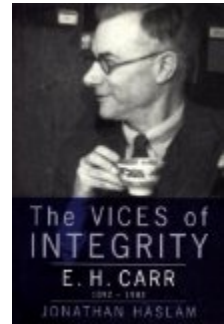


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Haslam. *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr, 1892-1982*. London and New York: Verso Books, 2000. xiv + 306 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85984-289-8.

Reviewed by Henry Reichman (Department of History, California State University, Hayward)  
Published on H-Russia (January, 2002)



## A Magnificent Biography

### A Magnificent Biography

Recently a senior colleague lamented the apparent disdain for biography among some younger scholars, who evidently deem the format too indulgent of popular taste. Yet the monograph under review here reveals how much can be done with this tried and true genre, even when the subject is relatively obscure and seemingly of interest to a mere handful of readers. To put it simply, this definitive biography of the British historian E.H. Carr is one of the best books I've read in years. (I am here repeating a blurb from the publisher's press release, but it is nonetheless true.) Jonathan Haslam has already established a reputation as a premier historian of Soviet foreign relations. A former student of Carr's, he now reveals a rare talent for intellectual biography. This is a work that will benefit anyone interested in the political and intellectual history of the twentieth century. It deserves a wide readership.

Edward Hallett Carr was surely one of the century's most outstanding historians and also one of its more controversial. He is best known to Russianists as the author of fourteen dense and forbidding volumes detailing the political, economic, and diplomatic history of the Soviet Union from the Bolshevik seizure of power to 1929, as well as numerous other works in Russian and Soviet history, including a remarkably readable (and juicily gossipy) 1933 account of the Herzen circle, *The Romantic Exiles*, still in print. Political scientists and diplomatic historians will recall his classic study of international relations, the woefully mistitled *The Twenty Years' Crisis*,

first published on the eve of WWII, but still obligatory reading for students of international affairs. And then, of course, there is the lively and provocative polemic, *What is History?*, a standard assignment in historiography and methods classes for four decades, which has sold nearly a quarter of a million copies to date. Any one of these works might be enough to make a more than modest reputation, but the collective accomplishment—and here one should also take into account Carr's considerable accumulated journalism as well as several minor works, including early biographies of Bakunin, Dostoevsky and Marx as well as numerous essays on a wide variety of themes—is nothing short of phenomenal, all the more so because Carr's approach to history remained throughout his career enigmatic and controversial. A disillusioned liberal, he became a political "realist" and appeaser in the thirties and, in the postwar years, a peculiar sort of leftist who could not endorse socialism or Marxism but nonetheless consorted with Marxists while seeking to explain, if not quite defend, the Soviet Union. As Haslam concludes, "Carr was the archetypal lone crusader, a Don Quixote without even a Sancho Panza" (p. 73).

Haslam deftly tracks the many twists and turns of Carr's long career and sensitively chronicles the numerous crises of his often tumultuous, if limited, personal life, including his two unhappy marriages and his late-in-life relations with the historian Betty Behrens (painfully romantic) and the Marxist Tamara Deutscher (productively professional and platonic). Born to a "well-to-do but parsimonious" (p. 1) middle class suburban London family, as a youth Carr suffered from a "singular" child-

hood in which “he learnt to suppress the greater part of his emotions.... He found it almost impossible to talk directly about his feelings, yet he could express them eloquently on paper.... Outbursts of raw emotion quite literally made him feel ill” (p. 3). As a student, he was much influenced by A.E. Housman, from whom he acquired, in his own words, “a rather pedantic addiction to the minutiae of accuracy and precision” and a “flair for cutting through a load of nonsense and getting straight to the point” (p. 12).

After completing his undergraduate education at Cambridge, where he studied classics, Carr in 1916 obtained a post as “temporary clerk” at the Foreign Office, a position that he more or less held for twenty years. Carr later acknowledged that “it was the Russian revolution which decisively gave me a sense of history which I have never lost” (p. 20) and he soon became something of a Russian expert, resembling in some respects George Kennan, the U.S. diplomat and Russianist of the next generation. The war and, more important, the Versailles settlement proved disastrous for Carr’s faith in the liberal principles of Lloyd George, however, and he gradually lost interest in his diplomatic career, investing increasing energy into the academic study of Russia, which led to publication of the best-selling *The Romantic Exiles*. Finally, in the mid-thirties, he applied for and was granted a newly endowed chair in international relations in Wales, although the appointment did not come without taint of academic politics. With the exception of an important stretch as a highly influential editorial writer for the London *Times* in the late thirties and another traumatic period in the professional wilderness in the late forties, Carr would remain in academia until his retirement, with positions at Balliol at Oxford and then Trinity at Cambridge.

Before 1945, Carr was clearly a man of the political establishment, albeit one with often idiosyncratic views and excruciatingly individualistic habits, highly respected but rarely liked by leading diplomats and scholars. In the postwar years, his interests and views led him to associate with less orthodox figures, most notably the Polish-Jewish former Trotskyist Isaac Deutscher and his wife. Carr and the Deutschers made for an odd pairing. Writes Haslam: “Isaac and Tamara greatly respected him as a scholar; they loved his writings on the romantic exiles, but inevitably held deep reservations about his ruthless realpolitik.... To Deutscher, Carr was characteristically English, not merely in appearance but also in cast of mind: empiricist to the core. He was, despite everything, of the establishment; whereas Deutscher was not only quite at home with theory and brilliantly but

awkwardly out of place in polite English society, he was also a committed Marxist. He could not but judge everyone intellectually in terms of their proximity or distance from Marxism; and Carr was never, ever a Marxist” (pp. 139-40). Although his career was in key respects defined by a sometimes belligerent individualism, in later years Carr learned to collaborate, informally with Tamara Deutscher and more formally with R.W. Davies, with whom he wrote the final volumes of his massive Soviet history.

Central to Haslam’s account, of course, are Carr’s publications, most notably the major books, but also his journalism. It is perhaps Haslam’s greatest merit that he succeeds in both summarizing and critically assessing these works without removing them from the context of both Carr’s life and career and the intellectual disputes of their time. Indeed, upon completing this book I was inspired, before writing this review, to read or reread several of Carr’s works. Few today would recommend *The Romantic Exiles* to one curious about the origins of Russian revolutionism, but it remains an undeniable page-turner—I intended to skim it but ended up going cover-to-cover late at night—and surprisingly contemporary in its linkage of the personal and political. The book portrays the Herzen circle “with great empathy and even greater irony,” writes Haslam. It “is really quite unlike anything else Carr ever wrote. It has an energy to it and a fluidity that makes it more like a novel than a biography. It reveals a compelling fascination with people, their foibles, their motives, their passions” (p. 51). In sharp contrast, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* is “a brutal and damning indictment of the utopian approach to international relations” with, I might add, uncanny contemporary resonance. “Indeed, Carr set out to do for the understanding of international politics what Machiavelli had done for domestic politics; quite consciously so.... Despite the fact that Carr aimed his argument as justification for appeasement, the work retains a more universal significance. No one had hitherto systematically analysed the conduct of international relations in such frighteningly realist terms” (pp. 70-72).

Haslam devotes a superb chapter to *What is History?*, first presented as the Trevelyan Lectures in 1961, and to the extended controversies with Isaiah Berlin, Hugh Trevor-Roper, and Geoffrey Elton these stimulated. According to Haslam, Carr “always had a tendency to lurch between his ‘needlework’ (detailed empirical research and writing) and grand, irresponsible generalizations” (p. 193), which the lectures exemplified. Indeed, it is obvious that the strident, at times simplistic, relativism of *What*

*is History?* was at odds with the kind of seemingly objectivist scholarship Carr himself produced. But Haslam effectively demonstrates that both in the debates that followed the lectures as well as in previous and later writings, Carr's views were decidedly more nuanced. *What is History?* was intended as a kind of shot-across-the-bow for liberal intellectuals corrupted by power: "As a resolutely independent thinker himself he sought freedom in self-consciously distancing himself from received opinion. The entire process whereby intellectuals who believe themselves free from authority end up rationalizing the interests of higher powers fascinated him, puzzled him and ultimately eluded him" (p. 216). Indeed, in the early Cold War years it was to an ideal of objectivity that Carr appealed in declining to choose sides in a divided world. His words from a 1950 essay can be heard echoed in some contemporary discussions: "The question is not whether objectivity is attained or attainable by historians, but whether the concept of objectivity in history has any meaning. To assert that fallible human beings are too much entangled in circumstances of time and place to attain the absolute truth is not the same thing as to deny the existence of truth: such a denial destroys any possible criterion of judgement, and makes any approach to history as true or as false as any other ... it is possible to maintain that objective truth exists, but that no historian by himself, or no school of historians by itself, can hope to achieve more than a faint and partial approximation to it" (quoted on p.194).

Much of the second half of the biography is taken up with Carr's epic struggle to complete his magnum opus, the *History of Soviet Russia*, of which the first lengthy volume appeared in 1950 and the fourteenth and final one in 1977, when he was eighty-five. Remarkably, Carr would complete three additional books before his death! Haslam ably traces the development of Carr's unfolding interpretation of the Soviet experience, analyzes his research methods, and judiciously surveys the critical response, deformed, as it was, by the Cold War. Very few, of course, have read the entire series—even single volumes—but many have used it as an indispensable reference work, which it remains today. The latter installments in particular have an encyclopedic character not much amenable to summary or critique. But Haslam focuses on the key contribution of these later volumes and the study as whole: the argument that the Soviet system was "not adopted purely as the result of ideological dictates in search of an ideal and rational solution to the problem of economic development. On the contrary, it was an improvisational response to a succession of crises,

both internal and external.... The entire process that Carr describes from the time of War Communism and culminating in 1929 is thus one where the main actors, not least Stalin, appear to be turning in the wind, a wind driven by meteorological forces far beyond their own control; but Stalin, of course, being the one least committed on point of principle, was more successful at tacking to the wind than any of the others. It is here that Carr's account far transcends what we hitherto understood of the main-springs behind the entire process that transformed Russia" (p. 255). This insight "constitutes the lasting originality of Carr's interpretation" (p. 147) and certainly merits reiteration today. (Here might be a good place to enter a perhaps quixotic appeal for reissuing the entire series, of which only the first three volumes remain available. Especially welcome would be the masterful treatments of foreign policy and the long out-of-print fourth volume, *The Interregnum*, which Haslam calls "even now a gem of a book" [p. 170].)

Carr's interpretation of Soviet history came, Haslam acknowledges, "from the top down." He "subconsciously transposed his early identification with the ruling class in Britain to the ruling caste in Soviet Russia. The result was a history narrowed in scope, but with the inestimable advantage of analyzing and documenting the regime's activities in its own terms; certainly no Soviet historian successfully did so, and no post-Soviet historians are likely to do so" (p. 146). To some Cold War critics Carr was thereby damned as pro-Soviet, when in fact he saw himself "trapped between alternatives from which he refused to choose" (p. 155). Carr declined to cast moral judgments on historical figures, but an undeniable moral commitment to the ideal of "progress" underlay his almost Darwinian view of history. As Haslam concludes, "one might be forgiven for suspecting that, had he not achieved notoriety as a historian of the Soviet regime, his view of history might otherwise have identified him as a conservative. Most certainly his history of the English industrial revolution would have shocked liberal and socialist critics by its cold and matter of fact treatment of the bloody balance-sheet. His was an incurable optimism, a steadfast belief in 'progress.' This was a Kantian or Hegelian, rather than a Marxist, cast to his conception of the historical process; a feature largely obscured by the fact that he wrote of a regime born of revolution" (p. 259).

The E.H. Carr that emerges from these pages is a man with "an extraordinary historical imagination, but who was absolutely incapable of putting himself into other people's shoes; living people, that is" (p. 276); a man who,

“for all his apparent Olympian detachment, could not cope with the turbulent world of emotion, whose secure bases of belief were thrown out of orbit by an incoming mass of frightening power, namely the First World War; a man unable to return to his past, but always unable to live by intellect alone” (p. 300). Yet this too was a man of extraordinary intellectual power, ferociously independent, with an astounding capacity for work. Although “he proved better at destructive criticism than constructive solutions” (p. 293), his “remarkable and controversial in-

tellectual legacy lives on” (p. 299), his writings still stimulating to read, his keen perceptions still oddly relevant to contemporary concerns.

Haslam’s scrupulously researched and gracefully written biography balances genuine empathy for Carr the flawed human being with a critically analytic perspective on his life and work. If there is a weakness, it is that the publisher should have included an extended bibliography of Carr’s published writings. Otherwise, this is a splendid book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

**Citation:** Henry Reichman. Review of Haslam, Jonathan, *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr, 1892-1982*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5801>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).