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E.H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher: a Very 'Special Relationship'

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It is very difficult or perhaps impossible for him to get out of his skin, theoretically and ideologically. He is steeped in English empiricism and rationalism, his mind is very far from what to him are abstract dialectical speculations, and so he cannot really break down the barrier between his own way of thinking and Marxism.

Isaac Deutscher on E.H. Carr (1955)¹

He calls me 'a great respecter of policies and a despiser - sometimes - of revolutionary ideas and principles', and speaks of 'my impatience with Utopias, dreams and revolutionary agitation'... But does not Deutscher lean to the other side? Are not his eyes sometimes so firmly fixed on revolutionary Utopias and revolutionary ideas as to overlook the expediencies which often governed policy - even in the Lenin period?

E.H. Carr on Isaac Deutscher (1969)²

At first sight their personal amity might seem puzzling: on one side, a self-educated former member of the Polish Communist Party, an exile from Hitler and Stalin stranded in London and on the other an English historian who was an unmistakable product of Cambridge, a former member of the Foreign Office, schooled in a diplomatic service famous as a bastion of British traditionalism.

Tamara Deutscher on E.H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher (1983)³

Along the long road that led from the Truman Doctrine in 1947 to the final collapse of Soviet power over 40 years later there were an almost infinite number of intellectual battles and skirmishes surrounding the Cold War. Some of these took place in public, but many tended to be

M. Cox (ed.), E. H. Carr
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fought out in the pages of academic journals, magazines and books that were read by few but thought at the time to be deeply significant. Given the turbulent times, most of these encounters tended to be highly polemical, several became the subject of litigation, though some – like the great 1960s debate about the origins of the Cold War – helped redefine the way historians thought about the world around them. In the end, however, nearly all of these discussions returned to the same set of questions: about who started the conflict, which of the two sides (if any) held the moral high ground, on whose side should one stand and what attitude should one adopt towards the two principal antagonists? On these particularly dangerous rocks any number of reputations were made and unmade, friendships broken and forged, careers wrecked.

But it was the ‘Russian Question’, ultimately, that was to become the litmus test for most western intellectuals; and where one stood on this single issue determined one’s political loyalties, pitting democratic socialist against communist, Marxist against Marxist, conservative against liberal, and the Left as a whole against their various political opponents. The ‘line’ one took on Soviet Russia – whether you were for it or against it, characterized it as a workers’ state or a new form of totalitarianism, progressive or reactionary, an aggressive threat or an insecure power more sinned against than sinning – defined you in ways that must now seem faintly bizarre. But that is the way things were in a bipolar world that not only divided the superpowers and gave rise to that most geographically specific of all Cold War terms – ‘East’ and ‘West’ – but divided people within the ‘West’ as well. Nor should we be so surprised by this. The Cold War after all was something from which none of us could escape: it shaped our political choices, inserted itself into our economic lives, led to wars that killed millions, justified the most brutal forms of repression, spawned a vast ideological apparatus, legitimized surveillance, made ideas an issue of national security and for the better part of 40 years threatened to destroy us all. Little wonder the Cold War was discussed and theorized in such minute and bitter detail. In many ways ‘it was the most important relationship in our lives’.4

If the Cold War in general and the Russian Question in particular helped define an era, it also helped create and sustain one of the more interesting intellectual partnerships of the period between the former diplomat and one-time assistant editor of The Times, E.H. Carr, and the Polish Jewish émigré and writer, Isaac Deutscher. They arrived at the Finland station called the Soviet Union by very different routes however; and it might be worth pausing just to see how.