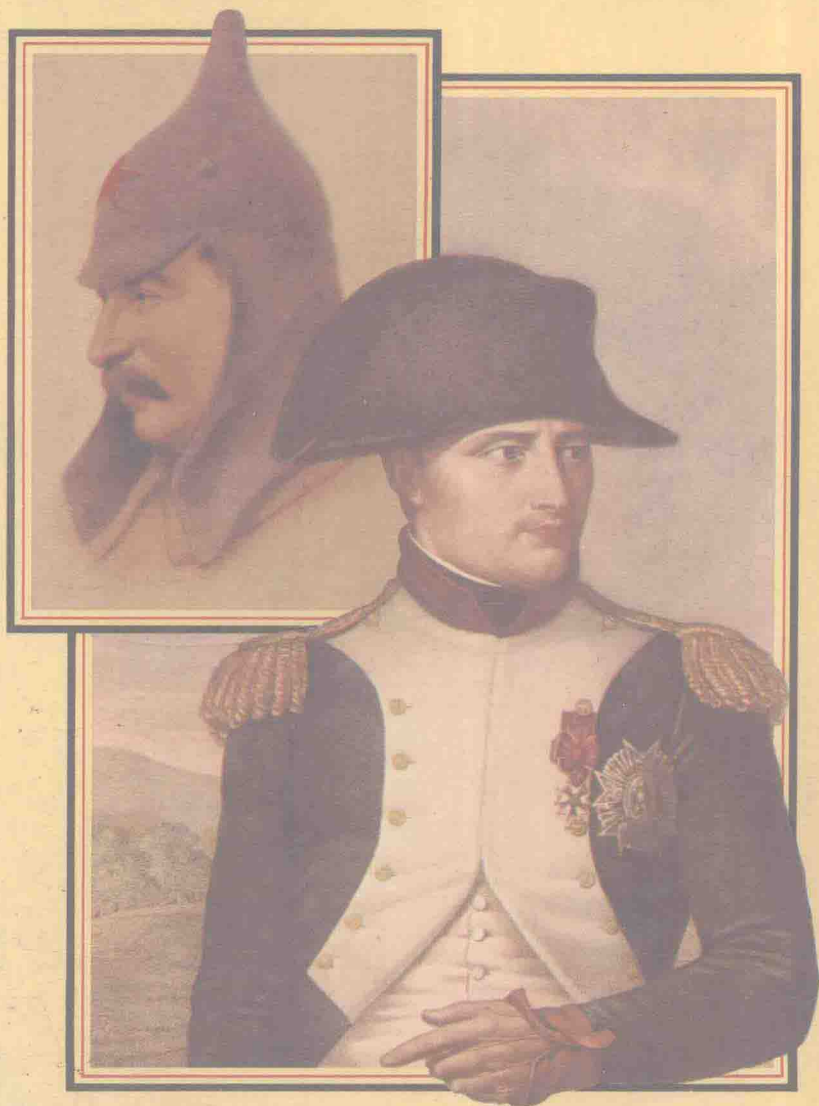


# FROM NAPOLEON — To STALIN — AND OTHER ESSAYS



— E.H.CARR —

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by

E. H. Carr

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# Introduction

If any unity can be claimed for this collection of essays and reviews written on particular occasions over the past thirty years, the clue must be sought in the title which I have given to the first section, "Historical Perspectives". A certain advantage perhaps accrues to the historian who grew up, and formed his first impressions, in a society which had no premonition of the catastrophe of 1914. The doctrines of liberalism and individualism held virtually unchallenged sway. In Britain, progress towards their realization was the core of the now derided "Whig interpretation of history". Even "the nations not so blessed as thee" were travelling along the same path. The standard of living of the "workers", of the depressed classes, was slowly rising. Beyond the civilized pale, primitive peoples benefited from the benevolent and nurturing supremacy of the white race. By the turn of the century some cracks had begun to appear in the seemingly solid structure. But these did not matter too much. Admitted imperfections could and would be dealt with. The world was on the whole a good place; and it was getting better.

Remembrance of these things sixty or seventy years later must, I feel, sharpen one's consciousness of the deep cleft which divides that remote age from the present, and of the historical process that brought it about. A civilization perished in 1914. The Second World War demolished even the ruins which the first had left standing. Technological advances have both softened and intensified the impact of change. But nobody who lived in that past, and is conscious of the magnitude of the gulf which separates the then from the now, can believe that the option of a return to it is open. The historical process cannot be reversed.

Indeed, if we sought to enumerate the reasons why Britain, which in the last century led the world economically and politically, now lags behind almost all the other Western nations, we should have to accord a high place on the list to the nostalgia for past glories which dominates—unconsciously, but none the less profoundly—our national thought and attitudes. If Britannia ruled the waves in

virtue of the elusive values of liberalism and individualism, of “free” enterprise, “free” trade, “free” market prices, “free” wage bargaining, “free” floating interest rates, it seems natural to attribute our decline to the abandonment of these principles and practices, and to assume that a revival of them would ensure our return to former greatness. Other nations, not burdened with this memory of nineteenth-century supremacy, find it less difficult to face the problems of the present and the future. We face only the past. The remedies we seek to apply belong to the past, and are irrelevant to the present or the future. The forward-looking utopias of the New Left are out of fashion, and have been replaced by the backward-looking utopias of the New Right. It is no improvement.

Only a few of the essays in this volume deal with the subject which has been the main theme of my work since 1945, and about which I have written amply elsewhere—the history of the Russian revolution. But this has never been far from my thoughts. Most modern historians would agree in regarding the First World War and the Russian revolution as two facets of the same turning-point in history. But this does not take us far. Several of these essays relate to nineteenth-century Russian history, and are designed to illustrate the incompatibilities existing before the revolution between the Russian and Western traditions. The Russian revolution reflected these incompatibilities. It was an event in Russian history, but it was also an event of worldwide significance. The balance is important. If we overemphasize its Russian aspect, we treat it as an event in a far-away country with no lessons, or no positive lessons, for the West. If we underemphasize its Russian characteristics, we assume that a Western revolution pursuing aims akin to those of the Russian revolution would necessarily have taken the same course and incorporated the same elements of a specifically Russian background. Both these views seem to me fallacious.

None of the essays were, however, written with any direct political purpose. I have strayed at random along some by-paths which proved agreeable and rewarding—at any rate, to myself. But all of them are imbued with a sense of the gulf which separates the world of today from the world in which I first began to observe and reflect. In so far as they have any unity, they were inspired by my constant preoccupation with the pace and direction of the historical process, and represent a protest against the profoundly unhistorical view which elevates the values of a comparatively recent Western European past into an absolute standard, a touchstone by which the

values of the present and the future—not to mention those of a remoter past—are to be assessed and judged. Even in writing the personal sketches which I have grouped together under the heading "Profiles", I have been concerned to depict my subjects—five of them historical figures, five of them friends with whom I was more or less closely associated at different periods of my life—against the social and political background of their careers. But I hope that these profiles, as well as some of the other essays, will suffice to show that I am in no way committed to an impersonal view of history.

All but two of these articles were originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, one (No. 11) in the *New York Review of Books* and the last (No. 32) as an interview in the *New Left Review* in the autumn of 1978; and I am indebted to the editors of these journals for kind permission to reprint them here. A few of them may show here and there traces of their date of composition. But any attempt to rewrite them would have been misleading as well as laborious; and I submit them to the critical reader in the form in which they appeared. For the title of the volume I owe a debt of acknowledgement to A. J. P. Taylor, since the first item in it is a review of a book of his published under that title just thirty years ago.

1979

E. H. CARR

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## **Part I Historical Perspectives**



# I From Napoleon to Stalin

Contemporary Europe—and Europe is still the passive, if not the active, centre of the world—is the product of the span of history which runs from the French to the Russian revolution: “from Napoleon to Stalin”, in the words of the title of Mr. A. J. P. Taylor’s latest collection of articles and essays.<sup>1</sup> It was a period of immense achievement and immense fertility in ideas, whose general shape is only just beginning to emerge. All that we can yet clearly discern in retrospect is that a period of history has come to an end, in so far as anything in history ever ends, and that, like every other period of great historical achievement, it bore the seeds of its destruction within it. “The history of modern Europe”, to quote Mr. Taylor again, “can be written in terms of three Titans: Napoleon, Bismarck and Lenin. Of these three men of superlative political genius, Bismarck probably did least harm.” Setting aside for a moment the intrusive moral judgment, it may be admitted that Bismarck stood on a lower level of universal, or European, significance. The real middle term between the French and Russian revolutions is constituted not by any great man but by the abortive European revolution of 1848, to which Mr. Taylor’s longest essay is devoted.

The essential result of the French revolution was to establish the doctrine of popular sovereignty as the foundation of modern Europe, though with no more precise definition of that elusive category “the people” than that popular sovereignty was the antithesis of the personal authority of the monarch. In France Napoleon tamed the revolution and put it into the imperial strait-jacket (and, in so doing, perhaps did more than the revolution itself to make a Bourbon restoration permanently impossible); beyond the borders of France he was the missionary and disseminator of the ideas of the revolution. Hence, as the Napoleonic legend grew through the succeeding century, the literary champions of

<sup>1</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *From Napoleon to Stalin* (London: Hamish Hamilton).

Napoleon in France tended to be men of the Right, whereas outside France it was generally the Left which made him its idol—a perfectly natural phenomenon which Mr. Taylor needlessly attributes to the perversity of the English Left. This ambiguous role is the common destiny of heirs of revolutions, whose business it is to consolidate and stabilize the achievements of the revolution at home and capitalize them abroad.

The French revolution of 1848 was the most significant fiasco in modern history. Its two most percipient observers, Marx and Tocqueville, both seized on its bogus character. "Hegel says somewhere," runs the famous opening passage of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "that all great historic events and personages recur twice; he forgot to add, 'Once as tragedy, the second time as farce.'" And Tocqueville, who describes the makers of 1848 as "endeavouring to warm themselves at the fire of our fathers' passions", compared it with "a bad tragedy performed by provincial actors". Mr. Taylor rather gratuitously seeks to do justice to Tocqueville at the expense of Marx who should, however, not be accused of having overlooked the conservatism of the French peasantry. But in truth both men in their different styles pronounced a strikingly similar verdict. It was Tocqueville in his *Memoirs* who declared that "socialism will always remain the essential characteristic and the most redoubtable remembrance of the revolution of February", and penned this cautiously worded but profound diagnosis:

How should the poor and humble and yet powerful classes not have dreamed of issuing from their poverty and inferiority by means of their power, especially in an epoch when our view into another world has become dimmer and the miseries of this world become more visible and seem more intolerable? They had been working to this end for the last 60 years. . . . And to speak more specially of property, which is, as it were, the foundation of our social order—all the privileges which covered it and, so to speak, concealed the privilege of property having been destroyed, and property remaining the principal obstacle to equality among men, and appearing to be the only sign of inequality—was it not necessary, I will not say that it should be abolished in its turn, but that the thought of abolishing it should occur to the minds of those who did not enjoy it?

In short, with the triumph of the industrial revolution and its inevitable consequence, the rise of the class-conscious proletariat, nothing could ever be the same again—not even political revolutions. In the Europe of 1848 no revolution could be other than a sham if it burked the new issue of socialism, in the sense of the demand for social and economic equality and the challenge to the rights of property. In England the industrial and commercial class, thanks to English leadership and predominance in the industrial revolution, had got what it wanted in the 1830s, and in the next decade successfully faced and nipped in the bud the Chartist rebellion; England had no 1848. In France 1830 had failed to satisfy the ambitions of the French bourgeoisie. The blame fell on Louis Philippe; and for the French middle class the revolution of February, 1848, was a move to consolidate its position and complete the achievement of the great revolution. This was a grave miscalculation. A repeat performance more than 50 years after is always a hazardous enterprise. When the good bourgeois revolutionaries of February 1848, perceived that the driving force of the revolution had passed into the hands of the new proletariat, and that what was being assailed was not monarchy but property, they hastily changed over to the other side of the barricades. The June days bloodily and dramatically drove home the lesson already inherent in the undramatic and bloodless defeat of the Chartists: the rift between bourgeois democracy and socialism.

In central Europe the fiasco of 1848 was gravest of all. For here the bourgeoisie had not merely failed, as in France, to consolidate its achievements, but had failed altogether to attain political power; the counterpart of the English and French revolutions had not occurred at all. In the German-speaking lands, where the industrial revolution had already made progress second only to that made in England, the revolution of 1848 was an attempt by the German bourgeoisie to carry to victory the principles of the English and French revolutions at a time when the socialist revolution had already begun to knock at the door. This attempt, which was to be repeated more than 50 years later in the Russian revolution of 1905, could not succeed. The futilities and inconsistencies of the German democrats of 1848 have often been exposed. But their position between the still undefeated strongholds of monarchy and the rising proletarian tide left them without any secure foothold; they could only throw themselves, as did the Frankfurt Assembly, on the

dubious good faith and none too tender mercies of the King of Prussia. For Germany, 1848 came too early or too late—too late for a victorious democratic revolution, too early for socialism to seem anything but a vague and sinister menace to the established order.

Ultimately perhaps no less significant than the rise of the new proletarian socialism, and more immediately spectacular, was the rise of the new nationalism. Here, too, 1848 proved an important turning-point. The doctrine of popular sovereignty consecrated by the French revolution carried with it by implication the doctrine of national self-determination, which seemed an inescapable corollary of democracy. If it was a right of man to have his voice in the affairs of the nation, it was an even more elementary right to have a voice in choosing to what nation he should belong. In practice national self-determination appeared at this time to operate as a uniting, not as a dividing, force. In France one of the consequences of the revolution had been to make an end of traditional Breton, Norman, and Provençal separatism and weld the nation together as an indissoluble whole. The first great national movements in Europe—the only ones of which anything had been heard before 1848—were movements for the national unity of Germans, Italians, and Poles. In so far as these movements were movements of disintegration, they were at the expense of the Habsburg and Russian empires, the bugbears of all nineteenth-century radicals and progressives. Thus, both in theory and in practice, democracy and nationalism could advance triumphantly hand-in-hand.

It was 1848 which shattered this comfortable dream. The dynastic principle, finally destroyed in France, was called in question and discredited all over central Europe; and, with popular sovereignty being now everywhere invoked as the basis of political authority, new nations began to make their voice heard. It was no longer the disreputable autocrats in Vienna and St. Petersburg whose dominions were threatened with disruption in the name of the new national principle. German unity was subject to challenge by Danes and Czechs, Polish unity by Ruthenians, Magyar unity by Slovaks and Croats, Italian unity by Slovenes—and British unity by the Irish. The new phenomenon found dramatic expression at the Slav congress in Prague in June, 1848, which Mr. Taylor calls "the least expected event in the year of revolutions". Just as Woodrow Wilson, arriving 70 years later in Paris, was shocked and embarrassed by claims to self-determination from nations of which he

had never heard or dreamed, so the democrats of 1848 stood aghast at these new entities springing unwanted and unheralded from the soil of central and eastern Europe. The Germans tried to spirit them away by throwing doubt on their national credentials and calling them contemptuously *Nationalitäten*; later on somebody, in the familiar and futile attempt to avert the future by invoking the past, dubbed them "unhistorical nations". All this did not help. The Slav congress did nothing constructive; it certainly did not demonstrate the solidarity of the Slavs. But it did demonstrate "beyond a peradventure" (in the Wilsonian phrase) that national self-determination was a principle with awkward implications both for bourgeois democracy and for international concord.

As the century went on, the new socialism and the new nationalism which had first reared their heads in 1848 began to exhibit some common symptoms. Both took on the colour of the mass civilization which emerged from the industrial revolution. Middle-class democracy had been essentially the creation of a society of independent *entrepreneurs*, producers and traders, of the world of individual enterprise, individual competition and economic *laissez-faire*, of men of property and substance who had a stake in the country. There was no single point which could be said to mark the transition from the world of small business to the world of nationwide trusts and international cartels, from the world of independent artisans to the world of giant trade unions and the closed shop: the change came by a process of gradual and almost undetected evolution. In politics it is equally difficult to mark the line which divided the bourgeois democracy of the mid-nineteenth century from the mass democracy of the twentieth; in Britain, where the process was signalized by the gradual transformation of a property franchise into universal suffrage, a transformation not formally completed till well on into the present century, the evolution seemed particularly smooth and natural. It may also be said that all the implications of modern mass democracy were already present in Rousseau's "general will", so that even in theory the germs of the new could be traced in the old. Nevertheless, while it may be more accurate to speak of evolution than of revolution, society in our time has passed over with extraordinary rapidity from predominantly individual to predominantly collective forms of organization; and, while many institutions continue to be called by their old names, hardly one of them has escaped vital and fundamental change.

The change was particularly apparent in its application to the phenomenon of nationalism. In the early democratic conception the nation was simply the national expression of the wills and preferences of its individual members; it was, in a phrase coined by Renan when it had already ceased to be appropriate, *un plébiscite de tous les jours*—or, in a more flippant formula, the result of a choice made “in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations”. But long before the nineteenth century was out this individualist view of the nation had become obsolete. As early as 1848 the Slav congress in Prague had celebrated the “liberty, equality and fraternity of nations”. The rights which the French revolution had accorded to man were transferred to the nation. The nation was the new entity enjoying and asserting its rights in the world. The man, who had rights, was slowly and imperceptibly transformed into the citizen, who had obligations. The man had been the maker and the *raison d'être* of the nation; the citizen was its loyal and humble servant. Much has been written of the aura of mysticism which came to surround the nation. But what happened here was not substantially different from what happened elsewhere. In all significant fields of organized activity the individual has been superseded by the collective group. Nor is it, generally speaking, true that the individual has been collectivized against his will. Far more often he has deliberately sought the support and protection of the collective group because, in the highly organized mass society of the modern world, he could not stand or work effectively in isolation. This is the problem which the nineteenth century bequeathed to its successor, and which that successor has scarcely yet fully diagnosed—much less solved.

The main casualty of this transformation in the foundations of society has been the theory and practice of liberalism, of the old liberal democracy and the old liberal nationalism. The fundamental tenet of a liberal creed was the belief in the power of individual reason and in the reasonableness of man. Rational discussion and argument, the interchange of individual opinions, was the sure way to find the answer to any problem; and, since men were reasonable, difficulties could always be solved by compromise, not by fighting it out. Nationalism, in the liberal creed, meant the rational desire of men of the same race and kind for freedom to live together and run their affairs in common; those who enjoyed this freedom themselves would naturally respect it in others. Modern



collective man shares none of these beliefs. The problems of our highly complicated and highly organized modern societies no longer seem of the kind which lend themselves to solution through a process of discussion and argument by rational individuals; they are referred to experts in the particular subject at issue. It is no longer a question of either arguing it out or counting heads, but of finding the right expert. Nor does it appear that major political conflicts are commonly resolved by compromise; power often plays as large a role as reason in the settlement. It is this sense of helplessness, or this desire for power, which has welded the individual into the collective group. It is not, as is sometimes said, that he barter freedom for efficiency. Standing alone, he feels himself neither free nor efficient.

In the most brilliant of the articles in this volume, "Munich Ten Years After", Mr. Taylor diagnoses Munich as the final downfall of liberalism. If the liberal doctrine of national self-determination was right, then the Versailles Treaty was an abomination and Hitler's claim was justified—which was what many, perhaps most, thinking Englishmen, bred in the liberal tradition, had believed after 1919; some had abandoned this belief (and, by implication, their liberalism) before 1938, others more consistently stuck to it. Moreover, if discussion and compromise, rather than fighting it out, were the right methods of settling a dispute, then Munich was the expression of sound liberal principles; it is difficult to contest that this was the angle, or one of the angles, from which Neville Chamberlain regarded it. Even the Czechs, as Mr. Taylor points out, were steeped in the liberal tradition.

The Czech leaders, Beneš most of all, were liberals by historical background and social origin—men of bargaining and discussion. They could manoeuvre and evade; they could not defy and perish.

It was thus not the Czechs but the Polish leaders, men of the eighteenth century and among the most illiberal politicians in Europe, who found the answer. It was not Beneš but Beck, "a man of infinitely lower moral calibre", who "gave the signal for Hitler's fall". By the same token liberal Britain fought Hitler not for democratic Czechoslovakia, but for retrograde Poland.

Mr. Taylor's volume is valuable for such intermittent flashes of insight lighting up a whole period rather than for any systematic