished by other certainties than those that could be valid for our country." Lines that join those of Ernst Jünger's *War* as an inner experience and show to what extent the spirit of revenge animates individuals and creates warriors rather than soldiers; emancipated men rather than removable functionaries.

This is the expression of an impatient madness, of a madness in love. To refuse to stand still, to constantly put oneself at risk as one questions oneself, is the sign that the nationalist revolution rejects the platonic love of an idea. Because the beloved nation has been lost, it is necessary to conquer it anew, to occupy its borders as one marries its folds, and not to seduce it. Yet there comes a time when the act is no longer enough to nourish hope. Violence exalts perhaps as much as it destroys the one who undergoes it, as well as the one who exercises it. The author admits: "We had lit a pyre where not only inanimate objects were burning; our hopes, our aspirations were also burning; the laws of the bourgeoisie, the values of the civilized world, everything was burning, the last remnants of the vocabulary and belief in the things and ideas of that time, all that dusty junk that was still lying around in our hearts." The ideal is annihilated; the idealist tends towards nihilism. The fatality, more and more evident, compels the warrior to consider again his aspirations, or to die of having consumed all that lived in his heart. In order to survive, it is necessary to project an ideal again, to carve an alternative in the tarnished banner that is still being waved without believing in it. The movement becomes an empty shell that only asks to be filled by a generation of the mind; the experience is vain without knowledge. It is no longer just a matter of moving to survive, but of knowing in what direction to move, and for what purpose. Then, the revolutionary passion, remembering that it was born from the reaction, offers itself a

daring conservative goal.

Intellectual and Violent: The Outpouring of the Spirit

The permanent interweaving of collective and individual considerations in the work makes it a perfect psychological portrait of the revolutionary, the militant in the strict sense (i.e., with military methods). But in the political struggle of the immediate post-war period, it was first of all the young Ernst von Salomon who revealed himself to himself; intellectual and violent, rather than an idea that progresses. At the beginning, the political will of the author and his accomplices is at best a quest, a desire to find reference points in the fog of the prevailing crisis, more than a real desire. But if simple reflection is not the starting point of this quest, it is a symptom of the fact that the German ideal of the nascent Conservative Revolution is not purely philosophical. It is more encompassing, more total: it is a "worldview" (*Weltanschauung*) that is certainly impregnated with philosophy, digested by the intellect, but also concretely experienced, visceral. This vision of the world feeds as much on thought as on will, and is delivered under the features of feeling in lyrical, dreamlike, suggestive or allegorical terms which defy the jargon and rationalist conceptual divisions. This is an emblematic style of the German conservative revolution, which can be found in the writings of Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt, and which aims to suggest, touch, and project rather than simply to expose. For the outlaw, embodied by Salomon, is not a man of the salon. He does not experience knowledge either; for him, experience comes first. The feeling of the young man precedes his intellectual formation and his metapolitical conscience. It is only by writing that he searches for the truth of eternal values in the extremity of lived experiences, in order to transform experience into knowledge. To elevate it, to erect it to the rank of the useful and the accessible to all, only then does the work take its meaning.

We find here a magnificent expression of the paradox of conservative revolutionary thought—modern among the anti-moderns, in that it seeks to turn modernity against itself; but also, and above all, in that it can seem to give priority to action, the impulse arising from the realm of the sensible and not from that of ideas. What is not experienced is only bourgeois procrastination, as one of Ernst von Salomon's comrades seems to suggest, to whom the work of Walter Ratheneau—assassinated with our author's complicity by the Consul Organization—entitled, *Die neue Gesellschaft* (*The New Society*) inspires only this terse comment: "So many sparks and so little dynamite." Privilege, whose wreckage is acknowledged by Salomon himself, when he admits with spite that the considerations of high politics made the Freikorps useful idiots in the service of foreign interests. And the will to act against all odds, in a permanent flight forward seems to spare only those who, like him, find themselves capable of

sublimating action through thought and extracting from it a little truth, clarifying a vision of the world, proposing a goal. The revolutionary madness, anarchic and unreasonable impulse, is as if channeled, balanced by the conservative instinct that calls for greater wisdom and an indispensable effort of conceptualization.

But this balance, Salomon would not find it, although he had the intuition of it, before his release from prison. Still too fiery, too extreme in his will to act at all costs, to the point of crime, to a damnation he did not even seem to fear. The outlaws are the rejected ones that the slap of history has thrown into the arms of the demon; the marginalized ones that exclusion will destroy for the weakest, will comfort in a besieged citadel for the others. Shortly before his death, more than 40 years after the publication of *The Outlaws*, he confessed that he had really questioned the meaning of his action during his second imprisonment, after which he fully embraced the movement of the conservative revolution by initiating for good the "revolution of the spirit," previously mentioned and present in germ in his work. That is to say, a work of redefinition of concepts, like that of the French encyclopedists of the 18th century, presumed precursors of the French Revolution. But as if the tension between knowledge and experience was fundamentally unsurpassable, history confronted this work, this knowledge, with the experience of politics and would make it wither away by the ideological and political detour of National Socialism.

Valentin Fontan-Moret, a conservative mellowed by reaction. This article appears through the kind courtesy of [PHILITT](#).

[Featured](#): Portrait of Ernst von Salomon in 1932.

