

# E.H. Carr and the Crisis of Twentieth-Century Liberalism: Reflections and Lessons

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E.H. Carr's contribution to IR is recognised as being of central importance in the history of the field. But it is sometimes forgotten that he began to develop his world viewpoint – through a critique of liberalism – almost twenty years before he published his classic *The Twenty Years' Crisis* in 1939. These views began to take shape during the Paris peace negotiations in 1919, and were then given sharper definition still following the world economic crash and the launching of the first of many Five Year Plans in the USSR. Carr's thought continued to evolve while holder – ironically – of the liberal-inspired Woodrow Wilson Chair in Aberystwyth, a position he held until 1947. The onset of the Cold War and his decision to undertake a sympathetic study of early Soviet history strengthened the reputation he had already acquired as the enfant terrible of the British establishment. A few years after his death in 1982, however, communism and the USSR collapsed, dealing his anti-liberal perspective a serious political blow. However, new problems at the heart of the world order today make Carr a writer from whom much can still be learned about the causes of crisis and the limits of liberalism.

Keywords: crisis, E.H. Carr, liberalism,

## Introduction

E.H. Carr is widely, and rightly, regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern IR – even in the United States, where there still is a certain tendency to regard the discipline as largely an American invention. It is as a realist, of course, that he is best known; though, as even the most cursory reading of his classic *The Twenty Years' Crisis*<sup>1</sup> reveals, his goal was not merely to remind his readers about the importance of power in world politics, but, rather, to show that the crisis of which he wrote in 1939 was in large part the result of what he viewed as a serious mismatch between

1. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, ed. Michael Cox (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

the depth of the world's disorders and the liberal solutions many thought might solve these after World War I. Indeed, according to Carr, an international theory born in one relatively stable century – the nineteenth – could in no way address the dangers and challenges thrown up in another. It had, in short, outlived its vocation, a view that made him many enemies when he first put these opinions forward between the wars, and was to make him just as many much later during the Cold War. This, though, did not deter the ever controversial Carr. But unsurprisingly, his robust attacks on liberal shibboleths made him something of a pariah among many of his contemporaries, including the President of the University in West Wales, when Carr was appointed to the Woodrow Wilson Chair in International Politics in Aberystwyth.<sup>2</sup> The strong-minded David Davies was of course incensed with the appointment of someone he considered to be an enemy of the League of Nations and a known critic of Woodrow Wilson. But the College – to its credit – was having none of it. Realist or not, Carr was the best man for the job!

Still, as others have pointed out, Carr's views were never simple or straightforward. Indeed, as Ken Booth remarked some time back in a seminal piece, Carr was by no means the straightforward realist that he was often portrayed as being by those who apparently liked to cite his books, but without having read them especially carefully.<sup>3</sup> But then, again, Carr never made things especially easy for anybody – including his many admirers. In fact, having set out to establish what he termed at the time as a 'science of International Relations', within a few years he had effectively abandoned the subject – just as it was beginning to take off as a serious academic discipline in the United States – to begin his long march (academically speaking) which in the end led to the publication of his massive 14-volume study of early Soviet history. Certainly, for one of the founding fathers of the field, once he had helped launch the project known as IR, he seemed to offer it very little support.<sup>4</sup>

The origins of IR have been much discussed and much disputed.<sup>5</sup> That said, there is at least one version of the creation that seems to be accepted by more academics than not: namely, that the subject began life as a liberal project after World War I but was, twenty years later, hijacked intellectually by E.H. Carr, who set it on a new course that led, via World War II and the Cold War, to what subsequently became a realist discourse fixated

2. P. Wilson, 'Carr and his Early Critics: Responses to the Twenty Years' Crisis, 1939–1946' in *E. H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Michael Cox (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 165–97.

3. K. Booth, 'Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice' *International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (1991): 527–45.

4. Michael Cox, 'Introduction' in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, ix–lviii.

5. Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1998).

with power, dismissive of efforts to reform the international order, and shorn of all normative content. If we accept this view (and many within the liberal tradition most obviously would not),<sup>6</sup> this makes Carr's role absolutely central to what happened in IR. Americans, like Morgenthau, might have made IR into the discourse it became just after World War II, and Waltz may have transformed it into a parsimonious science ten years later, but it is still Carr, in this particular story, who struck the first blow against the liberal premises of the early discipline and, in this way, laid the foundation-stone for an intellectual edifice that still remains standing today.

This article seeks to explore these issues and does so, ~~first~~, by examining how and why Carr became such a staunch opponent of liberalism after the First World War. As I will seek to show, his disenchantment occurred not as the result of detached theoretical reflection (Carr was always too much of an empiricist for that) but, rather, as a consequence of his own reflections on the 'real world' and its problems, and how these might be resolved by intelligent policy-makers. To this degree Carr was, and I would insist remained, as much a 'problem-solving' scholar as much as he ever was a 'critical' **one**.

**In the next section, I** then ask whether or not Carr's critique of liberal order conceived of in one epoch has anything to say to us today, in a quite different era. ~~There is, as I will argue, no easy way of translating Carr into the contemporary world, for the simple reason that the world today is so very different to what it was when Carr wrote about it over seventy years ago. But this does make him irrelevant, no more than it does any classical writer.~~ Indeed, a strong case could be made that he is perhaps more relevant today than he has been for many a long year. The reason should be obvious. The liberal world order that announced itself with such fanfare after the Cold War – in much the same way as it announced itself after World War I – is clearly suffering acute stress in the early part of the twenty-first century. Consequently, we could do a lot worse now than to turn back to Carr and see if he has anything useful to say about the sources of our current malaise.

## Biography

There is a view that to explain how thinkers develop ideas when they ~~do~~ it is important to dig deep into their background. In Carr's case at least, this psychological mining reveals hardly anything at all. As his biographer Jonathan Haslam has shown, Carr's early life seemed all too predictable; brought up in a rather sedate, *petit bourgeois*, sheltered English family, there was certainly nothing to suggest that the young

6. Lucien Ashworth, *Creating International Studies: Angell, Mitrany, and the Liberal Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

Carr would many years later come to be regarded as one of the *enfants terribles* of English intellectual life. As he himself was to confess in a short, but deeply revealing autobiographical note authored not long before his death in 1982, he was born into an age of Victorian certainty where few people of his class questioned the way the world was, and the way it would presumably remain for many years to come. An admirer of the British Empire, Carr was for over thirty years very much an 'establishment man'. He may not have been a Tory. On the other hand, he was hardly a precocious rebel without a cause. He did not even seem to be especially curious about the world around him when he was a young man; later he even recalled that while his parents did once take him on a 'day trip' to Boulogne, they (and presumably he) were not much inclined to venturing overseas.

Carr was thus a very ordinary young man. Educated at a minor English public school, followed by three years at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied classics, he was almost a natural for the Foreign Office. But even after he had joined this august body, there were no early signs of alienation or rebellion. He certainly did not express any admiration for the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Indeed, one of his early jobs in the Foreign Office was helping organise the Allied blockade against it. Admittedly, he was far more sympathetic to the way in which the more pragmatic liberal prime minister Lloyd George (as opposed to the confrontational conservatives) tried to deal with the new regime in Russia. Still, at the end of the day, he stood with the West against revolution rather than with a revolution opposed to the West.

## Making Peace

What, then, propelled Carr towards opposition, and away from – and ultimately against – liberalism? What, in other words, were the key events and factors which led to this intellectual and political transition?

The first event, quite clearly, was his experience in Paris at the discussions forming the background that finally led to the peace treaties of 1919. This brought him into contact with the American delegation, full of fine words about how the new world would solve the problems of the old based on an application of good liberal principles as articulated by the US President, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson never much impressed Carr. As he felt then, and repeated frequently thereafter, Wilson was something of a novice when it came to world affairs. He was also suspicious of Wilson and all his glowing talk about liberty and the rights of subjugated peoples. Behind all the idealist rhetoric there was, in Carr's view, a deeply cynical purpose: namely of employing high sounding words about freedom and liberty as a means of weakening the power of America's more formal imperial rivals. It had worked to good effect as part of Wilson's new diplomacy during World War I, and there was no reason to believe

the US would not deploy the same moral argument again. Wilson was not likely to press the case against the British in 1919 given his known racial views about the unworthiness of non-white peoples to rule themselves. However, there was no guaranteeing that another equally – and perhaps even more – liberal American, would not do so later.

If nothing else, this encounter with the United States alerted Carr to something he later referred to frequently: the way in which powerful liberal states sought to obscure their true intentions by sounding morally superior. Carr, to be sure, did not invent, nor ever use the term 'Wilsonianism' like other critics such as Morgenthau and Kennan. But all three could at least agree on one thing: that there was something particularly problematic about Wilson's purported idealistic diplomacy. Self-determination in particular was a highly problematic notion according to Carr. In his opinion, it not only caused more political problems than it ever solved; it invariably tended to leave behind serious economic dislocations as well. It also did not address the issue of minorities. Indeed, it was in his role as Secretary of the 'Minorities Commission' in Paris that Carr discovered how troubling this issue could be. On the one side there were new states like Poland – understandably yearning to be free and making their case in their normally passionate fashion. On the other was the inescapable fact that within each of the new states in Central and Eastern Europe, there were visible and large minorities. Their interests had by and large been reasonably well served within old imperial structures. Under the new regimes, however, their position was either likely to be under serious threat (most obviously in the case of the Jews) or was likely to become the source of new international tensions (most clearly in the case of the Germans outside of Germany). Either way, the simple announcement of the ideal of self-determination did nothing to address their position.

If Carr was less than enthusiastic with the central liberal idea of self-determination, he was perhaps even more critical of the way the allies dealt with Germany in 1919. Germany, he agreed, should bear its fair share of responsibility for having caused the war in the first place. But it was both bad politics – not to mention very bad economics – to treat a highly industrialised and still potentially powerful nation as if it were some pariah state. Carr was not alone in thinking thus. The view that the peace was bound to fail because of the way in which the British and the French treated Germany in Paris was a position quickly popularised in John Maynard Keynes' highly influential book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Carr soon became a convinced and critical 'Keynesian' when it came to thinking about Germany thereafter. Certainly, he remained sympathetic to the German position and could well understand – a little bit too much according to his critics – why Germany would wish to escape the limits placed on its power by Versailles. Liberal critics made much of this, especially as Carr continued to press Germany's case long after Hitler assumed office in 1932. This in large part explains the venom

they directed against *The Twenty Years' Crisis* when it was published in 1939. With its decidedly relaxed position on Germany's acquisition of the Sudetenland in 1938, they saw the volume as little more than a defence of appeasement. Carr then (though not later) was hurt but not unfazed by such attacks. Germany had been wronged, in his view. It could not be held down for ever. Its reasonable requests for rectification should be met. This, in his opinion, made perfect strategic sense. There was also little alternative, unless of course one was prepared to go to war.

If Germany was one issue that pushed a very large wedge between Carr and the liberals, then another was his damning critique of that great liberal edifice of the inter-war period: the League of Nations. Carr was not at first a sceptic; for some part of his Foreign Office career, he did in fact work on League of Nations' issues. Later, he even contrasted the old League with the United Nations, and though he could find little to say that was positive about the latter, he retained a certain affection for the League. But it was only nostalgia. The League, he argued with increasing vehemence, suffered from two major defects: a lack of serious attention to power; and the utopian belief (common, he felt, to all liberals) that if one passed laws and made bold-sounding declarations against aggression, this would somehow make everything right. Institutions, he opined, had their place in the world. To this degree, those who created the League had a point. But they laid so much store by the institutions that they seemed to forget that global order would not come about because of the presumed normative power of morally decent but ultimately irrelevant bodies like it (let alone something as vague as international public opinion), but rather because of brute facts on the ground. This is why the League was doomed. It might last for a while as long as it was not faced with a major international challenge. But when it was confronted by states who had no intention of accepting the rules laid down by the victorious powers of 1919, it could do absolutely nothing. As a result, it became increasingly redundant, and, in the end, collapsed completely; a monument, perhaps a most tragic one, to liberal illusions.

## Planning and the USSR

The ten or so years following the signing of the Versailles Treaty constituted something of a lull in world politics. Early western fears that revolution might spread beyond Russian borders proved to be misconceived. The new nations in Europe somehow managed to function. In Russia, the Bolsheviks began to experiment with the so-called New Economic Policy. The capitalist world, meanwhile, regained some degree of equilibrium. Even Germany showed signs of life as a result of some very serious financial pump-priming by the United States. Many structural problems remained, to be sure. Still, for a decade or so, it did seem as if that somewhat flimsy boat collectively referred to as the 'western world' had navigated its way



through some very turbulent waters, emerging at the bottom of the rapids just like *The Africa Queen* in the film of the same name: namely, battered, damaged and in need of serious repair, but still afloat.

The Wall Street crash, followed in quick order by the world depression, Japan's invasion of Manchuria, and the rise of Hitler, shattered all this. Certainly, for Carr, these were deeply troubling times. As the world plunged into what seemed to him like a new economic dark age, he began to question old liberal nostrums in which it was taken for granted that Smith's 'hidden hand' would always work its miracles and restore some form of equilibrium to the market. This was not to be. Indeed, as the depression continued, it became increasingly obvious to many people, including Carr, that some kind of new economic order was needed. In this way, the idea of planning as the only practical solution to humanity's needs began to look like an increasingly attractive option. Carr did not argue for a total overhaul of the economic order, however. Thus, while some form of government direction was essential in his view, it would not be necessary to abolish all forms of private property. Nor did he preach equality (Carr was no leveller). He did not even call for the elimination of an institution Carr always believed would be essential: namely, a ruling class. But there was no hiding the fact that by the mid-1930s Carr had shifted his thinking away from what he saw as one of the hallmarks of liberal thought – its belief that one should leave the capitalist economy to find its own solutions to its own problems – to becoming something closely resembling a socialist planner.

The issue of planning was, of course, closely bound up in Carr's mind with the existence of the USSR and the promulgation after 1929 of the first of its many Five Year Plans. Interestingly, though, Carr originally 'arrived' at the USSR not through a close study of the Russian revolution – this was to come much later – but, rather, through a long look at Russian intellectual and literary life in the nineteenth century. His immersion into this entirely different world had an enormous impact upon him. As he admitted, it was first and foremost his engagement with the politics of the nineteenth century Russian intelligentsia that detached him, intellectually and emotionally, from the West. It was then but a small step to study Soviet Russia itself.

Again, Carr's views on the USSR (like nearly everything else) were anything but straightforward. Thus, while he came to look favourably upon its economy, he had no liking for its political system. He had no illusions about Stalin. On the other hand, he did feel that Stalin's economic policies were necessary given the international situation. There was no sense in which he was a simple-minded 'fellow traveller', therefore. He was certainly very critical of what he regarded as Stalin's 'western idiots', like the playwright George Bernard Shaw and the founders of the London School of Economics, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Indeed, in some of his more popular reviews written at the time (sometimes under an assumed name) he attacked this happy band of 'bourgeois comrades'

for their complete failure to understand how the new Russia actually worked. Still, he could not ignore the USSR's many material achievements, nor the fact that while the western liberal democracies were languishing economically, the USSR appeared to be forging ahead.

Interest in Soviet Russia and his growing belief in the possibilities contained within planning inevitably led him to confront Marxism, and Karl Marx himself (about whom he wrote a biography in the mid-1930s). Carr clearly was no revolutionary. He denied the labour theory of value. And he did not believe the state could ever wither away. But the influence of Marxism upon him by the end of the 1930s was clear – nowhere more so perhaps than in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* itself, where Carr frequently quotes Marx, often cites Lenin and Hegel (another one of his theoretical favourites) and employs Karl Mannheim to good effect. Indeed, Mannheim's Marxist-inspired theory of intellectuals and ideas did much to shape Carr's thinking about ideologies in general, and about liberalism as a particular kind of ideology reflecting the interests and aspirations of the intelligentsia.

## Aberystwyth

Carr's intellectual drift and his determination to rethink the whole world situation led him irresistibly to the conclusion that he could no longer remain in the Foreign Office. This, in turn, opened up a most remarkable period in his life, following his decision to apply for the Chair (one of the few) in International Politics, based in Aberystwyth. He was appointed in 1936 in what turned out to be one of the great comedies – for some, one of the great ironies – in the history of the discipline. The Chair had been established in 1920 by the great Welsh liberal, David Davies of Llandinam, with the ostensible objective of studying world politics, but with the underlying purpose of celebrating and supporting the work of the League of Nations and its founding father, Woodrow Wilson. Carr, as we have noted, was a serious critic of both. Yet, given his background (twenty years at the Foreign Office) and his by then long list of serious publications, it became almost impossible not to offer him the job, on purely academic grounds. But there was no escaping the obvious mismatch between the Chair's aims as laid down by Davies – who immediately resigned once Carr took up the offer – and the new holder of the post.

Basically, what Aberystwyth gave Carr was time to think and to write – and write he did, with almost furious intent, between his initial appointment and his departure just over ten years later. His productivity was truly remarkable. In fact, over that time, he authored at least four original books: *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939), *British Foreign Policy* (1939), *Conditions of the Peace* (1942), and *Nationalism and After* (1945); one broad survey of the interwar years entitled *International Relations between*



*the Treaties* (1937); an edited volume on nationalism (for Chatham House, in 1939); and probably his most pro-Soviet book ever, *The Soviet Impact on the Western World* (1946). Of course, for long stretches of time Carr was never at Aberystwyth (much to the chagrin of Davies). Indeed, after 1940 he worked for *The Times*, in which position he came to influence a wide swath of British public opinion about the need for postwar reform and the necessity of remaining on good terms with the USSR after the war. Not for nothing did he come to be called 'The Red Professor of Printing House Square' by the leadership of the Tory party.

Carr's writing won him admirers (including the young Hans J. Morgenthau) and enemies (most notably Hayek) in equal measure. His admirers were obviously impressed by his sheer range and his espousal of uncomfortable positions. His enemies, quite clearly, viewed him as nothing less than a 'totalitarian' in their midst whose purported worship of power – not to mention his growing interest in (and obvious sympathy for) the Soviet experiment – made him a serious enemy of the liberal cause. Even the establishment, of which he had once been part, began to have its doubts about Carr. His anti-Americanism (whose deep roots can be traced back to his encounters in 1919), as well as his refusal to become part of an emerging Cold War consensus which saw the USSR as the problem, placed him increasingly outside the pale. Indeed, having given up his post in Wales, he now found it increasingly difficult to find another position. Nor did his choice of friends help much, especially his friendship with Isaac Deutscher – orthodox Marxist, Trotsky admirer, and author of a major biography of Stalin published in 1949, which though not uncritical of the Soviet leader, did suggest that his brutal and sometimes costly policies had nevertheless been essential if the Soviet Union was to escape its backwardness and go on to defeat Germany in World War II.

Carr's choice of allies was in large measure determined by a decision he took in 1945 to undertake a massive new study on early Soviet history. His reasons for doing so were clear: the Russian revolution, he believed, was not only one of the most important events of the twentieth century; Russia's increasing influence after World War II made it – with the United States – one of the two key players in the modern world. Thus, understanding how it came into being, how it had evolved, and what impact it was likely to have on the international system was of central importance. Carr already knew Russian, of course. He had immersed himself in Russian history. And he already knew the USSR quite well. He therefore seemed the perfect candidate to produce serious work on the Soviet Union. This, however, is not how several of his peers viewed things. Carr, they believed, was far too sympathetic to the USSR. His admiration for Lenin was well known. And he refused to view the USSR in simplistic Cold War terms. To make matters even worse, Carr (who as we have seen was no friend of the new nations of Central and Eastern Europe) did not seem particularly perturbed by what many in the West viewed as the completely illegitimate Soviet 'occupation' of

countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia. Liberals quite naturally were incensed. Carr, though, viewed Soviet policies in a quite different way. The Soviet role might have been brutal at times. However, in its own self-interested way, the USSR did two critically important things – by laying the basis for a sustained modernisation of previously backward societies while providing a solution to one of the great causes of the European disorder between the wars: namely, the proliferation of a group of politically unstable, economically non-viable, small nations standing between Europe's two dominant powers, the USSR and Germany.

Nor did the differences end there. For as Carr dug deeper into the archives in search of the 'truth' about Soviet Russia, something became self-evident: his utter opposition to making critical comment or passing moral judgments about the Bolsheviks. Indeed, for writers of either a liberal or conservative persuasion, Carr was not merely too detached from an ethical point of view, he was altogether too sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. He thus never condemned Bolshevik violence against its political enemies. Nor was he prepared to say much at all about their hostile relationship to formal democracy. To make matters worse, he took debates within the Bolshevik party very seriously, and by so doing portrayed both the discussions and the Bolsheviks in a relatively sympathetic light. The net impact of all this was to make Carr into a great hate figure, at least outside the political left. As one prominent critic later observed, Carr's writings on the USSR revealed in the most dramatic way possible that he was no friend of freedom. In fact, standing as he did with the USSR and its allies against the United States and its allies (though Carr denied such a simplistic characterisation of his position), it was clear where his loyalties remained; with the enemies of liberty, against a West who continued to promote the rights of the individual against the all-powerful state.

### **Carr for the Twenty-first Century**

Carr died in 1982. Within three years, Gorbachev had assumed the leadership of the USSR. Four years later, the USSR withdrew from the heart of Europe. And two years after that, the Soviet Union disintegrated, bringing down the wider communist movement with which it had been so closely associated. Carr was not to witness any of this. However, we can be fairly certain that he would have found the whole thing seriously disturbing. After all, the phenomenon he had invested so much time in writing about was no more. Worse still: the liberal order he had thought doomed had shown enormous resilience. Indeed, as 1989 appeared to show, it had not only shown it could last the course, but had effectively triumphed over its obvious ideological rival.

These tumultuous events pose the obvious question: how, then, should we now view Carr? The answer, according to his liberal critics of the

past few years, has been as straightforward as it has been predictable: as a failed theorist of a new world which not only failed to deliver on its promise, but was subsequently consigned into that proverbial dustbin of history where Carr had sought to consign liberalism several decades before. Such an assessment may sound harsh, even lacking in perspective. But with capitalist globalisation driving all in the years after the Cold War, in an international system dominated more than ever by a United States, and in a world of self-determining states from Poland to Kazakhstan, the Balkans to the Baltic, it was one that was bound to command a good amount of support.

Yet, in spite of all this, Carr's work continued to be read by a new generation of students, especially in the field of IR. Certainly, with new interest being displayed in the disciplinary history of IR, Carr had to be taken seriously. But it has only been over the last few years that there has been a fresh engagement with a number of his ideas, his critique of the nation-state and nationalism obviously being one, and his more general critique of liberalism being another. The onset of the world economic crisis, the generally recognised failure of western institutions to deal with a growing array of issues, and the rise of new revisionist states like China, would at least suggest that liberalism is once more under the microscope; and that there is still much that can be gleaned from Carr's analysis of a much earlier crisis of the liberal order. The world that Carr knew and wrote about may have changed beyond recognition. However, none of this can hide the simple fact that the world today is going through another of those great transitional moments where liberal answers no longer seem to suffice. We may not yet be at another 'Carr moment'. His answers might not be fashionable any longer. But it is a tribute to him that we can still read such works as *The Twenty Years' Crisis* and get a great deal out of it. This alone would put paid to the view (again strongly expressed by yet another of his liberal critics at the time) that his work was merely the product of 'diseased times' with nothing to teach future generations. The more we read Carr today and the ways in which he uncovered the limits of liberalism in his day, the more we discover how much he has to say about our own, increasingly disturbed world.

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