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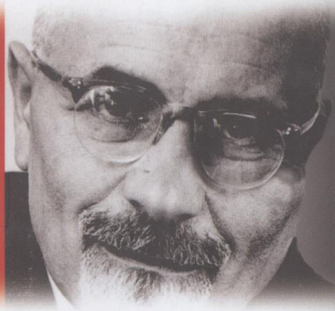

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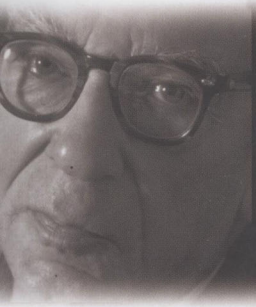

ISAIAH

THE COVERT PUNISHMENT OF A COLD WAR HERETIC

DAVID CAUTE

David Caute

ISAAC & ISAIAH

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It goes without saying that had the late Isaiah Berlin and the late Isaac Deutscher not written their enduringly fertile and marvellously erudite works, the world would have been a poorer place and this book would not have been written.

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Preface

BOTH ISAIAH BERLIN (1909–1997) and Isaac Deutscher (1907–1967) are regarded as major thinkers and politically influential intellectuals of the twentieth century. Both achieved the height of their influence during the Cold War. Their mutual antipathy was intense and in Berlin's case without parallel.

On one occasion Berlin explained to the present writer precisely why Deutscher should not be allowed to hold an academic post – anywhere. This conversation took place in the common room of All Souls College, Oxford, early in 1963. He declined to explain, however, whether he had in mind a specific post at a particular university. That was 'confidential'. Although Berlin's passionate discourse on that occasion made a sharp impression, I never pursued its consequences (if any) – very soon afterwards I became more preoccupied by his stance during the All Souls reform crisis.

Memories from that distant time sprang their lock a few years ago when ongoing research into the cultural Cold War brought me to the Isaiah Berlin archive in the Bodleian Library. There I came across partial evidence of what Berlin had done, or might have done, to Deutscher at the time of my conversation with him. Quite apart from the exceptionally gifted, and indeed charismatic, personalities involved, the story of Berlin's bitter feud with Deutscher held an added attraction: it offered a path into the densely populated controversies between historians and political theorists during the years when the American and Soviet systems confronted one other in naked rivalry. Surely that was what the personal antagonism between the devoted liberal and the dedicated Marxist was about?

Yes, to a large extent, but that is far from the whole story. Isaiah Berlin had become one of the presiding voices of Anglo-American liberalism. On virtually every issue he took the anti-Soviet position. Deutscher by contrast remained faithful to his Leninist heritage and resolutely defended Soviet

conduct. Although a critic of Stalin, he nevertheless regarded his work as essential to Soviet modernisation. Deutscher relentlessly disparaged Western positions while prophesying a true socialist democracy in post-Stalin Russia.

Berlin and Deutscher clashed bitterly about Marx, Marxism, Lenin and Trotsky. Deutscher ridiculed in print Berlin's warnings about the perils of monism and the determinist doctrine of 'historical inevitability'.

Berlin's famous definitions of liberty were dismissed by Deutscher as little more than an apologia for bourgeois conservatism.

Berlin revered Pasternak, whereas Deutscher disparaged *Doctor Zhivago*. Berlin admired Orwell whereas Deutscher denounced *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for exciting Cold War hysteria.

Almost all of Berlin's close colleagues in the field of Soviet studies regarded Deutscher's writings about East European satellite states with hostility, suspicion, even contempt.

Towards the end of his life Deutscher became a guru and hero to the New Left, which Berlin found intolerable. Deutscher excoriated America's war in Vietnam whereas Berlin, who subscribed to the domino theory, refused to condemn it.

But one must guard against reductionism; in this case, the conclusion that the two scholars can be viewed simply as protagonists for diametrically opposed ideological positions. The further one looks into it, the more apparent become sources of friction rooted in personal history and psychology. In terms of identity, this was a civil war, a fratricidal rivalry. Born two years apart, both of these high-voltage scholars arrived in England as immigrants in flight from totalitarian violence, both acquired exceptional mastery of a language, English, that they had not inherited, both forged intersecting paths into the Anglo-American intellectual establishment, commanding space in the highbrow press and radio while sharing the patronage of (often) the same editors and producers. You can find flattering words about Berlin in *Time* magazine, praise for Deutscher in *Newsweek*, his image on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Both competed to enlighten English and American audiences about the mysteries of European thought and Russian history, pumping out cosmopolitan oxygen.

Both were non-believing Jews attached to their Jewish identity but with sharply conflicting attitudes towards Israel and Zionism. Deutscher's lauded 'non-Jewish Jews' were not Berlin's. Both lost close relatives during the Holocaust.

Each bequeathed a massive archive: letters to, letters from, diaries, notebooks, press cuttings. From this heavy load of material emerge at least two key facts. First, Berlin was by far the more highly strung and quixotic letter writer,

with an inclination to adjust his message and expressed sentiments depending on the recipient.[1] His purchase of a Dictaphone no doubt encouraged his natural loquacity, his ingrained prolixity (what he himself called logorrhoea). Deutscher's letters on the whole are more conventional, more measured and guarded, devoid of Berlin's often impossible syntax and ebullient slapdashery. Deutscher keeps the tighter rein on his emotions – except when orating to mass audiences and thus releasing the Dr Jekyll from Mr Hyde.

The second key fact is that while Berlin's letters convey or betray from the early 1950s an unrelenting animosity towards Deutscher, the fire is not returned and Berlin passes almost unmentioned in Deutscher's correspondence. Deutscher most certainly regarded Berlin as an ideological opponent, a dominant figure in the Anglo-American establishment's intellectual landscape, yet it was enough to leave him for dead in the very occasional book review. Mr Deutscher may not have suspected that these rare burial ceremonies were never forgiven by Professor Berlin.

'May not' – one must speculate for lack of hard evidence. By the time of Deutscher's early death in 1967, he may or may not have known precisely what action Berlin had taken against him regarding the academic appointment he almost desperately sought. I suspect he didn't. In the wake of his death, Berlin entered into a tortuous, self-exonerating correspondence with Deutscher's widow, Tamara. Was he telling her the truth? We shall see. Mrs Deutscher clearly did not believe his version of events but it seems that she – and therefore Deutscher himself, whose working life she fully shared – lacked proof. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the action taken by Berlin, which he never fully revealed, preferring an elaborate narrative of denial, was to haunt him for the thirty years he outlived Deutscher – but it refused to go away.

It is remarkable how the Deutscher case has passed unmentioned by Berlin's numerous admirers, although Michael Ignatieff alludes to it flectingly. The index of *The Book of Isaiah*, a collection of tributes, some eulogistic, offers a single, passing reference to Deutscher as one of Berlin's 'academic *bêtes noires*' whom Berlin thought 'politically tainted'.[2] But the overwhelming emphasis of Berlin's friends has been on what he thought, believed, wrote and said, or his gift for empathy and instant understanding – not what he did, unless generosity and kindness to interviewers, assistants and students be counted as action. We hear little or nothing about Berlin's behaviour when practical measures were required against an adversary or in the heat of a college crisis.

This book sets out to explore Berlin's actions and allegiances against the background of his professed beliefs. To that extent, it is bound to be a somewhat revisionist enterprise and will no doubt arouse a fierce defence from his

admirers. Although my own ideological position is far removed from Isaac Deutscher's, I acknowledge that I am also out of sympathy with Berlin's brilliantly expressed version of liberalism. (He styled me a 'Jacobin', in his lexicon only one step short of 'Bolshevik'.) Actually, I was fond and admiring of him, like almost everyone, and perhaps can do no more in these pages than trim the giant's untended toenails. The affectionate recall, sometimes breathless adulation, he still engenders will rightly survive the narrative set out in these pages – bearing in mind that we were not entirely surprised when we learned that the far side of the moon, the side hitherto unseen, carries the deepest craters.

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Introduction

A CONVERSATION IN ALL SOULS

THE CONVERSATION TOOK place in the common room during the first week of March 1963. It was the idle half-hour after lunch when one might drift in from the buttery, with its curved, panelled walls and coffered ceiling shaped as an oval dome, the work of Hawksmoor.

Isaiah greeted me. 'Do you have a moment to spare? I seek your advice.'

He shepherded us into armchairs close to a window overlooking the fellows' garden. It could be no one else's garden since ours was a college uniquely without students.

Then in his early fifties, Isaiah wore thick-framed glasses and a dark suit with waistcoat, his perennial pipe to hand. His thickly moulded features, two deep furrows running down either side of a broad nose, conveyed their characteristic animation – the manifest pleasure of being Isaiah – but on this occasion he seemed faintly ill at ease, the large ears extended, a touch of the troubled elephant.

'I seek your advice,' he repeated, then abruptly asked what, 'in principle', should disbar a man from holding a senior academic post. 'Leaving aside,' he added in his rapid tones, 'lack of acceptable scholarly credentials, drunkenness, wife-swapping – nothing like that.'

I hesitated, as one might. Impatient, he boomed out the answer: 'May I tell you? Dishonesty. Falsifying evidence. Deliberate falsification.'

I asked whether he had anyone in mind.

He nodded. 'Indeed I do. Deutscher. Perhaps you know him?'

'Isaac Deutscher? No.'

'But you know his work. You admire him enormously – most of our young scholars on the Left admire Deutscher.'

I said that I knew Deutscher's *Stalin* and his Trotsky trilogy. I was also familiar with his essays attacking 'renegades'.

Isaiah appraised me. 'Quite sufficient.' Thereupon the dark, sonorous voice boomed and bounded in pursuit of thoughts lodged within long and complex sentences punctuated by elaborate parentheses and diversions. The style of delivery had affinities with that of his old friend Maurice Bowra, warden of my undergraduate college, Wadham, but whereas Bowra sprayed his chosen audience in machine-gun bursts, his features cast in stone, Berlin tended towards a semi-humorous bombardment, softened by pauses, caveats and almost apologetic half-smiles.

He asked whether I had read Deutscher's review of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. I had. I was aware that Isaiah had known and revered the late Boris Pasternak whereas Deutscher had likened his famous novel to a voice from the grave. I commented that I was out of sympathy with Deutscher's complaint that Pasternak's characters had never heard of Lenin or Trotsky and were allowed to witness few of the major events of the Revolution – most Russians, after all, had not been present at the signing of the Treaty of Brest–Litovsk. It had also struck me that Deutscher, although loudly a Marxist, displayed a marked preoccupation with Great Men.

Berlin nodded, evidently gratified. 'All very true. Deutscher worships Lenin, you see. He would like us to view Trotsky as Jesus on the Cross – the great modern tragedy.'

I ventured that Deutscher's biographies were impressively researched and extremely well written.

Berlin nodded again but grimly, the pipe between his teeth. 'To read him is to be persuaded unless one knows better. He is not short of followers and devotees, most of them, I have no doubt, sincere people resistant to what Deutscher would call the prevailing "Cold War culture".'

Perhaps presumptuously, I asked whether Deutscher, hitherto a freelance, was now in line for an academic post, but the question was somehow circumvented and got lost in further reflections about the ugly gap between what Deutscher wrote and what he knew.

I had first heard Isaiah's rapid-fire voice (and his name) in the early Fifties, as a teenager listening to his inspirational talks on the BBC's Third Programme. I had known him in the flesh during the three years since I came to All Souls and of course always enjoyed his presence, his wit, his abundant delight in being himself. Genial and affectionate, he took pleasure in maintaining friendly relations with the younger fellows. I was familiar with *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, *Historical Inevitability* and *Two Concepts of Liberty* – and with his high-profile polemics against the historian E.H. Carr, who often made common cause with Isaac Deutscher. But if he and Deutscher had ever publicly crossed swords I was unaware of it, though they were widely

regarded as Titans of opposing camps in the Cold War, at that time raging bright.

'Deutscher's gifts cannot be denied,' Isaiah said. 'But would you not agree that the more a man knows, the less excuse he has for peddling pernicious myths? For dishonesty? For falsifying evidence – deliberate falsification?'

I asked whether his main objection to Deutscher was his attachment to Marxism.

'Not at all. That is covered by academic freedom. We have Marxist academics like Mills and Hobsbawm whom I may even admire, though in complete disagreement with them. But not Deutscher. Evidence must not be suppressed. He ought to know better – and he most probably does. He is not fit to teach.'

I gathered that Deutscher should not be, must not be, received into the academic Ark – anywhere. But where in particular? Berlin again sidestepped my question, citing the demands of confidentiality.

'Think ill of me if you will, but I am really not at liberty to say.'

I mentioned that Deutscher was already a widely invited visiting lecturer in Britain, if still restricted in America.

A nod. 'He mainly lectures to the converted. But serious teaching – a protracted relationship with undergraduates, guiding them in their reading, moulding their outlook, establishing a curriculum – is not the same as the one-off lecture, come and go. How are young undergraduates, much less informed and perceptive than you, to survive his unscrupulous distortions? Believe me, your run-of-the-mill hack who dutifully toes the party line, word for word, chapter and verse, is far less dangerous than Deutscher. He passes for an independent historian, a free spirit. He confesses how, most regrettably, uncontrollable circumstances had by 1920 or 1921 forced Lenin and Trotsky to become Lenin and Trotsky. He explains how the necessary collectivisation and industrialisation of Russia was undertaken by a leader, Stalin, who most regrettably turned into a tyrant. Innocent people believe that Deutscher is an anti-Stalinist. Doesn't he say so, time and again?'

He paused to study me. Isaiah pausing somewhat resembled a car coming in to the garage for more petrol with its engine still ticking over.

'You don't, perhaps, agree? Perhaps you think I am consumed by Cold War hysteria?' He smiled. 'Perhaps not a fair question.'

I asked why none of these strictures against Deutscher applied to his ally in Cold War polemics, E.H. Carr. Presumably Isaiah would have no objection to appointing Carr to a teaching post?

'Quite so. I supported Ted's candidature at Trinity, Cambridge. He and I gave a joint seminar here some years ago, perhaps before your time.' Berlin said