

SOVIET BEGINNINGS

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION with its aftermath is much the greatest and most tragic issue of our time. Its impact upon the life of every human being is so direct, continuous and violent that the study of it with accuracy and detachment is becoming progressively more difficult as the need for it grows more urgent. Consequently the appearance of the opening volume of the long-promised major work on the history of the USSR by Mr E. H. Carr is an event of considerable importance.

Mr Carr is, in many ways, uniquely well-equipped for this great task; his scholarship is wide and accurate, he has uncommon powers of assimilating an immense mass of material set out in unbelievably tedious and maddeningly repetitive official phraseology, and a still more remarkable capacity for ordering and expounding it in lucid, precise and exceedingly readable prose.

But, what is more interesting, his attitude to the facts is far from colourless, since he holds a very definite point of View which, however sharp the reaction which it may provoke, is a formidable! weapon in his practised hands. For Mr Carr is deeply affected by the contempt for liberalism made fashionable in the last century by Hegel; he sees history as a procession of events ruled by inexorable laws, which only a fool or a madman would try to ignore or resist or deflect; and like Hegel (and Marx) the tone of his writing suggests that there is something childish or capricious or quixotic in approving or deploring the consequences of these laws. The proper task of a rational man is to adjust himself to this great pattern; of the historian, to make clear the direction pursued by the central stream of history, and of the men and nations triumphantly afloat upon it, without so much as a backward glance at unrealised possibilities upon which great hopes and fears had once been focused, still less upon the victims and casualties of the process.

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Mr Carr sees history through the eyes of the victors; the losers have for him all but disqualified themselves from bearing witness. It is natural therefore that to him the hero of this period is Lenin.

Lenin bestrides Mr Carr's pages like a colossus; beside him even Trotsky is inconsiderable. As for Lenin's once famous rivals – Socialists and Liberals, peasant leaders and intellectuals – history has judged them and therefore they are not often called to testify. Lenin won, and his works are consequently Mr Carr's principal authority for the history of his years in power; he seems to look on Lenin as Mommsen upon Caesar, or most German historians on Bismarck, a hero, awe-inspiring, saviour of his society, whose right to stifle liberties has been conferred on him by history herself.

The three principal topics of this volume are the growth of the Communist Party, the constitutional structure of the Soviet Union until 1923, and the problem of nationalities during this period; and because of his respect for the victorious cause Mr Carr looks for his evidence principally to early Bolshevik writers. These sources he uses scrupulously, skilfully and intelligently, and the account based on them is a valuable record of how the founding fathers of the USSR viewed their own beginnings; but comparatively free as they are from the distortions of latter-day Soviet 're-interpretation', they cannot make up for the relative neglect by the author of anti-Bolshevik and neutral sources.

Mr Carr's method does not, of course, lead him towards Communist orthodoxy or to any other specific political allegiance, but it is permeated by a great antipathy towards the martyrs and the unsuccessful minorities, whether Bolshevik or not, which the reader is throughout obliged to discount.

Mr Carr tells his story very clearly, and often brilliantly, but it is cast in two dimensions; what is missing is the social and political scene in Russia immediately before the *coup d'état*, as well as the part played by parties, institutions and individuals other than Marxist. And although Mr Carr is not engaged in writing the history of Russia before 1917, and has clearly decided to deal with institutions rather than persons, yet to tell the story so largely in terms of the fortunes and impact of one man and his entourage, however important, and that not too critically, is surely a defect in so serious and valuable a work. There is little to indicate the brutal violence, the fortuitous collisions of personalities and policies of the confused early years in Mr Carr's cool and beautifully ordered

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pages, at times as restrained and polished as government despatches by a sympathetic but discreet official observer from abroad.

Within these self-imposed limits Mr Carr's narrative possesses singular virtues: the style is luminous, the architecture of the entire work is admirably proportioned; the exposition is always interesting and at times supersedes all previous studies – as, e.g., in the masterly account of official policy towards the nationalities; the treatment of the genesis of Bolshevik ideas and institutions is based on very accurate and comprehensive knowledge, and the whole work is much the most important contribution made to its subject for many years in any language.

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.

Review of E. H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*,
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