

## The Democratic Dream: Stefan Heym in America

By Regina U. Hahn

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Focusing principally on what she characterises as Heym's life-long and remarkably consistent "belief in human agency and progress as well as his insistence on public debate and freedom of speech" (131), Regina Hahn sets out to demonstrate how his democratic virtues were developed and applied during his long period of exile in the United States. She does so by analysing *Deutsches Volksecho*, the New York-based newspaper he edited in 1937-39, and three of the 'American' novels he originally wrote in English – *Hostages* (1942), *The Crusaders* (1948), and *Goldsborough* (1953) (a fourth, *The Eyes of Reason* (1951), is not discussed although it raises many issues relevant to the analysis).

In the spirit of the *Volksfront*, Heym made of the newspaper a forum open to all shades of anti-fascist opinion. Influenced by the American democratic tradition, he encouraged grassroots activism and participation in political debate and ensured that the voices of labour, women, youth and ethnic organizations were clearly heard. It should not be overlooked, however, that the newspaper was also decisively shaped by Heym's own political preoccupations. Displaying considerable courage in exposing Nazi activities in the USA, he succeeded in ensuring that leading Nazis were brought before the law courts, although – as Hahn rightly insists – he was convinced that public opinion and not legal process was the only effective way of dealing with the threat they represented. Like many other émigrés, he was convinced that not the Nazis but the German people's potential for resistance represented the true Germany; he gave coverage to the significance of the Spanish Civil War for the anti-fascist struggle; and, until the shock of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, he insisted on presenting the

Soviet Union as a democratic society because he saw it as the only reliable opponent of Hitler on the European continent.

In her analysis of *Hostages* Hahn emphasises two key elements in democracy's struggle with fascism: the communal experience of the Czech people as embodied in Janoshik, and the specific democratic traditions of the USA, which Heym intended should encourage his US readership to identify with the Czech people. The response of each of the five hostages to their own and their country's situation is measured in turn against the principles of democratic theory and praxis. Preissinger follows only his selfish class interests, Wallerstein's attempt to adopt a detached, scientific approach to their plight is exposed as inadequate and ultimately inhuman, Prokosch's use of "literature [more precisely: the theatre] as a substitute for life" (72) is escapist and egotistical, while Lobkowitz is the socially and politically aware intellectual who is unable to act decisively and in a socially responsible way. Only Janoshik emerges from this analysis with credit as "an intellectual of the people who is familiar with the problems of communal life and social reality and who tests his theories through practical application to assure that they are socially meaningful." (79) This characterisation, which makes him sound perhaps too much like a social scientist, hints at an occasional tendency to overstretch the argument, as when Hahn argues that "the Nazis misuse social-democratic discourse (which reflects Czech liberal traditions sufficiently enough to prompt reflex responses of acquiescence among the public) to divert attention from their antidemocratic and irrational power." (63) There seems to be little to support this contention in the novel, where the overriding impression is that, far from adopting social-democratic attitudes, the Nazis are openly brutal to and contemptuous of the Czechs, and the latter can have few illusions about their position inferiority under their occupiers. In showing that the antifascist focus in *Hostages* shifts in *The Crusaders* to a preoccupation with the role of intellectuals in the defence of American democracy, Hahn argues more convincingly that Heym himself moves from feeling like an immigrant to seeing himself as an American anxious to fulfil his responsibilities as a citizen. In *Goldsborough* Heym highlights the soft underbelly of American democracy, showing how it can be undermined by a corrupt political machine which intellectuals seem to be unable to keep in check, but, as Hahn points out, the novel ultimately reaffirms American democracy's strength at grassroots level and its capacity to overturn the country's own form of fascism.

In conclusion, a few quibbles. Heym did not complete a degree in Berlin (23) before going into exile in 1933, although he did receive his school certificate there after the uproar caused by the publication of his poem “Exportgeschäft” in the *Chemnitzer Volksstimme* on 7 September 1931 had forced him to leave his home-town. The suggestion that Heym deliberately “withdrew into private life” (58) after the *Deutsches Volksecho* closed down in 1939 seems to me misleading given the dire circumstances in which he found himself at the time. The rather bald statement that Heym was “not a communist” in 1949 appears to depend on a rather literal reading of a statement by an unnamed acquaintance (Howard Fast, in fact) which, given the specific political context of post-war America, it might arguably be more appropriate to read as playfully ironic or even mildly sarcastic in intention. This being so, any discussion of Heym’s political convictions at the time becomes much more complex and intriguing.