Ethical Historiography:
The Berlin-Carr Debate and the
Revolutionary Realism of Alexander Herzen

by

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A Note on Translation and Style:

The research for this project was done in both the original language and in translation. The four key texts written by Herzen—*Dilettantism in Science, From the Other Shore, Letter on Free Will*, and *Letters to an Old Comrade*—are in this paper always cited giving both the Russian and English references. Quotes from the above four works were translated from the Russian editions.

The male pronoun has been used as a default in accordance with Berlin, Carr, and Herzen’s usage.
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INTRODUCTION

Defining the Possibilities of the Present

A recent article in The Atlantic Monthly titled “Man Versus Afghanistan” discusses the prospects of an overextended American military struggling to craft a lasting peace, against multiplying odds, in a remote and inscrutable war zone. According to author Robert Kaplan, in the post-Cold War era, the US military has repeatedly deployed to places with powerful legacies of dysfunction in order to do battle with the forces of historical determinism. As such it is a modern-day protagonist in the ancient and venerable debate about the comparative strength of individual morality on the one hand and the deterministic environment on the other.

Kaplan goes on to point to a 1953 lecture by the British intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin as the “ur-text” for a philosophical discussion of the US military’s self-sacrificing, ostensibly quixotic aims. Berlin, writes Kaplan, “condemns as immoral and cowardly the belief that vast impersonal forces such as geography, environment, and ethnic characteristics determine the direction of world politics. Berlin reproaches Arnold Toynbee and Edward Gibbon for seeing ‘nations’ and ‘civilizations’ as ‘more concrete’ than the individuals who embody them, and for seeing abstractions like ‘tradition’ and ‘history’ as ‘wiser than we.’” The current divide, then, like its precursor debate about intervention in the Balkans, sets “determinists” and “realists” against “liberal internationalists” and “neoconservatives.”

Kaplan’s article demonstrates the dangers of schematizing the historical dimensions of the “free will vs. determinism” debate that Berlin, and his contemporary E.H. Carr, elaborated with spirit and subtlety fifty years ago. While both Berlin and Carr are today chiefly remembered as political theorists, they debate determinism through a lens that encompasses a greater depth and breadth of the human experience than can be provided by the narrowly political. By emptying their debate of its complexity, Kaplan turns a complicated historiographical question into a pop-culture simplification that could conceivably be used to justify any action at all simply by arrogating the privilege of individual initiative and accusing opponents of a cowardly determinism. (One could easily envision a scenario in which the opponents of intervention accused the US, for instance, of being so in thrall to the abstract tradition of western democracy that it failed to grant due respect to the individuals living in the occupied zones.)

While Berlin’s famous brand of liberalism might very well have prompted him to politically support the cause of intervention, this is not the point at issue. Kaplan completely misrepresents the depth of Berlin’s historical thought by implying that Berlin aligned himself with an unalloyed idealism. In fact, Berlin’s emphasis on individual human agency and his distaste for systems was intended to yield a sharper view of reality rather than nurture hazy, utopian visions. Who is invested with agency and who is merely responding to the inescapable pull of historical determinism? How can we seek to guide history in a desirable direction while respecting the boundaries of what is feasible and what, conversely, is merely the product of utopian dreaming? How can we gain an intellectual foothold in a world
where facts and values are irreconcilably intermingled? These are all questions that Berlin and Carr jointly addressed, albeit to sometimes vastly different effect.

The Stakes of The Debate

In the fields in which Carr and Berlin are largely recognized today—in philosophy and in political theory—both are ensconced within the empiricist tradition. It is true that Berlin rejected the amoral predispositions of the logical positivists who dominated Oxford philosophy in the 30s, but he retained throughout his life their commitment to clarity, reality, and their distrust of idealism and grand system building. He might have railed against the reductive understanding of history by “modern empiricists,” who hoped to reduce the plenitude of human experience to the movement of atoms in space and chemicals in the body, but their failure was simply in limiting themselves to an artificially small sample of the conscious, moral human experience. “Our best historians,” he wrote, “use empirical tests in sifting facts, make microscopic examinations of the evidence, deduce no patterns, and show no false fear in attributing responsibility to individuals.”

Carr often proclaimed himself at odds with the empiricist theory of knowledge, arguing that historians were free to assemble the account of history that pleased them best, producing a multitude of diverging accounts of the past. Yet he nevertheless wholeheartedly believed in progress in history through the accrual of

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knowledge from one generation to the next. Carr time and again reminded the reader that the historian is irrevocably a creature of his moment and social position, with certain distinct priorities, values and ways of understanding the world. He emphasized the ways power and self-interest permeated and determined much intellectual discourse. But power and self-interest were themselves products of history, and indeed everything ultimately returned to history, for there was no “super-historical” method of evaluation of historical phenomena. Thus, Carr at root similarly conceived of himself as a certain brand of empiricist, investigating the neglected facts of the past to dispel the errors of perception engendered by historians blinded by their historical bias and by a-priori rationalism.5

The somewhat uneasy centrality of empiricism in both Carr and Berlin’s thought led them to the study of history as the account of human experience, and thus the measure of what exactly it meant to be human and the privileges and limitations therein. Berlin conceived of the historian’s role as the role of thinking man writ large: he must bring all of his moral faculty, cultural understanding, and general fluency with the basic workings of humanity to explain the different ways that man has chosen to live over time.6 The historian deals with differences among men who at

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5 Sean Molloy calls Carr’s famous Twenty Years’ Crisis “a paean to induction and the value of practical over abstract reason.” Carr “constantly stressed the need for a practical, pragmatic approach to international relations, one that generated awareness of the realities of international politics, rather than one that placed these realities in an abstracted artificiality.” (Sean Molloy, "Dialectics and Transformation: Exploring the International Theory of E. H. Carr," International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 17, no. 2 (Winter 2003), 281.)

6 “Historical explanation is to a large degree arrangement of the discovered facts in patterns which satisfy us because they accord with life as we know it and can imagine it.” (Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History", 24.)
root, because they are human, are fundamentally similar, or at least comprehensible to one another.

Carr, meanwhile, worked within what Randall Germain terms a “historical mode of thought.” He believed that history permeates everyday life; that people largely understand themselves as the products of past events which they can understand using their rational intelligence. He asserted that history can be classified with the sciences, and that the historian’s role consists largely in the location and analysis of causal chains in the past that can then be projected into the future. “It is at once the justification and the explanation of history,” he wrote, “that the past throws light on the future, and the future throws light on the past.” For Carr the historian attempts to do meaningful work by finding similarities across cultures, ages and events that are ultimately fundamentally different.

These disagreements—about whether history was a humanity or a science, whether humans were fundamentally similar or culturally incommensurate, about whether the historian should (or could) focus mainly on subterranean processes and sources of causality or on human intentions—manifested themselves at the micro and macro level of historiographical inquiry. At one end of the spectrum, Carr and Berlin debated the hoary question of free will versus determinism—how free are people to move within the matrix of history? At the other end, the macro perspective, they sought a balance between utopianism and realism—how free is history to diverge

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8 Ibid., 324.
from the course it has laid down itself (if indeed it can be said to have laid down a
course at all)? How much does conscious intention matter in history?

They debated all of these questions while both acknowledging the multitude
of different priorities and incommensurate ends that different people across time and
culture could hold—they both agreed that history demonstrated, if nothing else, that
the human condition changed from one epoch to the next. While Berlin shielded
himself from the relativist implications of this historicist realization, writing that the
historian must be able to preserve the human right of judgment of that which he
studied, Carr reveled in it. The differences in the way they conceived of morality as
well as their oppositional politics masked larger historiographical similarities. While
“realism” and “historicism” are not typically seen as comparable terms, Berlin and
Carr’s differing visions of resolute realism were both historicist because they
recognized that the terms of what was acknowledged to be real were unstable and
changed throughout history. While “historicism” and “morality” are likewise
generally seen as opposing terms, both Berlin and (though he might try to hide it)
Carr had a moral stake in their historiographical theories: they believed that the study
of history revealed real facts about the human condition that, once brought to light,
could help historians develop responsible accounts of human experience that would
facilitate the expression of human potential. Thus, for neither Berlin nor Carr was the
historicist realization an end state, a totalizing pre-determined dialectic or (depending
on which type of historicism one is referring to) a cause for paralyzing uncertainty in
a world with no objective reality benchmark. Ultimately, both Carr and Berlin were
interested in “what works best” in history, and in their own ways they both ultimately
sought to show that that which worked—that which according to them was most practical given the constraints of history and reality—aligned with that which was good.

Carr allied utopianism with free will and realism with determinism—realism was cognizant of the processes that moved history and free will was unbound from a real engagement with the world. Berlin thought the opposite: for him, determinist thinkers, from “rationalists, technocrats, positivists and believers in the scientific organisation of society” to “theocrats, neo-medieval romantics, authoritarians and political mystics,” all believe in laws of human behavior, which, when discovered and applied, would lead to a utopia, or, in his words, “universal felicity.”

Both Carr and Berlin, in making these arguments for and against determinism, attempted to align themselves with realism, the historical and political result of their empiricism. While they clearly disagreed on many topics, their essential focus on “what works” in history was central. As Jonathan Haslam writes, “the distance between Carr and Berlin in respect to their views of history was thus in some respects not as great as the public polemic would suggest”—it was their politics, that is, not their different takes on historiography, which were irreconcilable.

The questions Berlin and Carr asked of history have profound moral and political implications. They are in addition quite unwieldy, and unfashionable in the current academic climate. Contemporary trends in historical studies favor language-

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10 Molloy, "Dialectics and Transformation", 283.
based and textual explorations of cultural constructs rather than the philosophical pursuit of expansive moral questions and practical accounts of historical change. They are not typically amenable to the types of work Berlin and Carr hoped to do by studying history.\textsuperscript{13}

But it is not true, as alleged by critics such as Perry Anderson and Keith Jenkins, that these concerns are therefore leading, or antiquated, or irrelevant.\textsuperscript{14} Carr and Berlin argued for the vitality of arcane historiographical questions; they designed much of their work to be accessible to the layman; they in some ways anticipated post-structuralism by addressing questions of certainty in an uncertain world built upon the shaky foundations of cultural difference, self-interest, and even (to a very limited extent) language. Above all they maintained a sense that historiographical questions could have a palpable effect not only on the way governments functioned but also on the ways people chose to live their lives.

Both men recognized that the great historiographical questions that they discussed were eminently applicable to their own times. Though their politics were different, both recognized their particular moment as precariously transitional—and thus requiring a proper historical mindset in order to guide development in a salutary

\textsuperscript{14} Perry Anderson critiques Berlin’s works as “vast genealogies of leading ideas,” accusing Berlin of setting out to prove his own philosophical and historiographical agendas instead of closely engaging with historical texts. (Perry Anderson, \textit{A Zone of Engagement} (London ; New York: Verso, 1992), 234.) Keith Jenkins, meanwhile, writes that “Carr’s famous historical skepticism and relativism are not only slight but also extremely misleading” and that Carr is actually a positivist in the old Victorian mold, offering nothing valuable in support of or against present historiographical debates. (Keith Jenkins, "An English Myth? Rethinking the Contemporary Value of EH Carr's What Is History?," in \textit{E.H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal}, ed. Michael Cox (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2000), 307.)
direction. Carr and Berlin, as historians, both hoped to articulate the parameters of the past in order to influence that development: Berlin stressed the historian’s role of demonstrating the ways individual moral choice shaped the past (thereby implying, presumably, the ways it could shape the present). Carr focused rather on the historian’s responsibility to locate the major strands of causation in the past in order to develop an understanding of present realities and future developments. Their historiographies, though in conflict, were both profoundly ethical—both extremely conscious of their potential to positively affect everything from the international behavior of states, to the attitudes of civil society, to the daily, lived experience of individuals.

In the Cold War climate in which they were writing, Carr and Berlin’s work took on a great urgency. They perceived their rival goals as utterly oppositional. Berlin accused Carr of complicity with totalitarianism (Carr’s general support of the Soviet Union and his history of initially advocating Nazi appeasement certainly did not help his case in this regard). Carr, meanwhile, offered the rejoinder that Berlin’s historical interest in individual morality smacked of elitism and threatened to paralyze and infantilize a new generation, in an utterly unprecedented mass society, that was searching for a constructive way forward.

The Russian Intelligentsia

Berlin and Carr clearly shared an interest in the precise role of the historian and a fundamental investment in the historian’s social value. In this they were carrying on the legacy of a group of historical individuals with which they were both
fascinated, and about whom they both wrote voluminously: the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia.

According to Andrzej Walicki, the Russian inflection of the word “intelligentsia” implies “a body of educated people who felt responsible for their country’s future”—it is thus a primarily “ethical” category.\(^\text{15}\) The intellectual history of Russia is so rich, Walicki argues, not because Russians were the originators of significant philosophical schools or movements—they were typically more likely to import ideas from Western Europe. Rather, Russian intellectual history is notable for the high levels of respect accorded to ideas themselves, and the passion and urgency with which they were integrated into Russia’s historical development. “‘Who are we?’ ‘Where do we come from and where are we going?’ ‘What is the contribution we can make to humanity?’ ‘What can we do in order to carry out the mission entrusted to us?’” These were all, writes Walicki, burning questions that enthralled the class of “thinking Russians.”\(^\text{16}\)

No one took these questions more seriously—in the dual sense that he valued them and that he subjected them to thorough academic scrutiny—than Alexander Herzen. Herzen was one of the most notable of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia revolutionaries, and inarguably one of the most complex. In the 1840s, when the rest of his generation was occupying itself with drawing room discussions about the finer points of German idealism, he made impassioned pleas to his fellow intellectuals to direct their energies towards the real and lamentable state of things in Russia. He

\(^{15}\) Andrzej Walicki and Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka, A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1979), xv.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., xvi.
exhorted them to try and understand how his country had developed in such a manner and how it might profitably be changed for the greater good of all, especially Russia’s vast oppressed population of serfs. Yet in the 1860s, with the ascent of a militant younger generation of revolutionaries whose intransigent politics and harsh, violent methods that clashed with Herzen’s humane values and his sense of intellectual subtlety, Herzen again dissented from the intelligentsia zeitgeist. “‘The time of words’ they say, has passed, the time of acts has arrived.’ As if the word is not an act? As if the time of words may pass?” He added: “Our strength is in the strength of thought, in the strength of truth, in the strength of the word, in historical consciousness.”

Herzen dedicated his whole life to attempting to obtain an understanding of the past and the present in order to influence, within the bounds of possibility, the course of future events. He decried the unworldly rationalism and stale idealism that seemed to cloud the thought of his fellow revolutionaries and intellectuals. He vehemently denied the idea that history had any innate meaning or direction beyond that which people gave it in their individual historical moments. Yet he was confident that a careful study of human society—of what was and what had been—would yield the type of knowledge key to coaxing all elements of society into moving into a social arrangement more amenable to all. Despite his empirical assumptions, then, he represented something more than another iteration of the “scientific” historiographical orientation that emerged in the nineteenth century represented by

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Ranke, Humboldt, or Droysen. His intellectual vision was profoundly socially conscious, oriented towards change rather than towards the celebration and reification of the existing order. He was a publicist, eager to disseminate his ideas as broadly as possible—his widely circulated political journal *The Bell* was a sensation, the first publication to trumpet progressive causes in Russia. In his programmatic obsession with finding “what worked best” for a given society in a given moment rather than a static eternal solution, in his belief that expansively historical rather than narrowly political solutions must be sought for the problems of his age, Herzen in very real ways can be seen as a predecessor to Carr and Berlin.

Carr and Berlin both pinpointed the moment they happened upon Russian editions of Herzen’s works (Berlin in the London Library and Carr in a bookshop in Riga) as major turning points in their intellectual careers. Berlin was drawn to Herzen for his spirited defense of the importance of the individual, Carr rather for his challenge to bourgeois capitalist society. They both identified with Herzen for his dedication to bringing his society in line with his understanding of what was reasonable given what he knew about the fundamental nature and contemporary inclinations of man.

Because Carr and Berlin were largely historical thinkers, and because this dimension to their thought is far too rarely taken into due account, there seems no better way to examine their historiography than to compare, not only their explicit statements on the subject, but also concrete examples of their actual historical work. A reading of their accounts of Herzen, in whose broad tradition they both in some ways worked, offers access to their understanding of the way the historically
conscious individual could (and could not) function to guide the course of the society, or age, or country, or even the world in which he lived. Both Carr and Berlin appraised Herzen’s thought, his politics, and the way he lived his life as a way of working out their own activist historiographies, reminiscent of the spirit if not the aims of the Russian *intelligent*.

**A Brief Review of the Literature**

Owing to his dual importance as both a literary and political figure, Herzen has enjoyed a considerable amount of historical attention in Russia and the West. The authoritative English-language historical work, Martin Malia’s *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855*,\(^{18}\) discusses with encyclopedic precision the convergence of manifold intellectual influences and Herzen’s own experience which combined to produce Herzen’s theory of specifically Russian socialism, which would go on to inspire later revolutionaries. Malia’s book, however, ends in 1855, when “Herzen’s vision was at its brightest, as yet uncompromised by the exigencies of revolutionary struggle,” and as such it does not discuss the founding, in 1857, of the political journal with which Herzen was to make his most concrete political impact on Russian history.\(^{19}\)

Monica Partridge and Aileen Kelly (Berlin’s former student) are the two English-speaking historians who have produced most of the substantial work on Herzen in the last thirty to forty years; Partridge’s introductory monograph *Alexander*
Herzen, 1812-1870\textsuperscript{20} has been used in this thesis as a general reference guide, and one of Kelly’s volumes of essays on Russian intellectual history, Toward Another Shore,\textsuperscript{21} contains two very useful essays arguing for the creativity, comprehensiveness, and originality of Herzen’s thought. As for Soviet sources on Herzen, these were mostly avoided, with the assumption, backed by Malia, that Soviet work on Herzen was largely determined by Lenin’s shallow but commendatory 1912 article commemorating Herzen’s birth.\textsuperscript{22} Russian historians studying Herzen after the fall of the Soviet Union have departed from the Leninist mode of interpretation for a shift to a more rarefied philosophical realm.\textsuperscript{23} In general, however, historical work on Herzen other than that by Carr or Berlin themselves has been used primarily as a supplement to help contextualize Herzen’s own writings, specifically his texts elaborating the activist intelligentsia tradition. The historical dimensions to his philosophy, and the exact ways that he hoped to transmute this intellectual endeavor into real-world action, have received surprisingly little critical attention.

The only two noteworthy discussions of the Carr-Berlin debate are contained in the biographies of both men: The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982 by Jonathan Haslam, and Isaiah Berlin: A Life by Michael Ignatieff. Ignatieff’s coverage amounts to less than a page. “The gulf between [Berlin and Carr] was unbridgeable,”

\textsuperscript{22} Malia, Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855, 430.
\textsuperscript{23} Filosofskoe mirovozzrenie gertsena (“Philosophical Worldview of Herzen”) by G. Shpet and Gertsen kak metod i obekt (“Herzen as Method and Object”) by P. Hestanov are the two most notable works, and they are characterized by phenomenological and structuralist analyses respectively.
he concludes at the end of his brief summary.\textsuperscript{24} Haslam’s account, though considerably more extensive, is largely a play-by-play chronology of the volleys between Carr and Berlin, with ample quotes but minimal analysis. Though Haslam’s account is valuable and serves as a good introduction to the major issues at play, he largely treats the Carr-Berlin exchange as a scuffle between academics rather than a debate of enduring philosophical and historical import.

As for Berlin and Carr’s work on Herzen, the above-mentioned biographies mention them only in passing. There do not seem to exist significant analyses of either historian's portrayal of Herzen, much less a comparison of the two bodies of work. The only work to discuss Carr’s interest in Russian nineteenth-century intellectuals, including Herzen, does so in what amounts to a scant couple of pages at best. This account, Fred Halliday’s essay “Reason and Romance: The Place of Revolution in the work of E.H. Carr,”\textsuperscript{25} simply concludes that the fact that Carr wrote about Herzen and other Russian intellectuals indicated that he in some ways must have been interested in them. Thus, Halliday writes, because Herzen and his revolutionary contemporaries did not succeed, Carr’s paying attention to them at all indicates that he can’t have been a wholly collectivist or determinist thinker.\textsuperscript{26} This thesis plans to go beyond stating the simple fact that Carr wrote on Herzen, inquiring as to what, precisely, he said, how he went about saying it, and what that means for a critical understanding of the greater shape of his thought. Berlin’s works as well will

\textsuperscript{24} Michael Ignatieff, \textit{Isaiah Berlin: A Life} (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 236.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 268.
receive a close reading in the hopes that inquiry into the ways that each man
constructed a historical account will reveal otherwise submerged information about
their conceptions of history and of the historian’s task. Ultimately, no one has
combined an inquiry into the historiographical dimensions of the Berlin-Carr debate
with a demonstration of the concrete manifestations of these questions in work by
both authors, or attempted to trace the genealogy of the debate back to the critical
intelligentsia tradition that was, in significant ways, inaugurated by Herzen. The
present work will attempt to do just that.
CHAPTER ONE

Berlin, Carr, and “The Most Monumental Challenge of Our Time”

Historiography and the Fight for the Future

In 1950, the first volume of E.H. Carr’s planned multi-volume *History of Soviet Russia* appeared in print. It was titled *The Bolshevik Revolution*. Carr described his book as a preliminary introduction to his main work of providing the first comprehensive academic account of the early years of the Soviet Union, thus rectifying the Western world’s lack of serious academic inquiry into the nature of the Soviet state.\(^{27}\) At least one reviewer, however, read something far more alarming than a simple history book. Isaiah Berlin breathlessly concluded his *Sunday Times* review of *The Bolshevik Revolution* with the warning that “If Mr Carr’s remaining volumes equal this impressive opening they will constitute the most monumental challenge of our time to that ideal of impartiality and objective truth and even-handed justice in the writing of history which is most deeply embedded in the European liberal tradition.”\(^{28}\)

Over the next two decades, Carr and Berlin would go on to spar about what they considered the biggest, most venerable and most vital questions history had to offer. They debated: Which is more valid, the doctrine of determinism or that of free will? Or, if they acknowledged that question to be too profound for even celebrated


academics like themselves, they asked: Which is preferable, the assumption of freedom or of determinism, in everyday life and in the work of the historian?

They went on to inquire: Does history itself have a shape? Can a historian be a willfully moral being, or must he strive for the utmost objectivity? What does the word “objectivity” even denote in a discipline like history, in which the manifold, unpredictable and meaningful actions of men and not those of atoms or planets are the objects of study? Is everything relative or is there a case for an ultimate standard in life and in history? What is the ultimate purpose of historical knowledge?

Their debate is full of provocations, retreats, and half-measures, with inconsistencies and moments of brilliance vying for prominence. Given the complex nature of the issues at hand, neither Carr nor Berlin’s historiographies can be communicated in a few succinct phrases; they were not hermetic systems but rather expansive, occasionally messy attempts to articulate a response to some of history’s biggest questions.

Given the somewhat unfinished nature of the both Berlin and Carr’s positions, it is tempting to reach beyond the issues at hand and to begin to explain the course of the debate through other avenues. These questions were not debated in a vacuum, but rather derived concreteness and urgency from their greater political context—namely, the specter (or, as Carr would have it, the challenge) of the Soviet Union. An argument that human actions were causally determined was an argument for a planned society, or a position that a historian could not and should not repress the moral dimension of his thought was an argument to consider the Soviet Union first and foremost as a government that had brought pain and suffering to millions.
Obviously, asking which came first, Berlin and Carr’s warring takes on historiography or their opposing takes on the Soviet Union, would surely be reductive. Nevertheless, beyond its pure philosophical content, the debate does pose a number of intriguing problems for the intellectual historian. There is, for one, the question of the ultimate historical relevance of the debate—here there are notable parallels with Herzen. The positive content of Herzen’s thought, his interest in the peasant commune as a basis for a future Russian socialism, was almost immediately made obsolete by industrialization and the concomitant rise of Marxism. Historians must justify his historical relevance by arguing that his thought had some other, indirect way of leaving an impact on history (as does Martin Malia), or that his thought and life are rather of inherent philosophical interest (Berlin, and arguably Carr), or that he holds some level of interest as a historical case study (Carr). In a somewhat analogous way, the Berlin-Carr debates seem to suffer in that the backdrop of Soviet-style state totalitarianism they relied on for emotional and political relevance no longer occupies a central place on the world stage. They are also intellectually vulnerable on the grounds that they seemed to entirely circumvent many of the questions and issues which would begin to dominate the historiographical discussion immediately after their interchange played out, many of which were nascent concerns even during the fifties and sixties.29

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29 George Iggers writes that the 1960’s saw a sea change in historical practice: a blatant pessimism, latent in the nineteenth century, accompanied what was seen as a consciousness of the crisis in modern society. Concrete developments in historiography included a new consciousness of “gender, race, ethnicity and lifestyle” alongside class; a new attention to non-Western civilizations, disrupting the primacy of the Western master narrative; a fragmentation of the uni-linear concept of historical time; and finally a renewed interest in the literary quality of historical
Yet Carr and Berlin were discussing issues of vast historical importance that were shunted aside by the rise of more textual and interpretive historical schools of thought. They debated how much room the individual had to maneuver within the strictures of history, and whether history should be conceptualized in terms of change or continuity. They fought over the nature of causation in history: how things happened and whether it was possible to both understand and appraise past events. They emphasized movement, decisions and events rather than static structures and constructs. They were interested in the nexus between that which “works best” in history and that which is morally desirable, hoping that the proper study of history could reveal a credo for the present. Instead of composing obscure tracts for small coteries of fellow academics, they wrote accessible treatises on historiography and worried about the demoralizing effects the other’s doctrines might have on the general population. They were just as wary of the idea without historical contextualization as they were of doing the work of history, or life, without steady and searching critical attention.

Carr and Berlin’s respective historiographical visions are less mutually exclusive than possessed of different priorities. Carr and Berlin both acknowledged the uncertainty inherent in the historian’s task, which they then mitigated by accepting it as inevitable and proceeding to define the nature of the historian’s role as they saw it. Carr, for instance, often proclaimed himself a radical dissenter when it came to the idea of a “factual” historical narrative. “Study the historian before you begin to study

writing pursuant to the recognition of the non-referential nature of language. (George Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 6—9.)
the facts,” he warned potential students of history, for the historian’s bias will inevitably pervade any account. Yet, according to Carr, the values of the historian were themselves wholly a product of history—thus a “super-historical” standard of measurement simply did not exist, and history once again became the standard of measurement of the human experience.

For his part, Berlin disavowed Carr’s progressive model of history for a more overtly moral one in which ideas threatened to overpower the lived experience of real people and in which the individual life was the ultimate good. He acknowledged that all intellectual exchange took place in an arena of cultural perspectives, values, and language-related uncertainty, yet he emphasized that the search for an imaginary, scientific vantage place outside history was doomed. The way forward was to acknowledge that words like “objectivity” and “wisdom” connoted greater degrees of some commonly accepted meaning rather than some absolute, external ideal. Neither thinker ever came close to uniting the two strands of thought—Carr’s commitment to causation and his investment in the idea of progress clashed with Berlin’s emphasis on the value of life itself, lived in a continual succession of present moments; Carr portrayed his historical agenda as a mission of understanding, while Berlin argued for the historian’s right to judge, and to empathize with, his subjects. Yet there is perhaps more merit in the recurring loop between the two than either thinker realized.

31 “The emergence of a particular value or ideal at a given time or place is explained by historical conditions of place and time... Every group has its own values which are rooted in history.” (Carr, What Is History?, 106.)
32 Ibid., 105.
Ultimately, though their warring political sympathies led them to believe that they were in utter and complete opposition, both men relied on a number of shared motifs to strengthen their rhetorical positions. These include an abhorrence of cynicism, and a strong emotional commitment to ally themselves with what they see as the opposite, redemptive value; a continual appeal to common sense against rarefied reasoning and a desire to portray the preferred historiographical method as accessible, natural, and in line with everyday cognition; and finally, an uneasy conviction that the epistemological questions and the subject/object split that beset their works could be definitively surmounted. Each of these themes is in turn related to the at root similar ways Berlin and Carr conceived of the historian’s role as seeking to part the fog of ideas and to offer a more credible account of the way people experienced and engendered change through time—Carr argued that this might be accomplished through a scientific analysis of progressive power relations, while Berlin sought answers in a humane, moral, and measured liberalism. These attitudes magnified the importance of the personal proclivities of the historian, and this at times psychological dimension to the historiographical debate will later justify an ensuing comparison of their works on Herzen, a figure who held compelling attraction for both Carr and Berlin.

“A Peculiar Relationship”

An Introduction to Carr and Berlin

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) and Edward Hallett Carr (1892-1982) were British intellectuals active throughout much of the twentieth century—Berlin was based at Oxford throughout his life, and Carr was educated at Cambridge and returned there to
teach after serving in the diplomatic corps and holding several teaching positions elsewhere. They were also lunch partners, more-or-less cordial acquaintances, and enduring, intractable ideological opponents. Berlin himself described theirs as a “peculiar relationship,” one that he never quite understood. Both were, in the words of Carr’s biographer Jonathan Haslam, “the best of enemies”: attracted to each other by dint of their intellectual engagements (intertwined interests in Russian studies and the philosophy of history) but almost equally repelled by temperament and political affiliations. Berlin remained a “quintessential liberal” while Carr could be characterized as a “proto-authoritarian.”

Berlin’s biographer Michael Ignatieff does not accord the Berlin-Carr relationship anywhere near the space or seriousness that Carr’s biographer Haslam does—in fact, anyone reading Ignatieff’s *Isaiah Berlin* would probably come to the conclusion that Carr was a minor and remote embodiment of a general leftist presence in British intellectual life that would occasionally trouble Berlin. Ignatieff’s lack of emphasis on the peculiar relationship in comparison to Haslam is perhaps due to Berlin’s relatively greater academic celebrity. Yet the interchange between Carr and Berlin—recorded, as befits public intellectuals, in two bestselling essays and smaller attacks and counter-attacks in the “reviews” and “letters to the editor” sections of popular publications—offers much more than a representative sample of the types of questions occupying the minds of British academics of different political affiliations in the mid-twentieth century. Though the Cold War context of the debate obviously

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34 Ibid., 65.
35 Ibid., 65.
colors the type of concepts discussed and lends them particular urgency, and while
these concepts themselves (free will versus determinism, the individual in history
versus social forces) can seem somewhat stale, or even stodgy when removed from
their historical context, the conversation is both more nuanced and profound than it
might first appear. Approaching the debate as between an ardent liberal and an
intransigent Marxist would almost entirely miss the point, for both Berlin and Carr
were complicated thinkers whose work indirectly reflected and sometimes even
belied their purported intellectual affiliations.

Carr and Berlin became acquainted when Berlin wrote a positive review of
Carr’s biography of Russian intellectual Mikhail Bakunin.\footnote{Ibid., 65.} In a letter written to his
parents shortly after the December 1937 publication of the piece, Berlin notes a “very
flattering letter” written by “Mr Carr”: “I suddenly feel like a powerful reviewer
before whom poor authors are obliged to crawl. Soon I shall be a poor author
myself.”\footnote{Ibid., 265.} The next day Berlin’s note to his parents was very brief; a result, he writes,
of fatigue after writing Carr back a lengthy response: “after all he is a professor &
may come in useful one day.”\footnote{Ibid., 265.} By 1945 the relationship had taken a less positive
turn, with Berlin somewhat facetiously noting “the mad attempt to appoint E.H. Carr
to the Professorship of Russian” at Oxford as a symptom of that institution’s
malaise.\footnote{Ibid., 542.} This professional hostility did not continue unabated. For instance, Berlin
invited Carr to collaborate with a group of academics on a modern history
symposium, a move that nevertheless left Carr feeling beleaguered—he soon took refuge from what he regarded as (according to a friend) a “harassing experience.”

Berlin had invited Carr to collaborate on the symposium in an attempt to sway “Carr’s unhealthy attachment to the Soviet model.” But the two academics were to have utterly different approaches towards the study of Russian history, and their perspectives on the Soviet system were irreconcilable. Berlin, a Jew born in Riga, fled with his family from Petrograd after spending several years there immediately following the 1917 revolution, while his family slowly came to the conclusion that “something menacing had begun to happen.” Twelve years old when his family relocated to England, Berlin quickly adopted the ways of his host country and always located his origins in three discrete traditions—Russian, British and Jewish. He matriculated at Oxford and after graduation was elected as the first Jewish member of All Souls College, Oxford’s prestigious graduate college. He went on to have an eminently successful career as a public intellectual, writing widely read, often quite accessible pieces like “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” in which he explored Tolstoy’s philosophy and art. He also wrote “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), a historical survey in which he advocated “negative liberty,” or absence of coercion and interference against “positive liberty,” or the practice (or, under totalitarian

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41 Ibid., 168.
44 In this essay he posits that thinkers can be divided into two groups: the “hedgehogs,” whose life and work are organized around the principle of some all-consuming idea, and the “foxes,” who instead recognize the world as consisting of a multitude of experiential fragments. Berlin clearly endorsed the second position, though he was very aware of the charms of the first.
governments, the illusion) of granting the citizen a stake in his government. In 1945 he had been shaken by a visit to Moscow and Leningrad, where he met with the writers Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova, whose experiences of intense persecution under the Soviet regime were to color his work from then on: “He never doubted that his visit with Akhmatova was the most important event of his life,” writes Ignatieff. A year later Akhmatova was publicly denounced by the Minister of Culture. Formerly merely opposed to the Soviet Union, Berlin had now become devastatingly aware of the threat of totalitarianism and from that point on he embarked on a campaign of “concerted hostile engagement with Soviet communism.”

Carr came about his interest in Russia in quite a different way. At Cambridge, he recalls in a brief account of his life, called An Autobiography, he had a flash of insight after being informed by a “rather undistinguished classics don” that Herodotus’ historical account of the Persian Wars was molded by his opinions about the then-raging Peloponnesian War. This insight, writes Carr, “gave me my first understanding of what history was about,” indicating that the story of the past could be formed depending on the exigencies of the present. But it was the Russian revolution that “decisively gave me a sense of history which I have never lost”— from then on Carr understood that he was living through a momentous and uniquely historical epoch. Carr was working at the time for the British Foreign Office, which

48 Ibid., xiv.
sent him to the relatively remote outpost of Riga, Latvia, where he had plenty of time to read the works of nineteenth-century intellectuals whose early resistance to “liberal moralistic ideology,” as he puts it, inspired him. His Russian was perfect—Ignatieff points out that their fluency in the Russian language marked Berlin and Carr out as unique among British intellectuals, at least in the 1930s. He was “thoroughly pro-Soviet,” as Carr writes of himself, until 1935, when news of the purges precipitated “disillusionment and revulsion.” Nevertheless later critics have rather uncontroversially characterized him as fairly consistently pro-Soviet. R.W. Davies’ more nuanced account striates Carr’s attitude towards the Soviet Union into three discrete stages: a wholly positive one in the years 1931-1935, a four-year period of fairly intense distaste for the purges and other “Russian horrors,” and a period from 1941 until his death in 1980 in which he decided that the “black spots” of Stalinism had obscured the achievements of Soviet society and the challenge it presented to Western society. After all, as Carr wrote in 1961, no one posits that the achievement of British industrialization is invalidated by the large human price it exacted. Carr had meant for his landmark multivolume study A History of Soviet Russia (1950-1978) to be his defining work, but instead The Twenty Years’ Crisis (1939), his realist, power-centric take on foreign relations, and What is History? (1961), his

49 Ignatieff, Isaiah Berlin: A Life, 71.
breezy, provocative set of lectures on the nature of the historian’s task, are the works for which he is mostly remembered.\textsuperscript{54}

"A Family Quarrel"

Determinism, Relativism and the Parameters of the Debate

In 1963, an American reviewer of What is History?, after duly praising the work’s breadth and erudition, likened the experience of the reader to one who has accidentally barged in on a family quarrel. “The repeated gibes at Oxford may have amused some of the Cambridge audience,” wrote Jacob Price of Carr’s work. “But is the entire skeptical school of modern historical methodology limited to Sir Isaiah Berlin and Professor Karl Popper, however large they may loom in Carr's private demonology?”\textsuperscript{55} Price’s sense of having stumbled into an ongoing debate was obviously perceptive. Berlin and Carr both frequently named the other as a contemporary historian—not entirely without merit, they are quick to add with various levels of facetiousness—who gets historiography painfully, obviously wrong. As befits public intellectuals, Carr and Berlin conducted much of their debate in the public sphere—in best-selling essays and in major news publications. Carr can probably be said to have initiated the exchange with an anonymous front-page article in The Times Literary Supplement, in which he accused Berlin of being a proponent of something called “the new skepticism.”\textsuperscript{56} In 1953 Berlin delivered the inaugural Auguste Comte Lecture at the London School of Economics, which he then reworked

\textsuperscript{55} Jacob Price, "Review of What Is History?," History and Theory 3, no. 1 (1963), 136.
\textsuperscript{56} Edward Hallett Carr, "The New Skepticism," The Times Literary Supplement, June 9 1950, 357.
into a radio talk and, finally, an essay published in 1954 called *Historical Inevitability*. The essay was widely read throughout the 1950s and 60s, and it footnoted Carr in a gently but unmistakably disapproving manner several times. Carr published an agreeable yet doubting review of this essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* and then, several years later, proceeded to provide a sustained counter-attack through a series of lectures at Cambridge—the Trevelyan Lectures—which themselves were “highly public events, re-broadcast on the BBC, published weekly in *The Listener* [a BBC publication] and eventually assembled into the hugely influential text *What is History?*.” The publication of *What is History?* in 1961, which directly addresses Berlin’s stance numerous times, prompted Berlin to review the book in the *New Statesman* as well as to write two letters to the editor of *The Listener* in defense of his position. Carr’s reply to this defense, also published in *The Listener*, as well as a new introduction written by Berlin to mark the republication of *Historical Inevitability* in *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969) conclude the debate. These documents mark a fascinating, profound, and highly spirited public exchange about the way human beings function, the ways in which they conceive of their history, and the limits and the purpose of knowledge of the past.

A cursory reading of Berlin and Carr would clearly indicate that they differ on a number of topics such as the nature of progress, history’s relationship with science, the definition of objectivity and its relationship with relativism. These problems are complicated, and do not exist in isolation; both Carr and Berlin construct frameworks

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that establish interdependent justifications between them. Thus short summaries of the main points of both Carr and Berlin’s major works follow.

*Historical Inevitability*, Berlin’s most important profession of his mode of historiography, can be very roughly divided into two sections: in the first part, he catalogues the many and disparate thinkers who, throughout time, have been united in their belief that “one can discover large patterns or regularities in the procession of historical events.” An important corollary to this group are those who instead believe that knowledge of history is necessarily illusory, either because all societies create their own values or because the human mind itself is too feeble to grasp the true mechanisms of history—Berlin cites Carr as an example of the first type of thinker, though his later condemnations of Carr would rather center around his determinism and his crude, faux-empirical self-assurance. In any case, membership in this second group, according to Berlin, ultimately has the same implications as membership in the first: the possibility of morality in history is negated. Berlin goes on to show that despite the lure of totalizing schemata, people have in the past and continue to live their lives as if humans’ individual actions are their own and not the indubitable result of some overarching plan. Thus, he seeks to show that some element of wise, measured, but nevertheless unabashedly moral appraisal can reasonably coexist with, and is in fact embedded in the very process of, any holistic historical account. Carr and other historians who absolutely abstain from judgment, Berlin argues, are felled by their own insistence on utter neutrality (or in Berlin’s

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60 Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 121.
61 Ibid., 157.
62 Ibid., 170.
63 Ibid., 182.
words, “hoist by their own petard”). For in denying the right of historians to make value judgments, Carr and others who subscribe to the same fallacy misconstrue the nature of history, which, as an “inexact” discipline, can operate on no firmer ground than “a certain measure of concreteness, vagueness, ambiguity, suggestiveness, vividness and so on, embodied in the properties of the language of common sense,” a language that itself is permeated with implicit value judgments. Berlin’s method of attack towards Carr often involved these types of recognitions of his basic premises yet transposition of them into very different conclusions. Another example of this tendency is Berlin’s argument that the feckless historians who subscribe to relativistic principles in fact dismantle their own case: for if relativism is valid, a belief in the importance of neutrality predicated on relativism would be just another value, no better or worse than any other type of belief.

Carr divides his counter-argument in What is History? into six discrete sections. He first examines the role of the historian in actively constructing, rather than simply and transparently imparting, an account of the past. He argues that good historians shift the bulk of their attention to social dynamics rather than focusing on isolated individuals. He next seeks to show that history can be classified as scientific insofar as it attempts to understand the real cause-and-effect relationships that structure the course of human experience, but moral only insofar as historians’ existing value systems naturally figure in any historical account. Carr goes on to say that history can best be understood as the selection and study of causes, and that the historian must assume that history is generally progressive by its very nature, because

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64 Ibid., 162.
65 Ibid., 167.
it is composed of the actions of historical beings who accrue more and more knowledge as time progresses. He warns that notions of progress or decline are nevertheless heavily contingent on the interests of those pronouncing the trend. To conclude, he opines that despite the decline of Western power, the middle of the twentieth century was still a moment of unprecedented progress and improvement for the greater number of people in the world, and that close-minded national and cultural affiliations must not obscure this fact.66

Carr refers to Berlin steadily throughout What is History?, almost always explicitly in conjunction with the ideas expressed in Historical Inevitability. Berlin, Carr explains, is merely rehashing an outmoded, childlike approach to the writing of history in which the personalities of a handful of historical characters are taken to have been the moving force of history—what he calls the “Bad King John and Good Queen Bess” theory67 (an exaggeration for rhetorical effect that belied his 1954 assertion that Berlin “does not…wish to go back to the kind of history which was primarily concerned to tell us that King John was a bad King.”)68 Thus, Carr continues, Berlin occupies himself with the “dead horse” of defending the role of free will in history and with the trifling task of assigning blame and praise to different historical actors, endeavors that yield no new insight into the past. Ultimately, Carr sought to show that a belief in individual responsibility and a belief in causality, (regardless of the former’s lack of place in historical inquiry) were and had always been perfectly reconcilable during everyday life, despite Berlin’s claims that they

67 Ibid., 57.
68 — — —, "The New Skepticism", 357.
were opposed. “Though I am no philosopher, I shall continue to suspect a flaw either in the premises or in the arguments which lead to this ‘nonsensical’ conclusion, i.e. a conclusion repugnant to common sense and common experience.”

Everyone acknowledged, in other words, that the “theologian,” the “moral philosopher,” the “statesman” and the “common man” were availed of the privilege of moral language, but that “the specific function of the historian qua historian [was] not to judge but to explain.”

Carr and Berlin were masters of both aggressive styles of direct argumentation as well as the smirking pejorative (“It is perhaps unfair to hold Sir Isaiah Berlin responsible for his disciples. Even when he talks nonsense, he earns our indulgence by talking it in an engaging and attractive way,” Carr writes in *What is History?*.)

Berlin parries back: “Mr. Carr speaks of his indulgence towards my follies. I am glad to reciprocate by offering him my sympathy as he gropes his way in the difficult, treacherous and unfamiliar field of philosophy of history.” But while the intensely competitive nature of the debate can add considerable amount of entertainment for the reader of the Carr-Berlin exchange, it does not necessarily aid in their comprehension. For that the reader must first turn to the context that lent urgency to their debates.

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70 Carr, "History and Morals", 821.


“Pernicious Doctrines”

The Real World Stakes of Ivory Tower Debates

To Carr and Berlin, the stakes of their intellectual back-and-forth were perilously high. Each read looming disaster in the other’s mode of intellectual inquiry: political allegiances, attitudes towards enduring philosophical questions, and even differences in authorial tone were more than academic differences, they were powerful and potentially sinister ideologies. Jonathan Haslam, commenting on a statement of Carr’s to the effect that a lecture by Berlin would surely degrade the status of working historians into no more than collectors of facts and providers of obtuse, arbitrary moral judgments, writes that “This illustrates rather neatly his exaggerated appreciation of Berlin’s influence; the counterpart perhaps to Berlin’s undue concern at the subversive threat of Carr’s pernicious doctrines.”73 The urgency of this rivalry was perhaps exaggerated by the fact that Carr and especially Berlin confined their advocacy to intellectual rather than overtly political topics—their political incompatibility was sublimated into their historiographical debates.

Berlin was very aware of his role as a liberal intellectual, and he embraced the rational and measured attitude this was supposed to entail: “He did not pronounce on public issues. No one could say what his views were on trade union reform, the balance of payments […] He remained marginal to the central issues of any region of national life,” writes Noel Annan.74 In his intellectual advocacy Berlin cultivated a

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motto of *surtout pas trop de zèle*. Once, in response to a request to “pen a credo for Cold War liberals,” Berlin demurred that the proper counter to Communism was certainly not a rigid liberal faith of equally severe sincerity.

For Carr, this primacy of the intellectual over the overtly political was sometimes more a matter of necessity than design: according to Haslam, “the best of the *History of Soviet Russia* was absorbed without the associated belief system [the de-emphasis or even toleration of Soviet abuses in the name of historical objectivity], and it was a measure of the stature of the work that this could so easily be done.”

More generally, though he was a contrarian character who liked to portray himself as outsider skeptic of the academic establishment, Carr deplored what he saw as Berlin’s cynicism, finding his abstention from strong, overarching beliefs counterproductive, even noxious, in already uncertain times. Carr conceived of his own age as a particularly fraught era: in his scheme of the history of the western world over the preceding several centuries, he argued that the Renaissance-era cult of individualism had become economically and politically obsolete by the twentieth century. It only remained prevalent in the intellectual sphere, Carr continued, as a comfortable but effete holdover, “an illustration, perhaps, of an inherent time-lag in the history of ideas, perhaps the success of intellectuals in isolating themselves…” Carr went on to rail against Berlin’s “New Skepticism,” by which he meant Berlin’s strategy of dealing with this crisis of “reason and faith” by weakly attempting to preserve the old, comforting, yet obsolete intellectual order. “The new skepticism, muttering beneath

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76 Ibid., 199.
78 Carr, "The New Skepticism", 357.
its breath ‘surtout point de zèle’ and turning a fastidious back on the disturbing and uncongenial realities of contemporary society” was dangerously outmoded, he argued, for they were undoubtedly living in a time when intellectual freedom was under attack. The worst possible response was an academic “assertion of rights without obligations.”79 According to Carr, Berlin’s affinity for the individual in society was not a laudatory moral quality but rather a worrisome retreat from intellectual responsibility.

For his part, Berlin saw Carr’s lack of regard for the individual as cynicism of the highest order and his brash sense of self-assurance as the real expression of callow naiveté: “Mr. Carr,” writes Berlin in a review of What is History?, “here makes no pretence of impartiality; like the deeply committed thinker that he is, he sees no more than one side of any question.” 80 The parallels here to Berlin’s conception of the intellectual outlook of the Soviet Union itself are not hard to discern.

How did these dueling positions play out in the actual mentions of the Soviet Union in Berlin and Carr’s work? Carr mentions his study of the Soviet Union in What is History? occasionally, yet in the calm, measured tones of the academic, while Berlin avoids most explicit mentions of USSR, but allows the looming emotional reality of totalitarianism to haunt Historical Inevitability. For both men, however, the question of the immediacy of the Soviet Union’s painful past—the way, that is, that chronological proximity can radically affect the historian’s emotional response to an event—becomes a chief preoccupation. Berlin concludes Historical Inevitability on a defiant note:

79 Ibid., 357.
We are told that it is foolish to judge Charlemagne or Napoleon or Genghis Khan or Hitler or Stalin for their massacres… We are told that as historians it is our task to describe, let us say, the great revolutions of our own time without so much as hinting that certain individuals involved in them not merely caused, but were responsible for, great misery and destruction…and also told that we should practise such austerities out of respect for some imaginary scientific canon which distinguishes between facts and values very sharply.\(^81\)

For Berlin, there is no such thing as an amoral position—all historians necessarily view history through the lens of their particular constellation of values (he notes that Carr also subscribes to this concept of inherent bias).\(^82\) Any profession of neutrality is of necessity its own type of morality, and any attempt to escape from the messy world of value judgment is thereby illusory. “Detachment,” he writes, “is itself a moral position.”\(^83\) The fact that certain historians are insisting on this artificial neutrality even in the study of recent events, which are thus that much more emotionally potent, is especially galling to Berlin.

Carr agrees with Berlin’s premise (contemporary events engender more pronounced emotional reactions) but inverts his priorities, arguing that the historian must surmount his knee-jerk temptation to judge recent events in order to facilitate greater knowledge and understanding:

And if anyone cavils at the statement that it is not our business to pass moral judgment on Hitler or Stalin…this is because they were the contemporaries of many of us, because hundreds of thousands of those who suffered directly

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\(^81\) Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 114.
\(^83\) Ibid., xxix.
or indirectly from their actions are still alive, and because, precisely for these reasons, it is difficult for us to approach them as historians and to divest ourselves of other capacities which might justify us in passing judgments on their deeds...  

For Carr, the fact that history had happened as it did had inherent meaning, power was transferred in a specific way to specific parties, for a reason; suffering on the other hand was and is endemic and undeniable in all eras and thus of little to no interest to the historian.  

For all their overt differences, however, Berlin and Carr shared an important commonality in their sense that history, and the historian, play a vital civic role. Free will versus determinism, the relative importance of the social and the individual, the uneasy boundary between historical objectivity and relativism—these were not sterile questions for either Carr or Berlin, who both sought to alleviate what they saw as a central crisis of their time.  

Of course, the respective crises of Berlin and Carr were completely different. Carr ended *What is History?* with an impassioned, if slightly self-serving, broadside against “the loss of the pervading sense of a world in perpetual motion,” an effete and small-minded pessimism he believed was rampant in the intellectual circles of the day. Against these thinkers (here Carr does not name Berlin, though he does name intellectuals like Popper and Trevor-Roper, whom he seemingly places alongside Berlin) Carr announces that he is an unrepentant optimist. “I shall look out on a world

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84 Carr, *What Is History?*, 100.
85 Ibid., 104.
86 Ibid., 208.
in tumult and a world in travail,” he grandly concludes, “and shall answer in the well-
worn words of a great scientist: ‘And yet—it moves.’”

Berlin’s contemporary fears in this era were, rather, mostly the same as those held by the liberal cohort of intellectuals to which he belonged—the threat of Soviet totalitarianism to liberal democracy. Yet unlike many of his peers, Berlin was convinced that the intellectual antecedents of totalitarianism were not alien to the West but had in fact originated entirely within its intellectual tradition—in both its “romantic” and “scientistic” strands of thought. This understanding of the development of Western intellectual history, of course, lent credence to Berlin’s assertion that the historian must proceed with the maximum amount of caution.

“So Long as These Claims are Not Absurdly False”

Berlin and Carr on What the Historian Believes

“How could [Carr] talk about the relativism of history writing, while writing a history so firmly cast in a thoroughly deterministic framework of the past? And how could he at one and the same time argue that Berlin was wrong about determinism and yet he was himself right about relativism? In fact the lectures reflect something of a dissonance, of unresolved dilemmas, of an internalized debate…” Jonathan Haslam points out the logically uncertain nature of Carr’s position in the Berlin-Carr debates thus. But Berlin’s position, too, if pushed can reach what seems like an impasse: George Crowder frames this question as “on the one hand, he steps forward

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87 Ibid., 209.
88 Crowder, Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism, 43.
as a defender of liberalism against the threat of totalitarianism...on the other hand, Berlin’s pluralism seems sometimes to shade into relativism, to imply that between one set of fundamental values and another no single choice can be shown to be better founded than another…’90 It would be worthwhile to note, too, that both Berlin and Carr were very aware of each other’s logical difficulties, though it is less clear if they ever confronted their own personal argumentative shortcomings.91

While Berlin and Carr conceived of themselves on opposite ends of the intellectual and ideological spectrum, in fact their methods of inquiry often intersected or contradicted their self-fashioned images. For instance, Carr’s provocative rhetoric and posturing as an ideological and intellectual rebel tended to obscure the fact that he, too, had an overt moral commitment, and that his progress-oriented vision of history, emptied of its political content, was in some ways more traditional and familiar than Berlin’s. In the context of their wider claims about

90 Crowder concludes that Berlin does not answer this question, but that his work leaves some clues as to its resolution. (Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, 11.)
91 Berlin enjoyed pointing out the instability of Carr’s jump from relativism to what Berlin sees as a sort of modernist positivism. In his review of *What is History?*, he sardonically complimented Carr’s appreciation of Marx and Freud as heroes of rationality before adding, “Yet, true and just as his tribute is, it leaves the problem of objectivity untouched. For if we ask whether the Marxist or Freudian schema, in which we are to find our own place, is itself valid, or only a coherent fantasy to be explained in terms of Marx’s or Freud’s own peculiar predicament, where are we to look for an answer?” (Berlin, "Mr Carr's Big Battalions", 15.) Carr, for his part, liked to deflate Berlin’s ostensibly commonsensical approach to historiography by pointing out that common sense itself dictated that we sometimes function on different, ostensibly irreconcilable planes of reasoning: positing the example of sudden bad behavior from a friend, Carr writes that the behavior would of course be seen to have a cause, even if that cause was attributed to the friend’s personality and thus to some degree considered a moral affront. “The logical dilemma about free will and determinism does not arise in real life...the fact is that all human actions are both free and determined, according to the point of view from which one considers them.” (Carr, *What Is History?*, 124.)
humanity and people’s status as historical beings, Berlin and Carr’s individual disagreements take on a new light.

Berlin quite clearly believed that moral valuations, which inherently assume some degree of free will, are a natural and irrevocable part of the way people think. Historians, concerned with the breadth of human experience, do not use the artificially abstract, systemic vocabulary of scientists searching for a model with which to represent some isolated process in the natural world. “What actually occurs in historical thinking is much more like the operation of common sense, where we weave together various logically independent concepts and general propositions, and bring them to bear on a given situation as best we can,” writes Berlin. Concomitant to this “common sense” of the talented historian is his ability to be objective, true and fair: admittedly contested words which, according to Berlin, ultimately do possess certain meanings, the core of which “refer to standards commonly accepted by those who work in relevant fields; and that not merely within one generation or society, but across large stretches of time and space.”

It is this belief in a certain number of shared values, however vaguely defined, that ultimately lends Berlin’s moral universe its coherence and prevents his famous pluralism and affinity for the particular from devolving into relativism or meaninglessness. According to him, the conditions for being human are not simply biological. Rather, people are bound to morally appraise what they encounter; insofar as their judgments are wise they have already striven to understand the viewpoints

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92 Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 171.
93 —— ——, "The Concept of Scientific History", 11.
94 —— ——, "Historical Inevitability", 173.
and lifestyles of others; and, “so long as these claims [to understanding] are not absurdly false” some level of awareness and comprehension of others can and does occur.\textsuperscript{95} In this he makes a far-reaching assumption that puts him into direct variance with Carr. “That elusive entity ‘human nature,’” writes Carr in \textit{What is History?}, “has varied so much from country to country and from century to century that it is difficult not to regard it as a historical phenomenon shaped by prevailing social conditions and conventions.”\textsuperscript{96}

It is important to clarify what Berlin is doing when he jumps from a claim to a conclusion with the caveat “so long as these claims are not absurdly false.” Carr, Berlin (and as we shall see, Herzen) are all faced with the same central problem when they attempt to use historiography as a tool to affect the present: what will they take to be real, natural, or inherent to the human condition; what is rather contingent on the \textit{Weltanschauung} of a particular moment or social group; and what is manifestly wrong and in need of correction. Carr attacks Berlin for rhetorical strategies that tend to profess a good faith belief in those modes of thinking about history that already exist. When Berlin argues that, in his essay against determinism, he is not striving to show whether determinism itself is true or false but rather to show that “acceptance of [determinism] logically entails a far more drastic revision of some of our commonest convictions and notions than is usually allowed for,” he is making a seemingly conservative epistemological argument.\textsuperscript{97} Carr attacks Berlin for what he sees as a disingenuously evasive maneuver, writing in a letter to the editor in \textit{The Listener}:

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{96} Carr, \textit{What Is History?}, 38.
\textsuperscript{97} Berlin, "What Is History? (Letters to the Editor)", 1048.
“Over and over again, he seeks to show that determinism is incomparable with the ‘notion of individual responsibility’ which he emphatically endorses. If these arguments do not lead to the conclusion that ‘determinism must be false’, I do not see where they lead.”

Clariﬁcation is to be found in Berlin’s essay The Concept of Scientiﬁc History, where he provides the theoretical basis for his mode of reasoning. Berlin argues that thought processes in general, and the concerted effort of historical inquiry in particular, proceed not in any rigorous inductive or deductive manner but rather within a diffuse network of generalizations and assumptions. A good historian, then, is essentially very good at thinking like a human being. According to Berlin, within a person’s mesh of thought, individual beliefs can be tested and revised but the general texture of cognitive function is unimpeachable; to destroy it would be to destroy our status as thinking beings: “All my beliefs cannot be overthrown,” writes Berlin.

Even if the ground beneath one of my feet is crumbling, my other foot must rest securely planted, at least for the time being; otherwise there is no possibility of thought or communication. It is this network of our most general assumptions, called common-sense knowledge, that historians rightly and inescapably take for granted.

Part and parcel of this web of assumptions is the individual’s belief that he is operating in a world that allows some measure of individual responsibility. Berlin devotes much of the first half of Historical Inevitability, and for that matter a good part of his academic career, to demolishing the belief in a super-historical standard of

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98 Carr, "What Is History? (Letter to the Editor)”, 975.
meaning, whether this be expressed in a rationalist belief in inevitable progress or a romantic trust in the enigmatic workings of a Hegelian world spirit. These monistic systems of thought, and their accompanying blind belief in their own predictive capacity, rest on a deductive premise that according to Berlin is inherently inapplicable to the field of history. In his distaste for determination, Berlin prefers to err in the other direction and view the individual as generally less shackled to the influences of his social and historical context. This attitude is demonstrated broadly, for instance, in Berlin’s popular essays about philosophical topics that bring thinkers of vastly different epochs and intellectual traditions into conversation with each other. But Berlin’s distaste for monism, and his concomitant belief in pluralism, does not mean that he is a moral or epistemological relativist. Just as humans are not bound from above by totalizing historical systems, they are not anchored irrevocably to their particular social context, and are morally and intellectually capable of seeking to understand themselves and other people. It is this freedom, in a sense, that ties people together in Berlin’s universe.

Thus, when Berlin encounters an argument for moral reflection that attempts to reconcile moral activity with determinism—namely, by positing that humans are capable of adjusting their behavior in response to praise or blame, so that censuring an action may be unjust but nevertheless also useful—he rejects the claim, not for its truth value but for its ethical content (which in Berlin’s scheme has a truth value of its own). Such a utilitarian view of moral activity would entirely miss the point. In the introduction to “Four Essays on Liberty” (1969), Berlin writes: “It may be that such

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100 See Berlin’s essay “The Pursuit of the Ideal”
words, like the prospect of rewards and punishments, do affect conduct in important ways, and that this makes the useful or dangerous. But this is not the point at issue. It is whether such praise, blame, and so on, are merited, morally appropriate, or not.”

Though here he is referring specifically to the determinism debate, this comment encapsulates the broad conceptual lens with which Berlin approaches people and their relationship to history. The point at issue is not progressive evolution, change, or difference. It is, rather, that in a world in which determinism has yet to be proven, the concept of individual responsibility yet relates the actions of all people to one another and allows historical study to function on a single plane of inquiry that amalgamates intuitive, empirical and rational thought.

Carr, in discussing the ways that Berlin’s philosophies limit the analytical potential of his historiography, associates Berlin’s interest in morality with puerility. Carr does not see morality as indigenous to history—he conceives of himself rather than Berlin as the purveyor of the idea that there is no super-historical standard of historical appraisal. Carr, in a manner reminiscent of Berlin, subdivides the question of determinism into two discrete spheres: an academic concern with truth and understanding on the one hand, and the “real life” constellation of practical and ethical considerations, including judgment, on the other. “The fact is,” he writes, “that all human behaviors are both free and determined, according to the point of view from which one considers them.” Thus, if one considers the free will debate from the point of view of the historian, who attempts to understand what happened in the past,

102 “Sir Isaiah Berlin, in *Historical Inevitability*, is terribly worried by the prospect that historians may fail to denounce Genghis Khan and Hitler as bad men.” (Carr, *What Is History?*, 57.)
one will subscribe to a belief in determinism, which Carr simply defines as “the belief that everything that happens has a cause or causes, and could not have happened differently unless something in the cause or causes had also been different.”

If one considers free will from the point of view of the wronged friend or the magistrate, on the other hand, determinism and judgment can quite easily be reconciled, since, for instance, “it is a condition of social life that normal adult human beings are responsible for their own personality.”

For Carr, then, the overt moral angle is most emphatically not “the point at issue.” In reference to the above problem of moral censure or praise as a tool to alter behavior or as an autonomously valuable activity, Carr would enthusiastically come down on the first side. Even if moral judgment for the sake of judgment of individual actors was a legitimate activity for a historian, which Carr would argue it is not, he would still find it more useful for the historian to take an active role, to search for significant causal strands in the past, even to orient himself towards the future in his quest to locate progressive trends.

Carr’s conception of history, then, is far more temporally oriented than Berlin’s. He approvingly quotes Herbert Butterfield’s maxim that the only absolute for the historian in history is change. History for Carr is the record of a qualitative change in the nature of man: “Modern man is said to have…no greater innate capacity of thought than his ancestor 5,000 years ago. But the effectiveness of his thinking has been multiplied many times by learning and incorporating in his experience the

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103 Ibid., 122.
104 Ibid., 124.
105 Ibid., 164.
106 Ibid., 160.
experience of the intervening generations.” Yet Carr attempts to distance himself from his nineteenth-century predecessors. The modern age, continues Carr, has obviously dispensed with their blind faith in automatic progress, and the modern historian must rather “treat [progress] as a process into which the demands and conditions of successive periods will put their own specific content.\(^{108}\)

Carr repeatedly stresses the relativism of history: the idea that general, timeless conceptual frameworks have no inherent super-historical meaning. Rather, grand words are vessels for the purposes of specific, historically contingent content. He explains:

> The moral precepts which we apply in history or in everyday life are like cheques in a bank: they have a printed and a written part. The printed part consists of abstract words like liberty and equality, justice and democracy. These are essential categories. But the cheque is valueless until we fill in the other part, which states how much liberty we propose to allocate to whom, whom we recognize as our equals, and up to what amount. The way in which we fill in the cheque from time to time is a matter of history.\(^{109}\)

Here Carr here seems to be coming in direct conflict with Berlin, who argues repeatedly that the fact of self-interest does not invalidate morality, and that historians of any age and of any cultural backgrounds are still justified in judging right from wrong after having taken historical factors into account.\(^{110}\) In reality, however, Berlin

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 151.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 152.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 106.
\(^{110}\) “If we do condemn societies or individuals, we shall do so only after taking into account their social and material conditions, their aspirations, codes of value, degrees of progress and reaction…and judge them, when we do (and why in the world should we not?) as we judge anyone or anything.” (Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 177.)
was just as historically minded—equally wary, that is, of big, empty questions or concepts without real, localized content.\textsuperscript{111} The real difference between the two men is more nebulous, with Carr’s focus on self-interest at odds with Berlin’s more forgiving view of individual Weltanschauungs, all, up to a point, equally valid.

Carr’s realist focus on self-interest is his trademark. The historian, explains Carr, treads somewhere between subjectivism and empiricism. His task is not merely locating and arranging historical facts; rather, it is his attention to certain events above others that constitutes their status as historical facts in the first place.\textsuperscript{112} But, in case this emphasis on the historian’s choices appears to push history writing into total subjectivism and to blot out any engagement at all with the “real” events of the past, Carr clarifies that an objective reality does in fact exist: “It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes,” he writes.\textsuperscript{113} (“What, then, does follow? He does not tell us,” snipes Berlin.\textsuperscript{114})

The facts, according to Carr, are actually perfectly amenable to a sort of objective interpretation.\textsuperscript{115} Carr’s definition of “objective,” however, might seem quite foreign to those acquainted with the term in its traditional use. Carr writes that when we call a historian objective we mean “Not… simply that he gets his facts right,

\textsuperscript{111} He celebrates Herzen, for instance, for his realization that “general solutions are not solutions, universal ends are never real ends, that every age has its own texture and its own questions, that short cuts and generalizations are no substitute for experience…” (Isaiah Berlin, ”Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty,” in \textit{Russian Thinkers}, ed. Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 87.)
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{114} Berlin, ”Mr Carr’s Big Battalions”, 15.
\textsuperscript{115} Carr, \textit{What Is History?}, 31.
but rather that he chooses the right facts, or, in other words, that he applies the right
standard of significance.”¹¹⁶ Lest that seem circular, Carr clarifies that an objective
historian does two things: he “has the capacity to rise above the limited vision of his
own situation in society and history”—a recognition which, Carr allows, is partly
based on simply recognizing the extent to which he is mired in his own situation in
the first place.¹¹⁷ He also “has the capacity to project his vision into the future in such
a way as to give him a more profound and lasting insight into the past…”¹¹⁸ This
clarification seems to have confused the definition even more, as it appears to be
begging two questions at once: first, that the recognition of one’s historical
contingency will somehow enact an escape from that same contingency onto some
higher plane of objective understanding, and second, that the “vision” projected into
the future will be fundamentally allied with some real, objective state of things to
begin with. To equate objectivity with the ability to provide a profound and lasting
insight seems, again, oddly circular. Despite the confusion one thing is clear: this
jump from subjective historical contingency to some sort of objective ability to locate
significant causal strands in history and to project them into the future is intimately
related to Carr’s notion of the centrality of progress and ultimately forms the perhaps
imprecise but nevertheless vital core of Carr’s argument.¹¹⁹

Carr’s definition of objectivity, when compared with Berlin’s, begins to offer
a concrete way of comparing the two thinkers. Both define “objectivity” in novel

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 163.
¹¹⁷ Ibid., 163.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 163.
¹¹⁹ “The historian of the past can make an approach towards objectivity only as he
approaches towards the understanding of the future.” (Ibid., 164.)
ways that give insight into their different understandings of the subject-object split.

Berlin defines objectivity as the rarefied space in which people of different times and places and social affiliations may come to have some level of understanding: “This common ground,” he writes, “is what is correctly called objective—that which enables us to identify other men and other civilizations as human and civilized at all.”120 As with Berlin’s definition of objectivity, Carr’s seems to demand a leap of faith, and as with Berlin, it is here that Carr leaves himself open to attack.

Berlin’s most incisive critique of Carr’s vision of history as progress comes in his review of What is History? published in The New Statesman.121 Part of this review, incidentally, is excerpted on the back of the original US edition of What is History? The book jacket reads:

“…this is an admirably stimulating and intrepid book, a bold excursion into a region of central importance where more contemporary philosophers and historians, unaccountably, fear to tread.” —Isaiah Berlin, New Statesman

Ironically, the ellipses obscure the fact that in the actual review, this comment is prefaced with the phrase “Whatever may be thought of its arguments and theses…” Placed at the end of the review, after several hundred words in which Berlin has communicated in devastating detail exactly what he thinks of Carr’s “arguments and theses,” the comment takes on a vastly different tone from what the designer of the book jacket hoped to convey.122 Berlin’s most specific and most damaging critiques refer to the shaky logic of Carr’s reliance on progress as the linchpin of objectivity.

120 Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 177.
121 — — —, "Mr Carr's Big Battalions".
122 Ibid., 16.
Commenting on Carr’s belief in progress, or in other words in a series of significant causal chains in human history that determined the shape of past events and which gesture towards the likely developments of the future, Berlin is obviously bemused. Referring to the goals of the future in order to better understand the past, he writes, is intellectually dishonest: “the notion of goals which cannot be clearly seen, or certified as valid, until they have been reached, and whose only claim to validity is that they will be, or have been, attained—these goals are simply whatever in fact will turn out to have occurred. On this view, whatever occurs is good because it occurs…” This teleological attitude, says Berlin, leads Carr to blindly follow the victors in history and to consign “the failures and minorities” to “the trash heap of history.”

“For the Benefit of Future Generations”

The (Im)morality of Teleology

Berlin’s review is titled “Mr. Carr’s Big Battalions” in reference to Carr’s belief in the centrality of power, in the most basic and reductive sense of the word, in history—we know that certain groups attained dominion in certain times, Carr is saying, hoping to elucidate the causal strands that led this to happen. “I am not a specialist in the history of cricket. But its pages are presumably studded with the names of those who made centuries rather than of those who made ducks and were left out of the side.” Does this attitude, as Berlin claims above, serve simply to reify under the rubric of progress that which has already happened, no matter how terrible, in a sort of perversion of Whig history?

123 Ibid., 16.
Carr was actually more in the mold of the nineteenth-century German historicists like Ranke who believed that the fact that past development had proceeded in a certain way was inherently meaningful—for Carr, this meant that it was worthy of study rather than facile approval or condemnation.\(^\text{125}\) In some ways like Berlin, he seeks to show that the movement of history as he saw it was not an abstract, self-sustaining process, but rather the culmination of specific behaviors by human beings. Carr repeatedly argues that the analytic task of the historian is qualitatively different than that of the man on the street who used moral categories to define the world in which he lived. Yet he identifies the germ of history in human nature itself. Everyday people, he claims, do something of the work of the historian just by going about their daily existence:

> History begins with the handing down of tradition; and tradition means the carrying of the habits and lessons of the past into the future. Records of the past began to be kept for the benefit of future generations. “Historical thinking,” writes the Dutch historian Huizinga, “is always teleological.”\(^\text{126}\)

Time-bound information suffuses every action in the present, Carr argues, whether that be consciousness of the past—Carr notes that the Russian revolutionaries were obsessed with the lessons of the French revolution—or the future: “Every civilized

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\(^\text{125}\) Mandelbaum defines the nineteenth century understanding of historicism, as opposed to Karl Popper’s twentieth century condemnatory definition, as the following: “historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development.” (F. R. Ankersmit, "Historicism: An Attempt at Synthesis," *History and Theory* 34 (1995), 143.)

society imposes sacrifices on the living generation for the sake of generations yet unborn.”127 Carr goes so far as to claim the present doesn’t exist.128

Thus, while for Berlin, teleology implies a transfer of all responsibility from people to an impersonal historical idea,129 for Carr it is quite synonymous with the idea of history to begin with, for people themselves live their lives driven by goals, even if not fully elaborated ones, or even conscious ones—Carr is again and again adamant about the need to go beyond conscious motivation in the explanation of historical actions.130 These goals when pursued presumably coalesce into the driving forces of history, in what is perhaps one of the weaker logical jumps in Carr’s argument, as Berlin points out—whose goals are progressive, whose reactive? Whose interests represent the vanguard of humanity at any one time? 131

These questions can easily begin to seem abstract in the theoretical form in which they interact in Carr and Berlin’s respective historiographical treatises. Ultimately, one must return to the political realities of the time, and their attendant psychological component to offer some much-needed clarification. Carr is able to

127 Ibid., 158.
128 “We all know,” he writes in What is History, perhaps exhibiting some of his occasional lack of interest in the business of living that so frustrated Berlin, “the present has no more than a notional existence as an imaginary dividing line between the past and the future.” (Ibid., 142.)
129 “Yet once we transfer responsibility for what happens from the backs of individuals to the casual or teleological operation of institutions or cultures or psychical or physical factors, what can be meant by calling upon our sympathy or sense of history, or sighing after the ideal of total impartiality, which may not indeed be fully attainable, but to which some come nearer than others?” Berlin writes, arguing that teleology negates not only all possibility of but also all need for the historian, as it turns history into a science. “Few are accused of biased accounts of geological changes,” he adds. (Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 143.)
131 Berlin, "Mr Carr's Big Battalions", 16.
position himself as an underdog and his theory of historiography as an alternative
theory only because he is a British historian of the Soviet Union in the mid-twentieth
century. Because of this fact, Carr is able to align two principles which today seem
rather oddly antithetical—a concern with the disadvantaged, non-western “other” and
a concern with and reification of the victors in history—something vaguely
reminiscent of a sort of Whig version of history purged of its nationalist content. His
arguments make most sense as provocations forcing the liberal academic
establishment to examine their assumptions and their biases rather than definitive
formulations of a new, coherent type of historiography.

Likewise, Berlin depended for the urgency and coherence of his anti-
“Historical Inevitability” position on the existence of a state seemingly governed for
the purposes of ideology rather than people. His injunctions against, for instance, the
dangers of sacrifice in the present for the sake of future generations possess obvious
impact for any reader with a basic knowledge of the history of the Soviet Union, the
trials of its citizens, and the way these trials were justified by the powers that be. In,
say, a consumerist society in which the unbridled satisfaction of material desires
threatens to have permanent noxious effects on unlucky future generations, however,
a warning of this type might have somewhat less moral force. Or to take another
example, an argument for the importance of the individual will in history might seem
unspeakably vital in the face of the looming threat of a totalitarian society that
predicated itself on belief in Marx’s material dialectic. When it becomes apparent,
however, that “individual will” might very well limit its purview to the words and
deeds of a handful of generally privileged white men, then Berlin’s might be seen as
having a definite, though mostly hidden, specific social content to much the same extent as Carr’s does.

Turning to Carr and Berlin’s work on Herzen is a possible way to move forward. For both Carr and Berlin, the “discovery” of Herzen was a moment of deep personal as well as intellectual significance. In his brief account of his life, “An Autobiography,” Carr writes that as a diplomat in Riga (1925-1929) whose official duties left him time to spare for other pursuits, he began to immerse himself in Russian nineteenth-century literature, specifically Dostoyevsky and Herzen. He happened upon Herzen’s collected editions while browsing in a bookstore. The importance of this find was considerable:

I now perceived for the first time that the liberal moralistic ideology in which I had been brought up was not, as I had always assumed, an Absolute taken for granted by the modern world, but was sharply and convincingly attacked by very intelligent people living outside the charmed circle, who looked at the world through very different eyes. In other words, the first challenge to the bourgeois capitalist society came, so far as I was concerned, not from Marx or from the Bolsheviks, but from Russian nineteenth-century intellectuals…\(^{132}\)

Berlin, meanwhile, first encountered Herzen in 1933, at the beginning of his work on a biography of Marx, which is coincidentally the year \textit{Romantic Exiles} appeared. He had picked up a volume of Herzen’s memoirs while idly browsing through the stacks of the London Library.\(^{133}\) Unsurprisingly, Berlin felt an affinity for Herzen for rather different ideological reasons: Ignatieff writes that “it is easy to see

\(^{133}\) Ignatieff, \textit{Isaiah Berlin: A Life}, 71.
why he identified with Herzen: an aristocratic renegade who managed to reconcile genuine commitment with freedom from sectarian dogmatism.\textsuperscript{134}

Who exactly was Alexander Herzen? Why might he have held such interest for two figures as seemingly diametrically opposed as Carr and Berlin? In fact, in some ways Herzen is no less than a progenitor of the vendetta against a superhistorical standard of value, and the accompanying belief that a careful study of history would reveal the proper course of action to bring about desirable change. He believed—or wanted to believe—that the individual could do his part to guide history in a humane and desirable direction. As such, he was intimately meshed in the web of free will and determinism that Carr and Berlin would articulate with such panache nearly a century later.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 71.
CHAPTER TWO

“To Understand Means to Act”

Alexander Herzen and Revolutionary Realism

Introducing a chapter in his autobiography My Past and Thoughts—detailing the critical years of 1847 and 1848, which he had spent chasing revolutionary insurrection across Europe—Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) writes that the work is “the reflection of historical events on a man who has accidentally found himself in their path.”\(^{135}\) Herzen’s characterization of himself as an accidental tourist, as admirably humble as it may be, is highly suspect. He had no doubt that he was living in momentous times, whether it be the 1848 Europe-wide revolution or the 1861 emancipation of the serfs that momentarily raised, and then both times quickly dashed, his hopes for the definitive rise of a new epoch. Indeed, an intense awareness of history permeated every aspect of Herzen’s thought.\(^{136}\) His “left interpretation” of Hegelian philosophy turned the Russian intellectuals of the 1840s away from their fatalistic, apolitical interpretation of Hegelianism, repackaging it instead as the “algebra of revolution” in which individual, conscious action became the guiding

\(^{136}\) “Well aware that he was an outstandingly gifted man within a minute elite, he felt himself born to a role on the grand historical scheme.” (Edward Acton, Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.)
force of history. This move away from idealism did its part in orienting the nascent Russian intelligentsia as a group of intellectuals with activist inclinations.\textsuperscript{137}

Herzen self-consciously shied away from activities that were unlikely to effect change in the world around him.\textsuperscript{138} Perhaps reflecting this constant sense of personal involvement in great things, his first set of memoirs, \textit{Notes of a Young Man}, was published before he turned thirty.

He was in a unique position as a committed revolutionary with an eloquently and consistently held belief in moderation and deliberation; a fervent opponent of utopian idealism who advanced an (in retrospect) highly unrealistic scheme of Russian commune-based agrarian socialism as a cure for a “dying” Europe’s ills. Measured, warm, witty and wise, he was a member of the first generation of intelligentsia—the “men of the forties” or, according to Turgenev’s novel, the “fathers.” But he lived to watch the ascension of the “sons” of the sixties, materialist intelligentsia whose humorless militancy and emphasis on underground organizing contradicted his notions of transparency, free debate and civility. Just as Berlin and Carr’s approaches to history belie easy categorization, the general tenor of Herzen’s thought cannot be easily expressed: as Aileen Kelly writes, “Alexander Herzen is one of those political thinkers who elude all attempts at neat classification. Liberal,

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 237. Also see Malia, \textit{Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855}, 228.

\textsuperscript{138} Monica Partridge, for one, believes that if Herzen had continued his literary activity of his early years, he could have ranked among Russia’s greatest writers. However, he chose a more political path: “He interpreted the historic situation in which he found himself in Europe as requiring from him not great literature but activity of a more directly revolutionary kind.” Partridge, \textit{Alexander Herzen, 1812-1870}, 45.
radical, innovator, conservative, skeptic, utopian, materialist, idealist—all these labels have been applied to him and all are inadequate or misleading.”

Thus, although these labels will become important in a consideration of Carr and Berlin’s differing takes on Herzen, this chapter will refer to formal schools of thought and ideological affiliations only as Herzen himself conceived of them. Herzen thought of himself as having cast off the mantle of romanticism in order to view things as they truly were—he no doubt would have chafed at Carr’s characterization of him as the last, dilatory remnant of the movement. He held his freedom from dogmatism to be a defining characteristic, both of himself and of his coterie of fellow intellectuals. “In Herzen's phrase, his friends were too cultured and independent to be completely lost in any one set of ideas […] they conceived of life and human beings as too complex to be rendered meaningful by any one abstract formula.”

Herzen’s attention was fixed on the realities of the present moment: his creative engagement with the idealist Hegel, for instance, demonstrates that his concern for the practical necessity for action among Russia’s educated classes could act as a powerful determinant for the way he interpreted the philosophic doctrines of his time.

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141 “As is well documented, the stimulus for Herzen’s reassessment of Hegel was his concern about the conservative philosophical direction he found the nascent Russian intelligentsia to be taking in 1840, when he returned to Moscow after a stint in internal exile. The possibility of the most cultured stratum of Russian society using Hegel to justify reneging on its commitment to social change represents the real crisis for Herzen.” (Ruth Coates, "The Early Intellectual Careers of Bakhtin and Herzen:
Believing himself unbound from the strictures of dogma or pre-articulated ideas, then, Herzen thought that he could help direct the course of history by facilitating dialogue among intellectuals in an effort to find solutions most appropriate for the contemporary reality. According to Herzen, historical study and intellectual exchange among a rational group of people with strong social consciences offered the most desirable path to real-life change.

Inevitably, in beginning to think about the ways that specific approaches to historical study could facilitate or circumscribe the possibilities of the present, Herzen touched upon some of the vexing, fundamental historiographical questions that would absorb both Carr and Berlin. The question of free will versus determinism, as will become evident, was an evolving theme in Herzen’s work: unlike Berlin, who sought to discuss the implications of determinism rather than its truth or falsity, or Carr, who believed that determinism existed but that social discourse surrounding it shifted between modes of personal responsibility and external causation, Herzen believed that some sort of ultimately truthful accommodation could be reached between free will and the biological, historical, and other realities that limited the scope of human possibility. Part and parcel with his belief that his age was one of convulsive historical change, he tended to argue that understanding, rather than violent

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Towards a Philosophy of the Act," *Studies in East European Thought* 52, no. 4 (2000), 244.)

142 His *Free Russian Press*, for instance, as the first Russian press beyond the bounds of tsarist censorship, had an editorial policy of granting a voice to the full spectrum of opposition to the tsarist regime. According to Monica Partridge, “This editorial objective was quite new. No émigré journal had ever been prepared to offer so wide a forum, to create an opportunity for the free expression or [sic] views opposed to its own, to seek to be polemical rather than didactic.” (Partridge, *Alexander Herzen, 1812-1870*.)

condemnation, was the proper strategy to coax society into willing reform: “To crash down the responsibility for the past and the present on the final representatives of the truth of the past, now the untruth of the present, is just as ludicrous as the execution of the French marquises because they were not Jacobins,” he wrote a year before his death, in 1869.144

A (Metaphorical) Call to Arms

Herzen in Russia, 1812-1847

Herzen’s first major philosophical works are the trio of essays published under the name “Dilettantism in Science” (1843). These works by Herzen, interestingly enough, are located in the same uneasy nexus between apolitical intellectual endeavor and politically motivated work as are Carr’s and Berlin’s. In addition, their abstract quality as statements of principles also recalls the historiographical writings of Berlin and Carr. But while Berlin abjured overt political advocacy for ideological reasons and Carr’s political belief system proved too unorthodox to be widely engaged, Herzen’s arcane philosophical language was a conscious tactic that served to mask his subversive intent from the tsarist censors. “As always with Herzen,” Malia writes, “philosophy was not an end in itself but a vehicle for politics” and this was partially, Malia continues, because the language of metaphysics masked and protected his social critique, and also because Russian intellectual society was so permeated with idealism that Herzen quite wisely decided

144 Gertsen, K staromu tovarishchu. 580. For English see Aleksandr Herzen and Lev Navrozov, Selected Philosophical Works (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 581.
to initially speak to them in their own terms.\footnote{Malia, \textit{Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855}, 236.} And indeed, Herzen intended his essays to be read by the average educated Russian, striving first to convince his readers to regard philosophy in a newly rigorous way (“Dilettantism”) and then presenting a comprehensible survey of Western thought for the average literate Russian (in a collection titled “Letters on the Study of Nature”[1845-6]). Malia writes that these works are so suffused with a contemporary understanding of Hegel that they require “extensive transposition, almost decoding,” and in addition that “their philosophy is meaningful only as transposed politics.”\footnote{Ibid, 237.} This account of their inaccessibility is perhaps too pessimistic. The work is in fact quite intelligible if approached as the sketching out of an foundation for social action based on a historical study of man.

Herzen’s early essays reveal a preoccupation with the ways that thinking about history can shape the possibilities of the present that anticipates Carr and Berlin’s later historiographical debates. Herzen sought a way to move past the rigid divisions between idealism and materialism that shaped the intellectual arena of his era. He found the means for this reconciliation in history, which, as the record of life, necessarily resolved both “speculative philosophy” (encompassing logic, philosophy and science) with the empiricism of the natural world. “Immediacy and thought are the two negations which are reconciled in the process of history. Their unity has been divided into opposites in order to be reunited in history,” he wrote.\footnote{A Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}, Sobranie sochinenij v tridtsati tomakh, III (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauj SSSR, 1954), 83. For English, see: Herzen and Navro佐v, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 92.}
Monica Partridge writes that in these early works Herzen “had reached what Lenin would recognize as philosophic materialism and what he himself regarded as philosophic realism.” What, exactly, is philosophic realism, or for that matter philosophic materialism? Lenin claimed that Herzen was kept from the ultimate recognition of a Marxist-style “historical materialism,” instead languishing within the bounds of dialectical materialism, by his lack of attention to class: that is, his unwillingness to renounce all association with the bourgeoisie and to instead cast his lot with the nascent proletariat. Presumably Lenin meant by his criticism that the schematic form of Herzen’s thought demonstrated the desirable qualities of concern with objective, progressive change in history, but it was simply missing the class content that would have it accord with Marxist dogma. But the very omission that, in Lenin’s eyes, limited Herzen from achieving absolute historical consciousness, in fact reserved a limited but real space for conscious thought and individualized action in history which pure class dialectics a priori denies—to often embarrassing result.

Thus, Herzen—though he made sure to castigate the intelligentsia repeatedly for their estrangement from the masses—nevertheless elaborated a theory in which

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150 Sheila Fitzpatrick describes the difficulties of the Bolsheviks’ self-image as the party of the proletariat that was often at odds with the desires of the proletariat, crafting out a precarious position as the “revolutionary vanguard.” She also describes, for instance, the ways the Bolsheviks attempted to hide from themselves the way their intellectual elite ideologically constructed the worker class itself: “Proletarian consciousness was defined in tautologies. What the Bolsheviks (and other Marxist intellectuals) meant by it was the consciousness of a ‘conscious’ worker; and a conscious worker was a worker fitting the intellectuals’ idea of what a worker ought to be.” (Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma: Class, Culture, and Politics in the Early Soviet Years," Slavic Review 47, no. 4 (1988), 602.)
thinking individuals could play a creative and unpredictable role, one which the class
determinism of Marxism ostensibly (though not in actuality) denied them. As Malia
writes, “the dialectic was the transposition into metaphysics of two conflicting yet
related sentiments: the intellectual’s consciousness of his impotence to change
society, and his equal belief in the dynamic consequence of the discontent this
impotence bred.”151 Herzen’s dialecticism was imbued with purposeful implicit
antagonism towards his immediate opponent, for the notion of the dialectic, of change
as the only constant in history, had subversive implications under the tsarist regime.
“The implication would be inescapable to the attentive reader that the present state of
affairs in Russia could neither last nor be justified as eternally valid in itself.”152

Herzen had begun with the study of the Hegelian dialectic. He was impressed
by the Hegelian trope of the progressive improvement of man through history, but his
innovation was to make self-aware human activity both the engine and goal of the
dialectic: “No more than a century ago,” Herzen writes, “mankind thought to and in
fact began to ask for an account of life, foreseeing that there was a purpose behind
their onward movement, and that their biography possessed some deep and unitary,
all-connecting meaning”—he indicates that this development indicates the maturity of
man.153

While it seems in this quote that Herzen is embracing the abstract, “all-
embracing meaning” he elsewhere decries, in fact he has moved the site of that
meaning to history itself rather than to some super-historical scheme, thus vindicating

152 Ibid., 240.
153 Gertsen, *Diletantizm v nauke*, 87. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected
Philosophical Works*, 95.
the “biography of man” as an end in itself. He is also, to be sure, reveling in Hegelian language, which he would mostly abandon upon his emigration to Europe. For Herzen, this biography is a record in which change takes precedence over continuity to become the new absolute value—while each trend of thought may take precedence in its moment, it will surely eventually pass and be replaced by another.\textsuperscript{154} Herzen stressed again and again that the dialectic was a function of increasing human knowledge about history (as in, knowledge gained from past experience could be applied to the present; and present experience could be utilized in the future) rather than an inherent social or political mechanism.\textsuperscript{155} Thus, the position of the intellectual interested in the concrete questions of history and science (Herzen, taking a cue from the Germans, tended not to distinguish strongly between the two) obtains prominence as an expression of mankind’s progress.

In the cycle of essays that compose “Dilettantism in Science,” Herzen offers a specific prescription for the proper historical role of the intelligentsia in order that they might facilitate this all-important goal of self-knowledge through the recognition of change. He first reprimands dilettantes in general, or those for whom the pursuit of knowledge—here Herzen makes little to no distinction between science and philosophy—is limited to an easy, pleasant and altogether superficial gloss. Herzen writes that the Russians, accustomed to freely adopting ideas imported from abroad,

\textsuperscript{154} Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}. 75. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 18.
\textsuperscript{155} “But human reason is nonetheless a component of the historical process, which can, therefore, never be totally irrational or uncontrollable,” Aileen Kelly writes of Herzen’s worldview. (Kelly, \textit{Toward Another Shore}, 343.)
are particularly prone to this particular intellectual sin.\textsuperscript{156} Were they only to renounce their egotism and approach science on its own terms, and to recognize “science and art” from the standpoint of universal truth instead of the petty inclinations of the individual man, they would make their way nearer to an objective truth.\textsuperscript{157} The “Romanticists,” meanwhile, are in thrall to an embarrassingly outmoded dilemma between external nature and internal experience (Herzen is clear that the debate no longer reflects the interests of the present, and as such is gesturing towards the reactionary Slavophiles).\textsuperscript{158} Herzen goes on to criticize the “guild of scientists”—the antithesis of the dilettantes in that they were didactic, apolitical specialists, yet just as incapable of translating their knowledge into action. Finally, the “Buddhists” (the right Hegelians) were refusing to recognize the revolutionary power of science and thus making the mistake of pursuing and obtaining knowledge without turning around and applying it back to the world of action, through which abstract thought and life could again be joined. All of these misguided intellectuals, Herzen concludes, miss the big picture: that man requires knowledge, or access to the truth, before he can elevate himself to a truly free, conscious actor, in a world no longer characterized by contradictions, at some point in the future. Thus, “believing in [the future] we are filled with love for the present,” for only study and struggle in the present can achieve the hoped-for result.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{156} Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}. 10. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 18.
\textsuperscript{157} Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}. 22. For English see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 31.
\textsuperscript{158} Malia, \textit{Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855}, 245.
\textsuperscript{159} Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}. 88. For English Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 96.
Herzen’s view of history is rife with what the modern reader might consider paradox. He chastises the dilettantes for bringing too much of their own personality to their intellectual endeavors, the “Buddhists” for not bringing enough, and concludes that “the entirety of the living being consists not of the universal which has overtaken the particular, but of the universal and the particular, attracting and repulsing each other.”\textsuperscript{160} He believes that free action requires prior knowledge and awareness, and that this level of awareness has not yet been achieved in history: nevertheless, he continues, free action can take place independent of historical constraints.\textsuperscript{161} He reconciles the empirical and the rational, the scientific and the philosophical, the study of the natural world and the study of human history, simply by making a case for their ultimate unity: “Only speculative philosophy, cultivated on empiricism, is the terrible forge, before whose flame everything melts.”\textsuperscript{162}

In order to justify these statements, Herzen often relies on either incantatory language\textsuperscript{163} or organic metaphors,\textsuperscript{164} both of which bring together things which logically might seem to be opposed by placing their relation in life rather than in reason. But for Herzen, ultimately, the sheer artificiality of the idealism fashionable in the Russian elite must have offered a powerful negative argument for the need for a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[160] Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}, 75. For English see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 83.
\item[161] Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}, 84. For English see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 92.
\item[162] Gertsen, \textit{Diletantizm v nauke}, 100. For English see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 107.
\end{footnotes}
reconciliation of theory and experience. Herzen describes the ludicrous, ardently romantic cultural frame of experience in 1840’s Moscow vividly in his memoirs:

Everything that in reality was direct, every simple feeling, was exalted into abstract categories and came back from them without a drop of living blood, a pale, algebraic shadow […] The man who went for a walk in Sokolniky went in order to give himself up to the pantheistic feeling of his unity with the cosmos…

Herzen’s trust in the ultimate reconcilability of all things through enlightened human action, easier when German idealism on the one hand and autocratic tsarism on the other so obviously offered an irrational bar to future progress, was to be challenged once Herzen reached free Europe and found that the contemporary reality outside Russia wasn’t all he had hoped.

**Stranded Between the Shores:**

**Herzen after 1848**

Herzen applied for a six-month visa to take his wife to Europe for health reasons in 1846; in 1847, he arrived with his family in Paris, never to return to Russia. In Europe, he had to field the rapid double blow of discovering that the complacent French bourgeoisie did not at all resemble the vibrant intellectual community he had imagined, and then, scarcely a year later, watching the hoped-for

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165 Ibid., 234.
Europe-wide uprisings collapse in a lukewarm mixture of outright reaction and distasteful compromise.¹⁶⁶

Why, according to Herzen, had the revolution failed? Not because it was inherently impossible to overthrow entrenched authority, and certainly not because it had been premature according to some overarching timetable, à la Marx.¹⁶⁷ The revolution had failed because those who undertook it had not properly understood history and had not properly conceptualized their role within it.¹⁶⁸ The liberals railed against the contemporary system while trying to replace it with one that operated on broadly the same principles; they possessed an ideal that was inherently antithetical to every fact of the way of life under the old regime, many of whose features they had yet hoped to preserve. “The republic, as they understand it, is an abstract and not very useful idea, the fruit of theoretical meditations, the apotheosis of the presently existing state order, the transformation of that which is; their republic is the final

¹⁶⁶ In My Past and Thoughts, Herzen introduces his chapter on his devastating first years in Europe thus: “Alarmed by the Paris of 1847, I had opened my eyes to the truth for a moment, but was carried away again by the events [of 1848] that seethed about me…All Europe took up its bed and walked—in a fit of somnambulism which we took for an awakening. When I came to myself, it had all vanished…And I found myself alone, utterly alone, among graves and candles.” (Herzen and Macdonald, My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen, 332.)

¹⁶⁷ In his meditation on the legacy of 1848, Marx explains that the working class’s defeat was a function of the structural impossibility of its success at the time rather than a matter of mere strategy: “A class wherein the revolutionary interests of society are concentrated, as soon as it has risen, immediately finds in its own condition the content and the material for its revolutionary activity: to strike down enemies, to resort to measures dictated by the struggle—the consequences of its own deeds drive it ahead. It does not indulge in theoretic investigations of its own task. The French working class did not take this position; it was still unable to carry through its own revolution. ” (Karl Marx, Class Struggles in France 1848-1850, trans. Henry Kuhn (New York New York Labor News Company, 1924), 35.

dream, the poetic delirium of the old world." Just as in his earlier essays Herzen had celebrated the liberation of man through science from the antiquated systems of belief of earlier times, he here traces the revolutionaries’ failures to their unconscious enslavement to outmoded systems, or as he colorfully puts it, the “dilapidated Catholico-feudal world.”

Herzen emphasizes the entanglement of the revolutionaries in history’s “old forms.” Not only their political or social sensibilities, but their ways of being, their cultural and moral codes, indeed even the great achievements of civilization, would all have to be cast off if true revolution was to be viable. Ultimately, then, the revolutionaries failed not because they had attempted too much, but because they had attempted too little—they had worked within a political framework rather than a historical one. “The future stands outside politics,” he writes. And elsewhere, dubiously: “Do you desire political activity in the present order?”

Herzen again and again stressed the danger of allowing the structures or “forms” of monarchism or feudalism to survive beneath the surface of political revolution. Herzen allows that his call for totalizing destruction of the present civilization, and the claim that nineteenth century European society is inherently incompatible with the desired values of freedom and equality, will seem like insanity to most. “Yet this question,” he avers, appealing to Christian history (Herzen frequently used the historical trope of the Christians against the effete ancient world

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169 Gertsen, "S togo berega." 50. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 378.
170 Ibid., 51. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 379.
171 Ibid., 52. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 380.
172 Ibid., 78. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 406.
173 Ibid., 84. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 412.
174 Ibid., 52. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 408.
as an analogy for the historical role of the socialists),\textsuperscript{175} “was once raised by Christ, only in different words.”\textsuperscript{176}

In the following pages of his \textit{From The Other Shore}, especially in two dialogues between an idealist and an iconoclastic realist, Herzen elaborates a novel theory. It has been alternately characterized by William Weidemaier as a pervasively pessimistic anticipation of Nietzsche\textsuperscript{177} and “one of the first anticipations of atheistic existentialism anywhere in Europe;”\textsuperscript{178} or, conversely, by Aileen Kelly, as an empowered inversion of Schopenhauer’s skepticism in which an inherently meaningless world is cause for the cautious celebration of human possibility.\textsuperscript{179}

Kelly’s and Weidemaier’s appraisals of Herzen diverge less on the substantive content of what he believed—they both point to his rejection of metaphysics and to his focus on man as the locus of meaning as his feature of greatest originality\textsuperscript{180}—and more on the interpretive gloss which accompany their accounts. According to Weidemaier, Herzen’s deviation from the liberal mindset of the nineteenth century made him a “pessimist, an iconoclast, an enraged idealist” who anticipated, and in fact influenced, Nietzsche (though Weidemaier does acknowledge at the end of his

\textsuperscript{175} Malia notes that the threefold historical analogy of Christians, Rome and barbarians was initially not fully elaborated upon by Herzen—were the Slavs, perhaps, supposed to represent the barbarians?—but writes that Herzen’s affection for idealism’s “pseudo-logic of analogy” might have eventually helped push him to accept this scheme. (Malia, \textit{Alexander Herzen}, 338.)

\textsuperscript{176} Gertsen, “S togo berega”, 380. For English see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 380.


\textsuperscript{179} Kelly, \textit{Toward Another Shore}.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid, 326; Weidemaier, \textit{Herzen and the Existential World View}, 562.
essay that “in the final analysis, Herzen, like Nietzsche, felt a deep compulsion to affirm the basic value of existence.”)\footnote{Weidemaier, "Herzen and the Existential World View: A New Approach to an Old Debate."}

Kelly, on the other hand, argues that Herzen would have been appalled by his characterization as a pessimist; she adds that he did not live long enough to directly address Nietzsche but did directly repudiate the latter’s predecessor, Schopenhauer. According to Herzen, she argues, “the pessimists, and the optimists whom they despised, were brothers under the skin, equally motivated by a secret fear of confronting the fact that we are not central to the cosmic scheme of things…”\footnote{Kelly, Toward Another Shore, 342.}

Herzen’s understanding of the proper attitude towards history, according to Kelly, was rather an even-keeled hope in the possibilities offered by a contingent and autonomous, but not for this reason totally random or malign, universe.\footnote{Ibid, 343.}

Complicating these disagreements is the fact that, over the course of his life, Herzen made contradictory statements about some very central issues, allowing historians to craft different accounts of his most fundamental beliefs.\footnote{Even Isaiah Berlin, who seems to have an interest in portraying Herzen as fundamentally coherent a historical figure as possible, notes in one of his essays that “Herzen is neither consistent nor systematic.” He does, however, goes on to argue that Herzen is essentially systematic in his antipathy for systems. (Isaiah Berlin, "The Great Amateur," in The First Anthology: 30 Years of the New York Review of Books, ed. Robert Silvers (New York: The New York Review of Books, 1968), 60.)} Anyone attempting to formulate a meta-theory of Herzen’s approach to history has at their disposal a huge variety of material, some of it directly conflicting. In one striking example, Herzen wrote in 1847 a short story, called “From the Notes of Dr Krupov,” that expounded at length upon the theme that “History is the autobiography of a
This sensational, pithy quotation turns up in those works on Herzen attempting to convince the reader of either his pessimism or of his absolute opposition to structural interpretations of history. Yet one year later Herzen would preach humbleness before history, and recognition of its objectivity. When his fictional opponent in *From the Other Shore*, variously characterized as an idealist or a pessimist, lamented “The life of the people becomes a trifling game [...] Not for nothing did Shakespeare say that history is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing,” Herzen chastised him for his gloomy worldview, making the argument that each society had meaning and significance immanent in its own existence.

Perhaps the confusion can be cleared up, however. Despite providing a compelling sound bite in the phrase “History is the autobiography of a madman,” Herzen’s pronouncement in “Krupov” should not be taken to represent a long-held belief. The context of the story shifts its meaning. In it, a physician describes disordered thinking in everyone from an unhappily married wife to an inefficient bureaucracy; the ironic narrator thus diagnoses a pathology holding not only abstract history, but the whole of society hostage. The use of a clinical metaphor implies that this epidemic of privileging the imaginary over the real is a product of human foolishness. It is thus, presumably, curable.

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186 Weidemaier, "Herzen and the Existential World View: A New Approach to an Old Debate."
188 Gertsen, "S togo berega", 69. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 397.
Kelly’s argument is thus the more convincing one, but does not necessarily provide the full story, ignoring as it does the practical, historical content of Herzen’s thought. Herzen hoped to create a new discourse surrounding history that, by allowing people to more aptly perceive what had been and thus what was, would empower them to alter the future—or, at any rate, to extricate themselves from the past. This project did not allow for any inflated or bombastic emotion getting in the way. Thus the dialogic structure of the two main sections of From the Other Shore begins with the iconoclastic realist telling the idealist that his all-consuming sense of anger and despair is merely a “cowardly” panacea for his distaste with the state of the world: “because of their fear of finding out the truth, many prefer suffering to analysis” because, like any pastime, it “consoles…it keeps man from going deeper in the investigation of himself and of life.”

To be fair, in parts of From the Other Shore, Herzen does exalt destruction with a fervor that might suggest a pessimism so thorough it verges on utter nihilistic anarchism. “Preach the news of death,” he writes. “Point out to the people every new wound on the breast of the old world.” Yet even this was a figurative negation of a set of ideas rather than a call for real violence. Thus, for instance, Herzen sought to

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190 Gertsen, "S togo berega", 20. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, Selected Philosophical Works, 348.
191 Gertsen, "S togo berega", 76. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, Selected Philosophical Works, 404.
192 Martin Malia writes that while Herzen’s vision of the future yoked a belief in the sanctity of individual life and a desire for rapid, revolutionary democratization into a single program, “exalted utopias of this stamp, by a perverse yet classic logic, invariably end in politics that are far less pure than the original version.” In other words, Herzen did not foresee the violent direction that the tradition of dissent he had originated was to devolve into. (Malia, Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855, 426.) Partridge reinforces this point: she writes that in From
maintain authority over the concept of “nihilism” as it was being fashioned into something new and militant, something perhaps more closely resembling the modern conception of the world, by a new generation of radicals. In an 1868 letter to *The Polar Star*, the “thick” literary journal published by his *Free Russian Press*, Herzen writes:

> whether the name is appropriate or not does not matter. We are accustomed to it…of course, if by Nihilism we are to understand destructive creativeness, that is, the turning of facts and thoughts into nothing, into barren skepticism…into the despair which leads to inaction, then true Nihilists are the last people to be included in the definition.

Herzen concludes with some civil yet cautious words about the new generation, who had adopted the appellation ‘nihilist’ as their own: “Nihilism has broadened out…has absorbed a great deal from science, has produced leaders of enormous force and enormous talent. All that is beyond dispute.” Herzen concludes somewhat ominously: “But it has brought forth no new principles.”

To understand what type of “new principles” Herzen might have envisioned emerging twenty years earlier, when he was elaborating his particular brand of “nihilistic” historical skepticism in *From the Other Shore*, it is useful to turn to the work’s title itself, and the famous metaphor it contains. In the dedication to his son, Sasha, Herzen writes:

*the Other Shore*, Herzen “had provided the ‘new’ men with ready-made slogans, which they had taken at their face value…in welcoming chaos, destruction and death he had been referring not to human life but to ideas, institutions and prejudice,” a subtlety that was lost on the new generation. (Partridge, *Alexander Herzen, 1812-1870*, 124.)

The man of the present, that unhappy pontifex maximus, only lays the bridge; some stranger in the future will pass over it. You, perhaps, will see this… Don’t stay behind on the old shore.”

Herzen seems here to conceive of his age in history as a sort of interregnum between two more concrete stages, the shores. Yet when he wrote this dedication, he certainly did not believe that all of society necessarily teetered on the edge of imminent progressive change, given his repeated lamentations about the conservatism of the masses as well as of the upper class. He also, as Isaiah Berlin repeatedly stresses, never made any claims for the precise nature of that “other shore,” or even the inevitability of its being reached; some cataclysm (Herzen is fond of the image of the comet smashing into earth) could easily put an end to human history forever.

So who, then, is responsible for laying down the bridge to the future? Herzen identifies the real locus of history in the consciousness of a critical intellectual elite, or intelligentsia. “We,” he says, referring to a small band of independent intellectuals committed to free speech (as well as the presumably enlightened reader), “are the last links between the two worlds and belong to neither. We are people estranged from our race, severed from our surroundings, left to ourselves…”

According to Herzen, after 1848 a small elite of critical thinkers occupied the liminal space between the two ages, or shores.

Not, to be sure, that the critical thinker was doomed to dissent and confusion in all epochs of history. In some ages of great dynamism, critical intellectuals (though throughout Herzen is actually using the generic “chelovek” or

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194 Gertsen, "S togo berega", 7. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 336.
195 Ibid., 37. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 365.
196 Ibid., 113. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 441.
“person/man” can freely operate within the structures of society, finding their personalities in sync with the general tenor of the age. More prevalent and commonplace are the times of continuity and general order in which society and the individual have reached a compromise, maintaining order largely for order’s sake, while private life flourishes. Herzen and his intellectual compatriots, however, have found themselves trapped in the third age: “an epoch when social forms, having exhausted themselves, begin to slowly and laboriously die,” in the face of a nascent age ruled by new laws. While “violence, falsehood, savagery, mercenary servility…” overtake the great mass of people at such times, the saving grace of the critical intellectual is his sense of alienation; his ability to maintain his grasp of his own individuality in the face of forces that would deny it. In Herzen’s scheme, in such ages an intellectual isolation is the sole rational response to historical understanding.

As such, the “bridge building” methods he prescribed seemed to imply an escape, albeit temporary, from history itself—a reprieve from the historically contingent nature of all knowledge. The group of critical intellectuals occupying the liminal spaces between two eras possessed a renewed ability to look at things in themselves. Herzen advises that historically aware individuals conceive of themselves as naturalists: “The naturalist is accustomed to not introduce anything of his own for a certain while, to observe and to wait.” Or elsewhere: “I have accustomed myself to the gaze of the physician, entirely opposed to that of the judge.”

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197 Gertsen, "S togo berega", 120. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 447.
198 Ibid., 121. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 448.
199 Ibid., 73. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 400.
200 Ibid., 89. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 418.
group of critical elite are unbound from historical determination, Herzen takes a broadly historicist position with everybody else. He argues, for instance, that the masses are merely an expression of their age, deserving study and not condemnation or praise. They are “responsible for nothing…neither for good nor evil, they are facts, like a good or bad harvest.” 201 On the one hand, Herzen makes an argument for historicist relativism; he argues that each age has its own most appropriate principles and structures, and exists completely for itself alone. 202 On the other, he is still evidently somewhat contemptuous of the ideologies of past ages, which suffered more or less deviation from and obfuscation of the “real” nature of things—which a properly holistic viewpoint will presumably be able to understand. “All historical movement,” Herzen wrote much later, long after his enchantment with Hegelianism had dissipated, “is nothing but the constant emancipation from one state of slavery after another, from one authority to another, until it has reached the greatest harmony between reason and consciousness—a harmony, before which man feels himself to be free.” 203 Thus, side by side with the repeated invocation of a circular conception of history—in which a great rise is always followed by a decline, for the cycle to start anew—Herzen did see, or at least believed that it was not out of the realm of possibility to see, some sort of general progressive trend. Herzen was in any case confident that in order to progress past his own moment, man could and must definitively cast aside all historical illusions, again, by managing to look at things as

201 Ibid., 80. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 409.
202 Ibid., 32. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 362.
203 Gertsen, "Pis’mo o svobode voli," in Sobranie sochinenie v tridtsato tomakh (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1960), 441. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, Selected Philosophical Works, 574.
they really were, without obscuring frames of reference. Once the obfuscating
categories and definitions of the old world were shot down, everything would be seen
to validate the fundamental, salutary pliability of the world. The vaunted problem of
free will, for instance, was merely a confusion stemming from the dualistic premises
of religion and idealism—in reality people were free, but only within certain bounds,
simply because they knew themselves to be free within these bounds.\(^{204}\) Herzen
recognized the determining power of the specific interpretive frame with which
historical problems were engaged, and in his writing the language of morality and
pragmatism are intermingled: “You are misled,” he tells his idealist companion, “by
categories which poorly grasp life…who are we, dolls or people, indeed, do we live a
morally free existence or are we cogs in a wheel? For me it is easier to consider life,
and consequently history, as the sought after goal, rather than a means to an end.”\(^{205}\)

There remains in Herzen, then, ultimately a trust that the right kind of
intellectual inquiry—one that recognizes moral and empirical realities as essentially
unified—could lead to an understanding of history as the matrix of man’s entire
existence. For Herzen, there is nothing beyond history that’s worth knowing. By
history he understands all of the disciplines of serious study of man and his
environment. While he does not grant it an unlimited purview, he tends to associate
scientific objectivity with a neutral pathway to knowledge: “Of course,” he writes,

The laws of historical development do not contradict the precepts of logic, but
their paths do not coincide with the paths of thought, just as nothing in nature

\(^{204}\) Gertsen, "Pis’mo O Svobode Voli", 439. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov,
Selected Philosophical Works, 571.
\(^{205}\) Gertsen, "S Togo Berega", 33. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, Selected
Philosophical Works, 362.
corresponds with the abstract standards of pure reason…If we knew this, we
would rush to the study and discovery of physiological influences. Have we
done so?\textsuperscript{206}

In other words, the intelligentsia is yet prevented from understanding reality because
it clings to outmoded assumptions and methods of reasoning. What it needed to do
was study the way people actually functioned in the world. The intelligentsia had to
sacrifice their moral preconceptions as well, seeking understanding of all sectors of
society from the rich to the indigent rather than passing judgment. In this way, history
would gradually reveal all. “To understand and yet accuse,” writes Herzen, “is
almost as absurd as not to understand and to execute.”\textsuperscript{207}

This notion of “the study of social life,” of course, assumed two groups: those
doing the (admittedly frequently inept) studying and those or that being studied. This
division, ultimately, brings to the fore the key problem that Herzen is working out in
\textit{From the Other Shore}, namely, the ways that human consciousness interacted with
the “environment” (here including the great mass of unenlightened people acting on
instinct rather than reason) and the ways that it \textit{should} most harmoniously interact
with the environment in order to effect positive change. He knew, for instance, that
not everything in the natural world was desirable, despite the fact that it might

\textsuperscript{206} Gertsen, "S togo berega", 67. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected
Philosophical Works}, 395. Conversely it is important not to overstate Herzen’s trust
in science as a totalizing system of knowledge. Herzen ultimately believed in free will
within the limited parameters of the workings of the human body and the outside
world, preferably emancipated from any ideological system. (Gertsen, "Pis'mo o
svobode voli", 441. For English, see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical
Works}, 573.)

\textsuperscript{207} Gertsen, "S togo berega", 80. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected
Philosophical Works}, 409.
develop without interference from human consciousness. (“Scrofula,” he wrote, “very naturally follows malnutrition.”) 208

Herzen stressed the creative powers of human intelligence. For instance, the psychological necessity of free will—according to Herzen, history began with man’s perception of his freedom of action, and—becomes for Herzen a given, simply because it is an undeniable “phenomenal need of the human mind, a psychological reality.” 209 Thus when Herzen writes, “History is the development of freedom in necessity. What man requires is to realize that he is free,” 210 he is making a move whereby man is defined as one who acts freely, for man cannot function as man unless he believes this to be true. Man is thus by definition invested with some degree of agency. Herzen concludes that he is not working with the aim of overturning this basic, essential belief in free will, despite acknowledging that its actual objective truth is unknown: “Where is the way out of this circle [of free will versus determinism]?” he asks, before concluding “The endeavor is not to find the way out of it but to understand it.” 211 This approach to the problem of free will is a remarkable exemplar of Herzen’s belief in man as the locus of all meaning—thus a “psychological necessity” becomes treated as if it is a reality.

Who is responsible, then, for delegating what constitutes a salutary interference in “nature” and what a misguided, unnatural one? Who can decide whether or not a personally held belief is a psychological necessity or a confusing

208 Gertsen, "S togo berega,” 23. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, Selected Philosophical Works, 351.
209 Gertsen, "Pis’mo o svobode voli," 443. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 575.
210 Ibid., 443. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 575.
211 Ibid., 443. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 575.
ideological construction? Herzen himself at times expresses uneasiness about this very question: “And so let’s make ourselves heard!” he writes, before admitting, “To whom will we speak? And about what?—I honestly don’t know. I only know that I must do so…”

Inevitably, in seeking to understand the complexities of Herzen’s thought, the inquiring historian will search for the unsaid content underpinning his intellectual viewpoint. Herzen’s conception of “man,” for instance, is obviously laden with social meaning. His notion of the ideal historical subject was infused with ideological preconceptions about class and social status. Herzen displayed considerable sympathy for the masses, though he often found their conservatism and boorishness quite frustrating. He was particularly fond of the Italian and Russian peasantry, to whom he ascribed almost mystical powers of revolutionary potential. His respect for the wisdom of the people as against the meddling intelligentsia was a foundational component of the populism of the narodniki, students and intellectuals who “went to the people” in the 1870s.

Yet even the intensity of Herzen’s desire to escape the strictures of a dying age did not necessarily rid him of historical affiliation. Martin Malia, who quite adroitly traces the personal assumptions and assimilated systems of knowledge that helped to unconsciously determine the flow of Herzen’s thought, questions Herzen’s

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212 Gertsen, "S togo berega", 114. Also see Herzen, Selected Philosophical Works, 441.
214 Acton, Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary, 170.
self-professedly egalitarian beliefs: “Herzen’s socialism,” Malia writes, referring to
the system which Herzen cautiously hoped would take root upon the “other shore,”
meant total enlightenment as much as total democracy; it signified the acme of
civilized sensitivity no less than a ruthless egalitarian leveling…In effect,
Herzen’s utopia of the socialist commune is a projection into the world of
peasant Russia of his own aristocratic and idealist education, its extension
from the Moscow salons and lecture halls into the humble huts of the
village.\(^\text{215}\)

Indeed, Herzen’s program for the Russian peasant commune, the positive component
of the nihilistic program elaborated in *From the Other Shore*, seems both dated and
naive to the modern-day reader. While *Shore* proposes something like an escape from
history, Herzen-style peasant socialism seems destined to be dismissed in retrospect
as wholly anchored to its precise historical moment: a paternalistic utopia painting a
bucolic, unrealistically egalitarian picture of life on the commune; possessed, with its
emphasis on “youthful” Russian vigor, of noticeable nationalistic bias; and finally,
utterly ignoring the rising tide of industrialization.

Yet ultimately, these considerations should not obscure the larger inherent
interest of Herzen’s attempt to craft a rationale for action based on the proper
understanding of history. First of all, Herzen never made any absolute claims for his
peasant commune; he portrayed it as a practical solution to the problem of maximum
self-government and egalitarianism; one possible historical path among many.\(^\text{216}\)

Second, in *From the Other Shore* he attempts to work out a novel theory of

\(^{216}\) Aileen Kelly writes that he “would make no messianic claims for the theory of
‘Russian socialism’ that he based on the potential of the peasant commune, defending
it principally as an empirical solution to a contemporary problem.” (Kelly, *Toward
Another Shore*, 340.)
intervention by a discontented intellectual class that not only bridges the traditional
gap between the cloistered urban elite and the masses of the countryside, but also
recognizes this gap as a chief obstacle to salutary historical change.

To be sure, Herzen is very clear throughout that he is addressing fellow
intellectuals, and not, as he put it, “the masses” (*massy*). As already mentioned,
Herzen allies the masses with empirical reality—they represent what is necessary and
unpremeditated in human development. As such, they are blessed with a vaguely
Rousseauian “instinct” for historical action that the intellectuals have lost as they
moved from the countryside to the man-made world of the city.217 The masses offer a
glimpse into a world of a reality beyond the petty meddling of the idealistic elite: “we
still attempt to force our ideas, our desires on the environment…but what makes you
think that the people must carry out precisely your idea, and not theirs?... And are you
sure the means you have thought up have no disadvantages?”218

Yet, for Herzen, the masses also begin to represent something beyond
meaning as typically understood in historical study. Herzen points out that the unrest
of the great multitude of people was motivated not by distant ideological goals, but by
something both more palpable and more remote from the drawing rooms of the
intellectuals: hunger. More importantly, he critiques the traditional, linear, political
account of historical change as having little lived reality for most people. When
Herzen’s idealist companion complains that the people have little memory for history,
citing the late despotism of Napoleon and the willingness of the French to return to

217 Gertsen, "S Togo Berega", 67. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected
Philosophical Works*, 395.
218 Ibid., 67. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 395.
empire, Herzen answers, “This is quite simple. For the people despotism is not a
classifying characteristic of empire. Until now, for them all governments were
despotic,” and thus the masses can easily be rallied around conservative and
nationalist sentiments.\textsuperscript{219} He elsewhere has challenged the traditional historical
narratives of the revolutionaries by pointing out the fact that, although his
companion’s sorrow for his fallen comrades is understandable, it is somewhat
confusedly romantic in the larger scheme of things: “Your grief is justified, and I can
only offer you consolation of a quantitative nature: remember, that everything that has
happened from the rebellion in Palermo to the fall of Vienna did not cost Europe a
third of the men who died at Eylau.” Herzen goes on to point out that historical
understanding was still so muddled that the untold dead destroyed by the “civil
plague” of enlistment garner no sympathy, whereas at least the revolutionaries died
fighting for a cause they believed in.\textsuperscript{220}

For the idealist, this upending of the traditional historical narrative can only
mean further discomfort and desire to surrender all hope of change: “If one looks at
everything that way,” he says, “then I begin to think that one will not only stop
growing angry and doing something, but even lose the desire to do anything.”\textsuperscript{221} This
attitude is, of course, anathema to Herzen. Rather than pessimistically regarding this
new vision of history as another fragmented narrative pulling him farther away from
some objective historical “reality,” Herzen believes that by coming closer to the lived
experience of the people, he has already begun to move concretely towards his goal

\textsuperscript{219} Gertsen, "S Togo berega", 83. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected
Philosophical Works}, 411.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 71—72. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 399.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 83. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 411.
of at one and the same time discerning a desirable direction for social change and a practical means to bring it about: “It seems,” he reprimands his companion, “that I have already told you that to understand is already to act, to call into being.”

Intelligentsia As “Midwives to History”

Herzen’s Maturation, 1856-1871

Understanding the masses, and more broadly the non-revolutionary majority of society, as a means to effect historical change would become a chief preoccupation for Herzen in his later years, after the dissolution of many of his hopes for top-down historical change. He must have rather quickly realized that the noble, alienated individualism that he had preached in *From the Other Shore* wasn’t a practical way of fighting for historical change, for Herzen did not insulate himself from politics for long. His *Free Russian Press*, a courageous effort to offer the first-ever forum for uncensored Russian opinion, enjoyed a brief but electrifying heyday from 1856 to 1861. During that time, after an embarrassing Russian defeat in the Crimean War and before the peasant emancipation and the suppression of the Polish rebellion, Herzen’s weekly political newspaper, *The Bell*, served as a platform for debate by many disparate anti-Tsar groups. Herzen kept a low profile so as to grant maximum attention to a lively, progressive discussion of the issues at hand, yet his personal perspective still came across strongly: Herzen “combined uncompromising damnation of serfdom, censorship, corporal punishment and numerous varieties of cruelty and

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222 Gertsen, "S Togo Berega", 83. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 411.
injustice, with an open mind on the means of achieving reform and an inspiring faith that reform would be achieved.” 224 The Bell enjoyed immense popularity, and was smuggled into Russia using all sorts of illicit strategies. 225 In 1861, however, Herzen’s principled support of the Poles in the face of Tsarist repression rankled the nationalism of many of his readers, causing the circulation of The Bell to plunge. 226 More devastating from an intellectual perspective, Alexander II’s emancipation of the serfs proved woefully disappointing; conservative measures such as backbreaking redemption payments discredited Herzen’s belief in the possibility of enlisting the Tsar to peacefully collaborate in an extensive series of gradualist reforms. 227

The progressive movement began to grow beyond Herzen’s reach; the betrayal by the Tsar and the simultaneous lack of successful rebellion on the part of the peasants soon convinced would-be revolutionaries that the only solution was to organize in cells of militant revolutionaries and, in extreme cases, carry out acts of terrorism. While, according to Acton, Herzen was more involved with revolutionary organizations like “Land and Liberty” than he later in life liked to admit, 228 there is no question that Herzen never embraced the role of conspirator and found something fundamentally distasteful about the idea of intrigue and underground organizing. 229 Mikhail Bakunin, a friend and an anarchist contemporary of Herzen’s who gloried in revolutionary plots and conspiracies, conversely actively supported the new generation of radicals.

224 Acton, Alexander Herzen and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary, 129.
227 Ibid., 162.
228 Ibid.,162.
229 Ibid., 164. See also Partridge, Alexander Herzen, 1812-1870., 132.
Herzen’s series of letters titled *To an Old Comrade*, addressed to Bakunin, represent his definitive rejection of these revolutionary techniques, yet they also ultimately offer much more. As Monica Partridge writes, “had Herzen’s *Letters to an Old Comrade* appeared in his lifetime, or become more widely known after his death, posterity would much sooner have appreciated the discerning nature of his view of history.”

In the *Letters*, Herzen definitively rejects violence as a revolutionary tactic, for violence seeks only to circumvent history and is thus an incorrect method to use in attempting to break free of the forms of the past. He realizes that the attempt to foist a new political and economic order onto people who inhabit an elaborate pre-existing social world can only end in disaster. Man, Herzen is saying, can only live successfully and harmoniously in ways that he understands and which are comfortable to him. The use of force to suddenly install a new, ideal order, however objectively perfect, cannot succeed in creating a new way of life, just the empty illusion of one. For any such “artificial” liberation must ultimately be maintained by force, creating a “civilization by means of the knout.” Herzen’s caution and his attention to the vast messiness of history, with its enormously complicated cycle between the historical environment’s determination of the individual and the individual’s concomitant modification of the environment, represents a new maturity.

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231 “Violence may destroy and clear the ground—but not more.” (Gertsen, *K staromu Tovarishchu*, 578. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 579.)
232 Gertsen, *K staromu tovarishchu*. 577. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 578.
233 Ibid., 585. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 583.
from his nihilistic assertion in *From the Other Shore* that destruction could more seamlessly segue into a new social order. He develops the idea that the present situation and the way people think about the present are not two distinct values, but are rather, in all matters of history, co-dependent: social change begins with the popular consciousness.234 Yet that does not imply that he turns away from the role of the intelligentsia, who in fact must redouble their efforts to understand the masses, and thus, history. He writes the following of the cultural reification that supports the order of things more effectively even than force or economic arrangement:

> The popular consciousness, as it has developed, represents a natural, irresponsible, raw product of different strengths, attempts, abilities, successes and failures of human endeavor, different instincts and conflicts—it must be accepted as a natural fact and struggled with, as we struggle with all that is unconscious and instinctive—by studying it, mastering it and directing it, conforming it to our goals.235

The present system of society, Herzen believed, was bankrupt; its vast inequality and lack of convincing ideological justification made it inherently unviable. It remained only to educate the conservative elements of society—both the property owners and the sluggish lower classes—that this contradiction was creating the inevitable conditions of historical change, perhaps salutary, perhaps catastrophic. Landowners could be convinced of this rationally, by appealing to their interests. The lower classes, on the other hand, had to be studied, understood, and taught. Ultimately everyone had to be spoken to in his own language and made to understand his

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234 Gertsen, *K staromu tovarishchu*, 578. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 579.
235 Ibid., 579. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 580.
personal stake in reform, rather than frightened or shamed into going along with some new and alien plan.\textsuperscript{236}

There remains, of course, the seeming paradox of Herzen’s simultaneous desire to understand and to respect the course of history on the one hand, and to alter it on the other. Early on in the letters Herzen raises the elusive processes of history itself to the predominant position: “Does it follow that we should interfere in order to quicken the obvious internal process? Doubtlessly, a midwife may quicken, make easier, push obstacles aside, but only within commonly understood bounds…”\textsuperscript{237}

Yet for Herzen, a total understanding of the functions of history and a desire to judge and to alter them are simply not the opposite, irreconcilable elements that they became in the Berlin-Carr debate. Thus, Herzen elaborated a position that theoretical sophistication would not allow Carr and Berlin to accept. For Herzen believed that by a good-faith study of the present situation and its genesis, one could begin to divine what was, what could be and perhaps what should be. That history was partially a creation of individuals did not, for Herzen, render it without structure; rather, this element of free will in history offered the tantalizing possibility that people, prodded in the right direction, could appraise the structures themselves and make decisions about their efficacy. As Herzen wrote, “I don’t believe in the revolutionary path of the past. I try to understand the pace of humankind in the past

\textsuperscript{236} Gertsen, \textit{K staromu tovarishchu}, 593. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 594.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 576. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, 577.
and the present in order to find out how to proceed in step with it, not to lag behind, and not running so far ahead, that the people can not follow me."

238 Gertsen, *K staromu tovarishchu*, 586. Also see Herzen and Navrozov, *Selected Philosophical Work*, 587.
CHAPTER THREE
The Revolutionary In Retrospect

Berlin, Carr, and the Historiographical Problematic of Alexander Herzen

E. H. Carr, later on in his life, described *Romantic Exiles*, his early (and only) work on Alexander Herzen, as “frivolous.”239 This statement carried with it the not-so-subtle implication that historians who did choose to invest a substantial amount of energy in figures like Herzen, say, for instance, Isaiah Berlin, were wasting their time on those trivial subjects Carr had already cast aside for more important concerns. Berlin, meanwhile, in his reviews of Carr’s works, swiped at Carr with language recalling the nineteenth century gentleman of science that he sometimes accused Carr of aping.240 In 1937, reviewing Carr’s biography of Bakunin, Berlin wrote, “He is a connoisseur of nineteenth-century revolutionaries as others of rare ivories or butterflies; and he treats them with the same delicate, well-informed, faintly proprietorial interest.”241 In 1951 he leveled a similar charge: Carr’s “attitude toward his subjects–Herzen, Bakunin, and indeed Marx himself–bordered on ironical detachment, and he saw them as so many gifted eccentrics, remarkable, even

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240 Carr is “essentially a late positivist, in the tradition of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and H.G. Wells, what Montesquieu calls un grand simplificateur…a master of short ways and final answers to the great unanswered questions.” (Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, xxvii.)
fascinating, but to a sane, well-balanced Englishman inevitably a trifle comical." In the face of this mutual distaste for the other’s work, how can one honestly argue for the feasibility of a comparison of Carr and Berlin’s work on Herzen, let alone for its enduring historical importance?

A Defense of the Comparison

First, of course, there is the small question of the wisdom of comparing Carr’s *Romantic Exiles: A Nineteenth Century Portrait Gallery*, published early in his career (in 1933 Carr had not yet left the Foreign Office) with Berlin’s work on Herzen, the original publishing dates of which range from 1955 to 1968. However, the three decades that separate Carr’s work from Berlin’s last essay on Herzen, and the changes in political worldview they might have entailed, can be neutralized in part by the simple fact that throughout his long career Carr was surprisingly consistent in his general conceptual approach to the Soviet Union as a challenge to the western model. Carr’s attitude towards the Soviet Union in 1961, when he wrote *What is History?*, can be considered tempered over time, but not qualitatively different from his attitude in 1933. Thus Carr’s appraisal of Herzen’s place within the long chain of events leading up until the Russian Revolution might realistically have remained fairly constant. More broadly, while each thinker enjoyed painting the other as outmoded—Carr is a “too faithful follower of the eighteenth-century dogmatic materialists” while Berlin spends his time “flogging the very dead horse” of the determinism

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243 “Herzen and Bakunin on Liberty”
244 “The Great Amateur”
debate back to life\textsuperscript{246} — they can, as their decade of spirited historiographical debate attests, be considered to have been contemporaries.

More serious is the objection that while Berlin’s work on Herzen demonstrates Berlin at his most characteristic, Romantic Exiles was rather an aberration in the larger body of Carr’s work. Indeed, it would seem that Carr moved on from and even rejected the intellectual preoccupations of his early years—during which time he produced a quartet of finely observed biographies.\textsuperscript{247} Later on in his career he turned to “harder” subjects such as his multivolume work on the political, social, and economic order of the early Soviet Union and his realist analytic studies of international relations. In essence, the individual historical subject disappeared from prime place of consideration, and social trends, power relations, and extended causal chains replaced him.

Yet the novelistic quality, psychological depth, and atmosphere of uncertainty of Romantic Exiles in fact ally it with a certain major recurring theme in Carr’s thought, one that was just as important as his more widely recognized role as a self-assured explicator of the abstract processes that propel history forward. It is true that Carr, in general, preferred to treat the Russian revolution as a “given” in history, and to study the dynamics of the nascent Soviet state, rather than to endlessly focus on the conditions of its inception as if undertaking a postmortem.\textsuperscript{248} Yet this

\textsuperscript{246} Carr, \textit{What Is History?}, 121.

\textsuperscript{247} Dostoyevsky (1821-1881): \textit{A New Biography} (1931); \textit{Romantic Exiles: A Nineteenth Century Portrait Gallery} (1933); \textit{Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism} (1934); and \textit{Michael Bakunin} (1937)

\textsuperscript{248} “Last term here in Cambridge I saw a talk to some society advertised under the title: ‘Was the Russian Revolution Inevitable?’ I am sure it was intended as a perfectly serious talk. But if you had seen a talk advertised on ‘Were the Wars of the
historiographical credo, ostensibly escaping the ideological blinders worn by other Western historians, nevertheless did not preclude Carr from working to understand the revolutionary spirit. Fred Halliday cites Carr’s “romanticism, his belief not only in the [pre-revolutionary] importance of romance, utopia, dreaming in politics, but in its enduring importance.”

Jonathan Haslam goes even further when he writes that Carr’s *What is History?* in fact “belongs much more with the *Romantic Exiles*—with the detached, skeptical, but utopian side of Carr’s mind—than it does with the *History of Soviet Russia*; or, at the very least, it represents an uneasy synthesis between the two approaches.”

But though a comparison of *Romantic Exiles* and Berlin’s essays on Herzen is historically feasible, it might not initially seem necessarily productive. The works themselves do not closely resemble each other: Berlin’s energetic, fairly brief essays are all propelled by pithy central theses concerning the contemporary relevance of some aspect of Herzen’s work or thought; Carr’s *Romantic Exiles* is a detailed narrative history of a whole tribe of individuals in which Herzen is the major, but by no means only, figure of importance (he dies on page 274 of a 365-page book). Instead of, like Berlin, setting forth a clear thesis, Carr takes pains to announce that he in fact is without any overt agenda. He plays the part of a “historian as keeper of the factual record,” sounding quite unlike the later Carr of *What is History?*, who repeatedly avowed that the facts are practically epiphenomena of the historian’s

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inevitable ideological bias. In his introduction to *Romantic Exiles*, Carr writes that “I have refrained where possible from judgments of my own, but I have not been able to avoid giving from time to time my own interpretations of the situations and events described.” Nevertheless, he adds, “The facts are there, and the reader can pass his own judgments, which may well be different from mine.” With this coolly professional posture, Carr probed deeply into the often tragic personal lives of Herzen and his compatriots—producing a searching, matter-of-fact account of the social interactions of a group of people that has been thought by some readers to be “somewhat excessively ironical.”

That is not to mention the political differences between Carr and Berlin’s appraisal of Herzen’s ultimate historical role, which are predictable enough to not require excessive explanation. For Berlin, who endorses Herzen, the Russian intellectual symbolizes a diverging stream from the general current of militant revolutionary thought that would eventually culminate in the Bolshevik revolution. “The strong tradition of libertarian humanism in Russian socialism, defeated only in October 1917, derives from his writings,” Berlin concludes in one of his essays. For Carr, conversely, Herzen did the mental work of elaborating a preliminary revolutionary vision that would serve to inspire the more action-minded Russian revolutionaries that followed, even as they overtly rejected him as a model. The

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251 “By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.” (Carr, *What Is History?*, 26.)
254 Though they are inextricably linked to the historiographical aspects of Berlin and Carr’s works, this paper argues that they are not all-important.
Soviet recognition of Herzen as a forefather thus validates that he did, in fact, play a legitimate historical role: while the story of the *Romantic Exiles* might end in “tragedy tinged with futility,” nevertheless, “they have their place in history. Just fifty years after his death, the Russian Revolution honoured Herzen among its great precursors by naming after him one of the main thoroughfares of its capital city.”

**Herzen Under the Historical Microscope:**

**A Revolutionary Case Study**

Despite the formal and political differences between the two works they are at root commensurate: Carr and Berlin both investigate Herzen as a case study of a revolutionary in spirit who eschewed the familiar revolutionary *modus operandi* of wresting control of the state apparatus and pursuing power at all costs. They treat Herzen as a man who sought to guide the course of history in an unprecedented and enlightened direction largely by seeking to become more self-conscious about the parameters of what was and was not possible (or what was free and what was determined) within the flow of history itself. The ways in which they describe this undertaking, and appraise its successes and failures, reveal much about their own understanding of the place of free will and determinism in history, the role of the critical intellectual in guiding history, and the intersection of understanding and morality. They both implicitly inquire: did Herzen fail to guide the course of history in the direction he desired because his vision was somehow flawed, or because he did

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not properly pursue it? Was he simply stymied by historical forces beyond his control?

Carr and Berlin seem to be attracted to Herzen the man for strikingly similar reasons. His ability to (at least some of the time) balance skepticism of political programs and grand historical narratives on the one hand with a measured sense of optimism for the future on the other, with its integration of intellectual and extra-rational or emotional intelligence, must have resonated strongly with both of them. During his lifetime Herzen “oscillate[d] between pessimism and optimism,” writes Berlin with ready admiration, “skepticism and suspicion of his own skepticism, and [was] kept morally alive only by his hatred of all injustice, all arbitrariness, all mediocrity as such.”257 Carr is less overt about his investment in Herzen’s revolutionary mood swings, yet he traces the peaks and valleys of Herzen’s personal and political attitudes with great acuity. Herzen is both an almost life-long “professional skeptic”258 and the one person brave enough to proclaim aloud “the hopes which Russia scarcely dared to confess even to herself.”259

Even more importantly, Herzen is so vivid a character that he seems to make history palpable for both Carr and Berlin, though they characteristically state this idea in almost opposite terms. For Berlin, Herzen’s My Past and Thoughts has the “vitality of spoken words”260 and a sort of “palpitating directness”261 rather than the quality of a stale historical text. Herzen collapses the enforced distance of history in

258 Carr, The Romantic Exiles, 239.
259 Ibid, 204.
order to communicate directly with the reader.\textsuperscript{262} He seems to offer Berlin a direct conduit to another age,\textsuperscript{263} so much so that Berlin praises the “descriptions of entire forms of life in which his writings abound.”\textsuperscript{264} Herzen’s prodigious abilities, however, extend beyond the elision of historical distance. He is, in Berlin’s account, possessed of a sort of sixth sense for historical truth, a quality beyond the written or spoken word: “he had acquired no taste for academic classifications: he had a unique insight into the ‘inner feel’ of social and political predicaments: and with it a remarkable power of analysis and exposition.”\textsuperscript{265} This “inner feel” is, of course, suggestive of the innate capacity for historical understanding, over and against any specific critical approach or theoretical framework, that Berlin’s ideal historian would possess in spades.\textsuperscript{266}

While for Berlin, Herzen is so masterful and self-aware that he seems to transcend and negate historical distance, Carr rather portrays Herzen’s appeal as a product of his times. Herzen, writes Carr, was the expression of a last flowering of a piquant historical moment: “The drab, respectable monotony of Marx’s domestic existence… affords a striking contrast to the many-hued, incalculable diversity of the

\textsuperscript{262}“His prose is essentially a form of talk, with the vices and virtues of talk: eloquent, spontaneous, liable to the heightened tones and exaggerations of the born storyteller…but always returning to the main stream of the story or the argument.” (———, "The Great Amateur", 203.)

\textsuperscript{263}“Civilized, imaginative, self-critical, Herzen was a marvelously gifted social observer; the record of what he saw is unique, even in the articulate nineteenth century.” Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{265}———, "Alexander Herzen", 207.

\textsuperscript{266} See page 40 of this thesis.
lives of the Romantic Exiles,” Carr writes at the end of his study. “In them romanticism found its last expression.”

Berlin and Carr, though they might find Herzen compelling for roughly similar reasons, ultimately derive conflicting historical lessons from the study of this magnetic character. Berlin has popularized Herzen first and foremost as a champion of the worth of the individual, a “revolutionary without fanaticism” who fought to dispel the hold of all ideological systems that served to obscure the reality of individual life. According to Berlin, Herzen’s message that even historical change must be undertaken with an eye to the dignity and autonomy of the individual was swept aside by the approaching tide of history to history’s own ultimate detriment. Berlin repeats again and again this central point:

This particular species of non-metaphysical, empirical, ‘eudaemonistic’ individualism […] makes Herzen the sworn enemy of all systems, and of all claims to suppress liberties in their name, whether in the name of utilitarian considerations or authoritarian principles, of mystically revealed ends, or of reverence before irresistible power, or ‘the logic of the facts’, or any similar reason.

What Berlin appears to be saying is that Herzen is noteworthy because he appreciated the limits of historical knowledge, but not in the postmodern sense of historical “knowledge” as a multitudinous aggregation of conflicting narratives devoid of any unifying principle or underlying truth. Rather, Herzen recognized, even symbolized, the fact that human beings are the loci from which all systemic social knowledge is generated. History cannot be excessively generalized, and thus no definitive answers

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268 Berlin, ”Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty”, 112.
can ever be found within its progress or lack thereof. Utopian visions of the future can never supplant what we know about the way real human beings act. This realization might not be shocking, Berlin acknowledged, it might be a little mundane, and even not all that productive a framework to use when attempting to extract meaning from history. Yet that does not mean it is not true. “There is no a priori reason for supposing that the truth, when it is discovered, will prove interesting,” Berlin wrote in his *Four Essays on Liberty*.\(^{269}\) Herzen, explains Berlin, wisely understood the fundamental truth that systems generalized from above or below, from ideological or materialist propositions, must never be granted the dangerous favor of full explanatory power, for then they would become just another type of tyranny. Herzen elaborated an idea—the importance of liberty stemming from the ethical primacy of the individual—that was not the production of any historical moment and which does not necessarily survive in any concrete embodiment in history (it was unique when Herzen articulated it and it was not adopted in Russia during his lifetime or after). Rather, Herzen’s commitment to liberty, which according to Berlin is a curious combination of moral principle, personal credo, and epistemological realization, has a timeless philosophical validity.

For Carr, rather, Herzen is a revolutionary very much of his time. Herzen does not communicate across the years to contemporary readers about the worth of the individual and the pursuant limits of historical knowledge, as in Berlin’s account. Carr’s work on Herzen represents conversely the power of historical knowledge—the incontrovertible strength of the understanding progressively gained throughout

\(^{269}\) — — —, *Four Essays on Liberty*, xxvii.
history, a power that Herzen instinctively understood but one which he never quite
managed to harness. Carr groups Herzen with a coterie of Russian émigrés to
Europe—the titular Romantic exiles—who clung to a political and personal
Romanticism that was already decades out of date in Europe, for all its intense
popularity in Russia in the 1830s and 40s. As befitted a group of well-to-do
Romantics with generally revolutionary predispositions, their lives offered a
combination of personal entanglements of assorted levels of sordidness and
revolutionary schemes of various, though generally quite low, levels of practicality.
Herzen, the wisest and the most sympathetic of the group, was the quickest to
comprehend the futility of their lifestyle: “Herzen, after the manner of disabused
Romantics, had become a cynic.” But this cynical realization was not simply a
personal interpretation of history. Carr is very clear that in Herzen’s age, the
empirical results of history had laid waste to a whole raft of experiments generated
from both Enlightenment and Romantic premises. Herzen’s cynicism, or more gently
his skepticism, thus stemmed from his ability to comprehend the bankruptcy of earlier
historical attitudes and his concomitant inability to locate anything with which to
replace them. “Skepticism,” writes Carr, “was a child of the Revolution and
Romanticism—of the great age which had believed in idealism and in progress, in
democracy and in the perfectibility of human nature, and which, by the most
contemptible anti-climax in history, had issued only in the complacent triumph of
bourgeois plutocracy.” This knowledge-in-retrospect was modeled perfectly by
Herzen, but the Russian thinker’s tragedy is that he never managed to advance to

270 Carr, The Romantic Exiles, 196.
271 Ibid., 45.
Carr’s second level of historical understanding: “the relation of present and past forms of knowledge to progressively emerging future ends.” In other words, he failed to comprehend the historical developments likely to issue from his era.

Indeed, despite the failures of democratic revolution in 1848 and the slow, ignominious decline of Herzen’s own once-popular *Bell*, Herzen maintained to the end a dual belief in democracy and free exchange of ideas that seemed to belie his negative experiences with both. “Confirmed sceptic though he had become,” Carr writes, Herzen “never for a moment doubted the validity of the democratic principle as a solution of the political problem. It was not the principle which had played him false; it was the will of mankind to apply it.”

It is ultimately, then, Herzen’s idealism and the exuberant energy with which he and his contemporaries pursued revolution (even, in the case of Herzen, in the face of his suspicion that they had embarked on a doomed quest), rather than any substantive role, that serve for Carr as his enduring legacy.

Berlin and Carr are actually in close to perfect agreement as to what that legacy was—that is, the real-world impact Herzen ultimately had on the course of the development of Russian history, and more specifically, on the history of the Russian revolutionary tradition. Berlin writes that Herzen’s historical role involved his doing the mental work of elaborating a revolutionary creed: “he created, almost single-handed, the tradition and the ‘ideology’ of systematic revolutionary agitation, and

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272 — — —, *What Is History?*, 123.
274 Ibid., 205; 364.
thereby founded the revolutionary movement in Russia.”

For Berlin, however, Herzen’s historical importance is only one facet of his significance; indeed, all of his essays on Herzen revolve around the premise that he offers something of value to the contemporary, western reader. Carr also points to Herzen’s elaboration of the revolutionary tradition as his distinguishing historical feature, though he makes somewhat more modest claims, concentrating on the publication of *The Bell* in particular as the locus of Herzen’s continuing significance. “For the space of about five years, Herzen…dreamed, in visions of unprecedented clearness and splendour, the aspirations of enlightened, liberal Russian opinion, both inside and outside Russia,” Carr writes. “The conjecture soon passed; and the vision faded. But the memory remained in history.”

For Carr, Herzen’s self-actualization, his contemporary political significance, and his enduring historical importance all rotate around the nexus of his concrete, albeit short-lived, success as a revolutionary publicist.

Berlin and Carr come into obvious historical disagreement, however, when they trace the genealogy of Herzen’s revolutionary ideology. The fact that Berlin and Carr posit different antecedent causes for Herzen’s unique brand of political agitation, of course, does not automatically determine that their assessments of the ethical or intellectual quality of Herzen’s revolutionary efforts necessarily differ. Yet as historians (even more as historians conscious of the ideological implications of

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275 Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty", 83.
277 “It was the period of Herzen’s most feverish political activity and of the last gleam of happiness which either he or Natalie were to know.” (Ibid., 202.)
278 “These five years from 1857 to 1862 were the most fruitful and important of Herzen’s life.” (Ibid., 205.)
determinism), Berlin and Carr were both likely to embed their account of the specific meaning of an event within the wider universe of causal chains (or lack thereof) that they had constructed.

Thus, for Carr, Herzen’s efforts took place in a world which, in retrospect, was quite a different place in reality than in appearance, which was not wholly accessible by a contemporary figure, even one as clever and discerning as Herzen, and which thus requires the attention of the historian to uncover the real mechanisms beneath the surface. Carr notes as an aside, in a characteristic example, that the sudden demise of the repressive Tsar Nicholas II, which brought so much joy to Herzen and which stands out as a major political event of the age, was in fact (in retrospect) rather insignificant. The quiet English repeal of the Stamp Duty was actually more important in the larger scheme of Russian politics (because it allowed Herzen to begin production of his political journals): “The encouragement given by [the repeal] to the production of newsprint…make it an incomparably more significant event in history than the demise of a Russian aristocrat,” writes Carr, although the latter predictably “loomed larger in contemporary opinion.” In this tendency to conceive of the work of history as a policy of demystification Carr was in some ways emulating Herzen himself.

While, according to Carr, Herzen is reactive to both personal and political exigencies, Berlin writes that he remains utterly consistent in his most important

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279 Ibid., 207.
280 Herzen, for instance, liked to point out that the masses did not use the same conceptual categories to understand history as the intellectual elite, and that the emotional potency of certain events could obscure the much wider social costs of others. (See pages 88—89 of this thesis).
philosophical commitments. Thus, of Herzen’s resolve to protect individual rights in
the present against those who would subordinate them to distant, abstract ends, Berlin
writes: “Herzen’s position on this issue is clear, and did not alter throughout his
life.”\(^{281}\) More specifically, Berlin’s portrayal of Herzen is one of a born revolutionary,
whose moral sense was prodigious from the very beginning. Berlin thus explains that,
though Herzen attempted to forge a career as a civil servant prior to his second exile
because of an indiscreet letter, “whatever his ambitions at the time, he remained
indomitably independent and committed to the radical cause.”\(^{282}\) Carr, on the other
hand, identifies the trauma of second exile as the locus of much of Herzen’s
revolutionary discontent:

Herzen was now a married man of nearly thirty; and his comparatively lenient
punishment stung more keenly and rankled more deeply than the far severer
sentence of six years before. […] His political opinions, hitherto the
expression of a vague and undefined idealism, crystallized into a bitter, life-
long hatred of the Russian autocracy.\(^{283}\)

The sole instance of Berlin directly mentioning Carr in one of his essays on
Herzen involves a similar disagreement. Berlin footnotes Carr as having given the
“clearest formulation” of the traditional, though incorrect, thesis that Herzen’s shift
from a utopian socialism to a newly pessimistic realism had occurred entirely in
response to the tragic outcome of the revolution of 1848.\(^{284}\) Berlin reaffirms, rather,
that Herzen’s unique, almost paradoxical personal alchemy of “committed, ultimately

\(^{281}\) Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty", 103.
\(^{283}\) Carr, The Romantic Exiles, 23.
\(^{284}\) Berlin, "The Great Amateur", 51.
optimistic revolutionary” ardor and his conservative skepticism as to “whether human beings can be transformed,” were set in place long before 1848.\textsuperscript{285}

Berlin, in citing what he believes to be Carr’s undue attention to political events as they shaped Herzen’s thought, both exaggerates his differences with Carr\textsuperscript{286} and declines to engage with the core of Carr’s explanatory model for Herzen’s behavior. For the heart of Romantic Exiles deals not with impersonal political events but rather with romantic relationships and personal scandal, of which Herzen by any account had his fair share.\textsuperscript{287} It is almost as if the lack of demonstrable historical import of Herzen’s thought leads Carr to decide that there must be some extra-historical means of explaining its genesis. But this loop is not quite as recursive as it first seems. Carr, for instance, seeks an explanation for Herzen’s optimistic advocacy of Russian democratic socialism in The Bell despite his broader disillusionment with

\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{286} Carr writes for instance that after 1848 “the irony and skepticism which had always been latent in his character found an outlet and a justification.” Carr, The Romantic Exiles, 45.

\textsuperscript{287} As briefly as possible: before he left Russia Herzen married his cousin, Natalie, whom he dearly loved and who was similarly devoted to him. Herzen’s other formative relationship was a Schilleresque friendship, begun in early adolescence, with a gentle poet named Nikolay Ogarev. At one point early in their marriage Herzen had a brief liaison with one of his serfs, which devastated Natalie. Once the Herzens moved to Europe Natalie embarked on a romantic friendship with a young Russian émigré named Natalie Tuchkova. A year later Herzen’s wife began an illicit affair with a Herzen family friend, the effete German poet Herwegh. The affair ended badly, with Natalie caught between her genuine love for both Herzen and Herwegh; the vaguely unscrupulous Herwegh spread rumors that Herzen was trapping his wife in the marriage contrary to his romantic ideals, and great scandal in the wider revolutionary community ensued. Natalie died in childbirth soon after, and Herzen, heartbroken, eventually moved to England. His old friend Ogarev and his new bride, Natalie Ogarev (née Tuchkova), joined them there. Herzen and Natalie soon embarked on a long-term, tumultuous affair with the full knowledge of Ogarev, who sought solace in a relationship with an English prostitute. Herzen fathered three children with the much-younger Natalie before he died.
democracy. How could Herzen, the man who had found himself out of step with both his country and his age, completely devote himself to the cause of the rehabilitation of the latter by the rebirth of the former?

For Carr, this problem demonstrates the fundamental, essentially human lack of rigor of Herzen’s thought, and, perhaps in extension, in all forms of individual, circumstantial or non-systematic revolutionary agitation. Herzen was able to be somewhat optimistic about Russia’s future because he had forgotten what Russia was really like: “a whole decade separated him from the personal experience of Russian realities” and thus his vision of Russia had become “sentimental.” Even more importantly, Herzen’s newfound nationalism could be traced to personal trauma; namely, the death of his (Russian) wife and her shameful affair with a German poet. “It is seldom recognized how often a man’s political convictions reflect his intimate personal experience,” Carr writes, yet Herzen “succeeded in sublimating these feelings [of hatred for Herwegh] into the sphere of political activity. The explanation may sound fanciful to those who have not studied the sources, but these leave no doubt of its accuracy...”

Berlin, meanwhile, does not necessarily shy away from historical explanations for what he sees as Herzen’s core belief system, yet these explanations are coded in timeless, evocative terms unmoored from the suggestion of cultural or economic determinism. For instance, Berlin stresses Herzen’s aristocratic background in order to justify Herzen’s beguiling, almost paradoxical mix of intense social conscience and cultivated personal appeal. He “belonged to the class of those who are by birth

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289 Ibid., 210.
aristocratic, but who themselves go over to some freer and more radical mode of
thought and of action.”²⁹⁰ There is, for Berlin,
something singularly attractive about men who retained, throughout life, the
manners, the texture of being, the habits and style of a civilized and refined
milieu…Their minds see large and generous horizons, and, above all, reveal a
unique intellectual gaiety of a kind that aristocratic education tends to
produce. At the same time, they are intellectually on the side of everything
that is new, progressive, rebellious, young, untried…²⁹¹
Herzen, and by extension his fellow revolutionary aristocrats, are thus marked by
intellectual autonomy as well as a sort of implicit class or perhaps cultural value;
furthermore, the very fact of their commitment to pursuing destabilizing change
despite their privileged economic position emphatically belies a simplistic scheme of
determinism. Contrast this explanation of Herzen’s aristocratic nature, for instance,
with Carr’s casting of Herzen’s background as a factor limiting his freedom as a
thinker: “For all his enlightenment,” Carr writes, Herzen “retained in a large measure
the traditions and habits of the Russian aristocracy. Romanticism was his religion,
liberalism his political faith, and constitutional democracy his ideal for Russia.”²⁹²

Herzen and Bakunin:

Studies in Action and Historical Awareness

But Herzen was not the only notable member of the class of aristocratic
revolutionaries. Mikhail Bakunin, one of the few other Russian revolutionaries of the
era to have reached a comparative level of renown, offers both Carr and Berlin a
study in contrasts with Herzen. While Herzen dedicated his best years to the cause of

²⁹¹ Ibid., 187.
fostering political dialogue among all progressive Russians, Bakunin enjoyed scheming in secret with other like-minded revolutionaries; where Herzen preached caution and sometimes even moderation, Bakunin wholeheartedly threw himself into the business of total destruction; where Herzen’s politics were a somewhat tortuously thought-out amalgamation of socialist, democratic, and liberal individualist concerns, Bakunin’s were purely anarchistic. In personality, he was somewhat like a large oafish child to Herzen’s distinguished patriarch.293

For Berlin, a comparison of Herzen with Bakunin represents, in the person of Bakunin, the perils of action without understanding; Carr instead uses Bakunin as a foil to represent, in the person of Herzen, the incoherence of understanding without action. “Understanding” in this sense means a comprehension of the basic mechanisms of history as explicated by Berlin and by Carr respectively. Obviously, it has very different content for the two historians.

Berlin introduces his essay “Herzen and Bakunin on Liberty” with a corrective intention: he will show the reader that, while Bakunin and Herzen occupy similar places in the Russian revolutionary canon (Herzen for elaborating revolutionary ideology, Bakunin for founding the Russian tradition of “political conspiracy”) their commensurate historical influence belies the fact that Herzen’s philosophical thought is of enduring and inherent interest whereas Bakunin’s was simply a inconsequential gloss over his drive to destroy the world around him.

Berlin spends much of his time in this essay elaborating Herzen’s theory of liberty, which amounts (according to Berlin) to a belief in the sanctity of the

293 Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty",113; Carr, The Romantic Exiles, 222.
individual as the highest good, and the concomitant recognition that different people, controlled by no higher scheme, will inevitably pursue different, often incommensurate ends. Herzen, writes Berlin, recognized that the mass of people generally care little for liberty (the prerogative of the elite), but that the individual, not wholly socially determined, is perfectly free to dissent from the prevailing state of affairs. According to Berlin, Herzen is most notable “as a moralist;” Berlin is not particularly clear on whether Herzen’s contempt for systems was chiefly practical (a way to pierce the illusions that veiled reality and to more accurately comprehend the world in order to change it) or specifically ethical (a way to reassert the value of the individual life over that of abstractions, however useful). While he seems to assume that the two are indivisible, Berlin nevertheless implies that the moral dimension of the problem is much more striking for Herzen. Herzen intends to pursue his protest in defense of the individual, for instance, “whether it is effective or not.” As per the argument made in the second chapter of this thesis, this interpretation elides Herzen’s trust that the proper mode of non-judgmental intellectual inquiry could yield real information about the world that would assist the intelligentsia in changing it.

Berlin also significantly downplays Herzen’s antipathy towards, and desire to change,  

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294 Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty", 95.  
295 Ibid., 88.  
296 “For Herzen the issue of personal liberty overshadows even such crucial questions as centralism against free federation; revolution from above versus revolution from below; political versus economic activity; peasants versus city workers…[etc]…and all the other great issues which divided the liberal and revolutionary parties in Russia until the revolution. (Ibid., 102.)  
297 Ibid., 101.  
298 In quoting the famous line from Dr Krupov, for instance, (“History is the autobiography of a madman”) Berlin neglects to mention that the story is shaped around the conceit of a physician diagnosing a pathology, rather, than, say, a philosopher lamenting an inescapable fact of human existence. (Ibid., 90.)
his contemporary society—his hatred for the tsarist regime and his contempt for the complacent European bourgeoisie—in order to emphasize his secondary fear of overzealousness among his fellow revolutionaries. Bakunin as he emerges in Berlin’s portrait embodies this exact danger: his whole soul was devoted to zeal in the service of abstraction. Bakunin, writes Berlin, displayed “a cynical indifference to the fate of individual human beings, a childish enthusiasm for playing with human lives for the sake of social experiment.” Bakunin had “a hatred of slavery, oppression, hypocrisy, poverty in the abstract, without actual revulsion against their manifestations in concrete instances”\(^{299}\) not to mention his Hegelianism,\(^{300}\) his confused belief in both determinism and revolutionary agitation,\(^{301}\) his essential frivolity.\(^{302}\) Thus, Berlin argues, Herzen’s respect for the individual (and specifically for the individual civilized enough to recognize liberty as the ultimate good) results in a mode of understanding the world that recognizes its own limits in the fundamentally unknowable expanse of reality. In doing so, it far surpasses the level of understanding achieved by either pedantic academics or dreamy idealists. This noble brand of intellectual humility, Berlin writes, with its attendant moral commitment to the individual, offers the only possible buffer against Bakunin’s wild, destructive attempts to shape the world to his personal whims.

For Carr, there is no question of discussing the doctrines of Herzen or Bakunin in terms of moral consequences; rather, they were never put into practice in the real world and instead represent stages in the development of revolutionary

\(^{299}\) Ibid., 103.
\(^{300}\) Ibid., 103.
\(^{301}\) Ibid., 109.
\(^{302}\) Ibid., 105.
thought. They are pure constructs, more or less suited to solving the problem set before them. For Carr, Herzen’s enduring belief in the future of democracy (at least in Russia) as a “solution to the political problem” was the mark of the persistence of Romantic orthodoxy in Herzen’s thought. 303 Bakunin’s anarchism similarly originated in Romantic doctrine but was the function of “a more original and more daring mind than Herzen’s.” 304 For Bakunin took the Romantic premises of the innate perfection of untrammeled human nature to their likely conclusion: he decided that not democracy, but rather the total freedom of anarchy was “merely the logical outcome—or the logical reductio ad absurdum—of the romantic doctrine.” 305 Having taken this idea to its farthest reaches, Carr writes, Bakunin had exhausted political Romanticism: “a stage in the history of human thought had been completed.” Marx was to provide the next opening in revolutionary theory by forcibly elbowing aside Bakunin. 306 Herzen, then, was quite correct in his self-analysis that he had been “born too soon—or too late” 307 (this intellectual hypothetical of great men born in times other than those ideally suited to their talents is curiously recurrent in Herzen’s, Berlin’s, and Carr’s work). 308 Herzen’s limited ability to think about society in terms

303 Carr, The Romantic Exiles, 224.
304 Ibid., 225.
305 Ibid., 226.
306 Ibid., 226.
307 Ibid., 45.
308 The concept of a figure outside his historic moment was a tantalizing thought experiment for both Berlin and Carr. Obviously, had Bismarck been born a century early he would not have been Bismarck, writes Carr. Yet according to Carr, great men can exist unrecognized in their own time—the important thing is to recognize the interplay of historical circumstances and great personalities. He writes somewhat confusingly that great man is “at once the representative and the creator of social forces which change the shape of the world and the thoughts of men.” (Carr, What Is History?, 67-68.)
other than as an aggregation of individuals is either a legacy of romanticism or a function of his aristocratic nature, but it in any case kept his vision from expanding into something fully able to comprehend the workings of the world on a grand scale. (Carr’s appraisal of Herzen also seems to underestimate him in its own ways—Herzen’s revolutionary methods were both pragmatic and programmatic, intent on pursuing that which worked and casting aside the rest, and so yoking them so firmly to Romanticism in this way is a little disingenuous.)

But despite this portrayal of Bakunin and Herzen as roughly commensurate thinkers—both advocating unviable political visions unable to cleave to reality in order to challenge the prevailing order—Carr offers a competing, latent strand of interpretation as to the mechanics of Herzen’s success, or lack thereof, as a revolutionary agitator. Perhaps it was not Herzen’s vision, or his connection to his particular historical moment, that was responsible for his failure to achieve his expansive revolutionary aims. Perhaps, Carr very gently intimates throughout Romantic Exiles, it was in fact his reluctance to act at all that sounded the death knell to his revolutionary aspirations. Characteristically, Carr phrases this thought in the language of categorical definition rather than personal choice: writing of Herzen and Herwegh’s flirtation with the notion of a duel to settle their grievances, for instance,

Berlin plays on the mental confusion that results from such a question as “could Richelieu have acted like Bismarck” or “could Hamlet been written in the court of Genghis Khan” as proof that our way of thinking about history is not confined to “empirical-inductive” grounds. Rather, we call these questions “grotesque” because “they conflict with presuppositions which govern our whole thinking about the world - the categories in terms of which alone we conceive such basic notions as man, society, history, development, growth, barbarism, civilization, and the like”—in other words, our entire Weltanschauung rebels against such a question. (Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History", 5—6.)
Carr explains that they had no intention of actually going through with their violent threats. “Herzen and Herwegh were not medieval swashbucklers or courtiers of the roi soleil, but nineteenth century men of letters. Their weapon was not the sword or the pistol but the pen.” Carr develops this theme of Herzen not quite living up to the political and personal image he had constructed for himself when he closes his chapter on Bakunin with a quotation from Bakunin on Herzen that he labels “apt”: “He is, first and foremost, a writer of genius…but he decidedly has not in him the stuff of which revolutionary leaders are made.” Later on Carr cites extensively a letter from a Russian radical critiquing Herzen’s revolutionary bona fides that amounted to much the same idea as Bakunin’s, albeit in harsher tones.

Herzen, writes Carr, was devastated when he read this screed, realizing that he had lost his place as the figurehead of the opposition. Here in his own oblique way Carr is discussing the same nexus of action, understanding and morality that Berlin grappled with in his essay on Bakunin and Herzen. For Berlin, understanding and morality are yoked, invariably making action in the service of great, transformative aims (which are categorically wrong) suspect. But for Carr, two competing timelines—an exalted, inevitable one (the intellectual history timeline in which Marx supplanted the Romantics) and a more prosaic, practical one (the Russian political timeline in which young revolutionaries radicalized and in so doing abandoned Herzen) —produce two warring interpretations of Herzen’s failures. In the first, for

310 Ibid., 247.
311 “…not a political leader and still less a political thinker.” (Ibid., 265.)
312 “His strategy might be perfect; but the rank and file would not fight under his leadership. He was a general without an army.” (Ibid., 266.)
all his skepticism of the Romantic way of thinking, he was intellectually unable to progress to a modern, Marxist mode of revolutionary activity. In the second, however, he possessed at least a modicum of agency: he was morally unwilling, or personally disinclined, or perhaps too intellectually sophisticated to stoop to the depths of violence and self-imposed penury demanded by the strident new generation. In his introduction to *Romantic Exiles*, Carr invites the reader to judge for himself, and to provide his own interpretation; while it is true that Carr does not shoehorn the reader into any particular answers, that does not mean that he fails to shape the reading experience by posing a very specific question in the text.

Carr, that is, presents the story of the exiles in tones of futility; Herzen’s life in particular comes across as a more or less noble failure. He does leave open, however, the exact nature of the historical lessons offered by the tragedy of the *Romantic Exiles*, and of Herzen’s life in particular—which is all the more tragic because it was experienced as such by Herzen himself. “In the last years of his life,” Carr writes, “Herzen experienced the bitterness of the prophet proclaiming in the wilderness a cause which was more and more emphatically rejected by his own countrymen.”

While Carr was hyper-aware of the ideological connotations of inquiring into the causes of the Russian revolution as if suggesting that it had been a particularly unfortunate historical accident, his work on Herzen essentially proceeds in this manner. The justification for this approach within Carr’s historical scheme is that the Russian revolution succeeded while Herzen failed.

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313 Ibid., 225.
Here, Carr’s yoking of determinism with realism and free will with utopianism becomes abundantly clear. We the readers know in retrospect that Herzen did not manage to guide society in the direction he desired. We know now that even his more modest goals for Russia were quixotic and utopian, by the simple historical fact that he did not succeed in establishing them, and probably could not have succeeded based, again, on what we now know about the historical currents that did in fact eventually materialize (rapid industrialization of Russia, the gradual rise of violent dissent, Marxist ideology, and so on). His theoretical writing about the role of the revolutionary in history is useful only as a document chronicling the process of that attempt. Herzen’s tragedy is that he was aware that he lived in a moment of profound transition but that he did not manage to comprehend the significant causal strands running through his present in order to anticipate what shape, precisely, that transition might end up taking.

Conversely Berlin never once implies that Herzen is a failure or a tragic figure. For Berlin, the distinction between utopian and realistic goals is made not on the basis of historical contingency—what ends up to have ultimately happened and what fell by the wayside. Success in history not only has nothing to do with morality, it does not necessarily have anything to do with practicality or usefulness —the crude exertion of power says nothing about whether or not an action is fitting for its time and place. Rather, as Berlin reminds us through Herzen, any intentions to alter the shape of the present must always be measured against the standard, accessible at the time as well as (perhaps) in retrospect, of how well they aim to fulfill real and immediate human needs, and their likelihood of success in doing so. This baseline
measure of reality is the only way to palliate the confusion inherent in any historical account—engendered by the non-representational nature of language, the conflict of cultural perspectives, and so on.\(^{314}\)

Of course, both men’s studies of Herzen are much more than sterile vectors for their personal historiographical credos. They are vibrant, literary, eminently accessible works that tempt the reader—almost any reader—into identification, into immersion, into “living through” the challenges and quandaries that Herzen (and to a lesser extent his contemporaries) faced in their efforts to alter society. Whether Carr is demonstrating the ways that Herzen’s personal life influenced his political choices, or Berlin is celebrating Herzen’s elusive, almost extra-rational ability to get a “feel” for the inner nature of historical problems, the biographical characteristics of both Carr and Berlin’s work expose untold dimensions to problems that they would be hard pressed to communicate in their more straightforward historiographical works.

\(^{314}\) “‘Dualism’ is for Herzen a confusion of words with facts, the construction of theories employing abstract terms which are not founded in discovered real needs, of political programmes deduced from abstract principles unrelated to real situations. These formulas grow into terrible weapons in the hands of fanatical doctrinaires…” (Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty", 89.)
CONCLUSION

An Ethics of Empirical Experience:

Historical Limitations and Future Inspiration

Though he was one of the first proponents of the idea that history itself had no inherent meaning or point of culmination, Alexander Herzen nevertheless believed that any solution to the problems of his time had to be historical in scope. Isaiah Berlin argued for the need for a more expansive, moral historiography while he simultaneously warned against historical constructions not based in the solid realm of reality. E.H. Carr acknowledged that the self-interest of the present pervaded all accounts of the past and all the concepts used to discuss it, yet he nevertheless elaborated a realist, progress-minded historiography. All three thinkers accepted certain limits on what could be known about the past and the types of information the study of the past could yield, yet they did not refrain from believing that there was an actual past to know about, one that involved real people and real events; one whose study could yield real consequences for the present.

Their historiographies sometimes took the form of attitudes more than hard-and-fast, logically consistent programs—a delicate balance of skepticism and optimism detectable in the works of all three thinkers. Cynicism was something they pejoratively ascribed to others (and, in Carr and Berlin’s case, each other);\(^\text{315}\) it implied a distaste for and rejection of the material offered by history along with an unstated premise that there was some other, better mode of understanding that could

\(^{315}\text{Or, in Carr’s words, “new skepticism.”}\)
be appealed to in history’s stead. Herzen, Berlin and Carr all repudiated the premise of a super-historical standard by which the events of the past could be ordered and judged.

Berlin and Carr were writing right before the explosion of historiographical perspectives in the 1960s, and this precarious moment is obvious in everything they do not address. In retrospect their accounts were limited in many ways—their discussion of non-Western societies is oblique and minimal, questions of race or gender are entirely absent, and language when recognized at all is shunted aside as a non-issue. The idea that different groups might have entirely incommensurate historical narratives composed of different conceptual categories, suggested in Herzen’s work, is largely silent in Berlin and Carr’s debate.

As they were historians of Russia writing during the Cold War, the contemporary context of Carr and Berlin’s work gave it an emotional heft perhaps somewhat less accessible today. Even Carr’s protestations that he was bracketing off questions of morality in order to understand “things as they really were” was itself, as Isaiah Berlin reminds the reader, undoubtedly an ethical position, especially in the context of study of the Soviet Union after word of its abuses had gotten out. Herzen analogously had the contemporary backdrop of the obvious bankruptcy of the tsarist regime, which lent credence to his argument for the historical necessity of change. Yet eventually the Cold War drew to a close; meanwhile, Carr’s (and in a modified

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316 Of course, as this paper has discussed, Carr in actuality had just as firm a moral agenda as Berlin: as his dislike for capitalism and as his condemnations of Berlin for what he saw as an enervating and backward-looking mode of historical interpretation attest.
form, Berlin’s) argument that self-interest determined a multiplicity of equally valid historical agendas at odds with each other became fairly commonplace.

The present world does not admit the (ostensibly) narrower focus and moral dichotomies of the 1950’s, nor has it for some time. Certain of Berlin and Carr’s ideas, such as the centrality of the division between free individualism and the subjugation of the faceless collective to systems (Berlin) and the easy identification of the subaltern “other” with the position of nascent power (Carr) no longer ring as true as they might once have. Yet the works discussed in this thesis dealt with the elaboration of a historiographical methodology rather than a static, hermetic set of ageless principles. The idea propagated by Herzen, and later by Berlin and Carr, that one could use the workings of history to understand the parameters of choice in the present is significant beyond its particular context.

Nothing illustrates this principle more than a return to Robert Kaplan’s essay about US intervention in Afghanistan, discussed in the opening pages of this paper. Kaplan references Historical Inevitability as the “ur-text” for a case for intervention. He portrays the complex question of whether the US should involve itself in the Middle East as, according to Berlin, admitting of only two possible answers. One can either defer to “abstractions” like “history” and “tradition,” thus rejecting the possibility of constructive, self-directed change, or one can repudiate history and embark on a brave and moral, albeit idealistic, course into uncharted waters. There is, apparently, no other way.

This, of course, is a misreading of Berlin. In Historical Inevitability, Berlin does indeed rail against all of the “collectivist mystiques” (including “abstract nouns
with capital letters” like “History”) that tempt men to subjugate themselves to some totalizing idea. Berlin writes that these myriad views are all defined by a single fundamental distinction: “between, on the one hand, ‘real’ and ‘objective’, and, on the other, ‘subjective’ or arbitrary’ judgements, based respectively on acceptance or rejection of this ultimately mystical act of self-identification with a reality which transcends empirical experience.” In other words, the position Berlin is explicitly arguing against is the one that “transcends empirical experience” through “a mystical act of self-identification.” Thus Berlin is not advocating the abandonment of history, as Kaplan insists; he is in fact arguing for the rejection of all those quasi-historical visions (including determinism) not in fact verified by little ‘h’ historical experience. Attention to the real, lived experience of different groups is one of the hallmarks of this ethical historiography; even Carr, though he made it a point to examine those unexamined processes influencing the shape of daily life, ultimately appealed to increases in world living standard as one of the chief vindications of the modern age.

Herzen, Berlin and Carr all realized that history was made by people, who were conscious to various extents of the motives and results of their actions and could hopefully be made more so. Their historiographies were uniformly interactive rather than intended for a closed audience of academic (or, in Herzen’s case, revolutionary) 

317 Berlin, "Historical Inevitability", 126.
318 “The loss of white supremacy in Africa, which worries Empire loyalists, Africaner republicans and investors in gold and copper shares, may look like progress to others. I see no reason why, on this question of progress, I should ipso facto prefer the verdict of the 1950’s to that of the 1890’s, the verdict of the English-speaking world to that of Russia, Asia, and Africa, or the verdict of the middle class intellectual to that of the man on the street who...has never had it so good.” (Carr, What is History?, 149.)
peers. Ultimately, all three men believed that it was possible to produce knowledge that could alternately empower, prod, or enlighten people so that they might more comfortably or efficaciously or justly live in the world.
Works Cited


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