If Andreapol, the lazy Russian town on the banks of the Dvina River, gave young Isaiah Berlin his first taste of Russianness, it was on the banks of the Thames, in London, that he had become a Russian-Jew. This hyphenated label, which Berlin later came to use to define himself, was a product of immigration and acculturation pressures and processes. It was a type of identity that emerged after displacement, as part of a reorientation in a new environment and a hosting society. Categorizing Jewish East European immigrants as “Russian-Jews” was a common Anglo-Jewish practice. More than anything else, it was part of the new community’s social language and typology. The category was neither available to nor necessary for Berlin and his family in preindependence Latvia or in revolutionary Petrograd, and the acquisition of such an identity trope, unconscious as it may be, should be understood as taking place in the wake of anglicization. By “anglicization” I refer to the conscious effort to integrate into the new society, accept its central norms and cultural values, and acquire certain English character traits, which make one seem as a sociable and respectable person by upper middle-class standards. Reinventing oneself as a “Russian-Jew,” this chapter argues, was not contradictory to but rather compatible with this effort, and it allowed young Berlin to maintain that delicate equilibrium between what he denounced as “assimilation” and what we would probably prefer to call “acculturation.”

Becoming a Russian-Jew, however, was a process, not an event. To understand its crystallization one must take into account the type of education and new kind of interaction with non-Jews that the adolescent Berlin experienced in London.

Ideological reorientation was part and parcel of this process. The contrast between English freedom and “Eastern” Russian authoritarianism, no doubt, seemed much bleaker after immigration, but was not invented by it. For an anglophile like Mendel Berlin, England had always represented a land of liberty, a miraculous island where one could enjoy the pleasures of tea, empire, parliamentarism, and high-culture, all at the same time. But even in retrospect, Mendel did not rationalize his decision to immigrate to England solely in terms of the rise of Bolshevism. Heavily invested in plywood and having long-established business ties with British companies, Mendel's memoirs identify the force pushing him to migrate in a nationalist high tide bad for business and Jewish life, no less than in Bolshevism.
For Isaiah Berlin, however, it became significant to trace back his unyielding anticommunist persuasions to his childhood experiences in Petrograd, where he witnessed Bolsheviks dragging an old and terrified policeman down the streets of Petrograd, probably to be executed. Berlin would later write, “I’ve never forgotten it. It was the most horrible thing I ever saw with my own eyes. It gave me a distaste for violence for the rest of my life. That was the only revolutionary horror I ever saw.” The Petrograd episode came up on several other occasions: “Anyone who has gone through it [the 1917 Revolution] even as an innocent child, as I was at the age of eight, would have found it difficult to join the Communist Party later,” the aged Berlin insisted. Such statements were accepted by Berlin's biographer, and made a huge impact on his interpreters, who also suspected that his anticommunist commitment was, as Terry Eagleton called it, “pre-set for him by an early political trauma.” But we must avoid an uncritical acceptance of such biographical reductionism. Memory has a narrative of its own, and the Cold War was an excellent blender of such memories, coloring his last moments as a child in Eastern Europe with Orwellian hues. The monstrosity of Bolshevik totalitarianism was understood in retrospect. Leonard Schapiro, a close friend of Berlin's who also spent his childhood in Riga and revolutionary Petrograd, astutely commented on this in his autobiographical sketch:

I may add that my critical attitude to Soviet Russia was in no way due to the fact that I had spent my early boyhood in Petrograd during the Revolution and the Civil War. On the contrary, these years, for all the hardship and brutality which characterized them, remained in my memory as a time of exhilaration—new art forms, the elation of watching a new society in the making, in fact a period of great romance. It was only many years later, when I came to study Lenin's period of rule and rise to power in detail, that the reality of the revolution (or what I concluded had been the reality) became clearer to me.

When Schapiro sent a copy of his piece to Berlin, he replied enthusiastically that he was deeply moved to read such a vivid depiction of their common past. To that he added:

I agree that our experiences in Petrograd did not set us against the Regime […] Our parents so disliked the new regime that this alone might have turned us toward it, and we learned the truth like everyone else from the public sources afterward. I am sure we are both suspect to the Left as victims of the Revolution, and are bitterly biased against it, but this is not true.

It would be equally erroneous to assume that all of Berlin's writings on freedom, including essays from his juvenilia, were simply responses to this single childhood experience in Petrograd. Revolution and communism loomed over his youth, but were shadows more than concrete experiences. This is the proper context for understanding Berlin's early writings from the period, including his 1928 Truro Prize-winning essay from St. Paul's on the concept of freedom. It is all too tempting to project “Two Concepts of Liberty” backward onto this early essay, written by an eighteen-year-old student. Such a reading, however, would mean falling prey to one of the worst excesses of teleological thinking in the history of ideas. It would falsely assume author consistency, and use Berlin's life story