BOOK REVIEW

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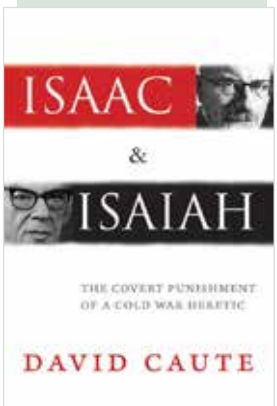
Isaac and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic[1] by David Caute



ISAAC AND ISAIAH: THE COVERT PUNISHMENT OF A COLD WAR
by David Caute
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This is a remarkable book – very 'Caute-ian' in terms of its asides, wit and denunciations – and remarkably penetrating in its observations and research. There are 105 pages of footnotes, bibliography and index, and these reflect the detailing that constitutes this book. The problem, for a reader who is a member of a catholic 'left' – i.e all who question the 'right' from the broad church of liberalism and who question in particular the unrestrained nature of capitalism – and who has had some sympathy and separate admirations for both Isaiah Berlin and Isaac Deutscher, is that one ends up, after reading Caute's magisterial and denunciatory book, embarrassed by and disliking both.

Caute goes out of his way to contextualise the differences between the two. The escape from fascism and the hopes for a future – for the world at large, for Jewry, and for the future of higher education – are all portrayed here; as are the vast webs of interactions and reactions with and against Pasternak, Akhmatova, Orwell, Koestler and Arendt. In this sense, Caute has produced a wonderful book of intellectual history. And he reminds us that many of his characters, e.g. Arendt, went out of their way not to regard themselves as philosophers, but as political theorists – creatures of their time and commentators on the thought of their time. Time and again, Caute also reminds us of the talent Berlin had for essays and for verbosity within those essays. i.e. he also did not write sustained philosophy and, in a way, never fulfilled his promise as a fully original thinker. But someone like Deutscher, who did write great books, was compromised by the polemical if nuanced nature of the great hope he imbued into his books that, one day, the Soviet Union would realise the humane mission that Deutscher saw implicit in the Russian revolution. Everybody in Caute's depiction of the world is struggling towards something that could not be attained.

What Caute paints is a picture of post-war thought in Britain that was, in a very British way, every bit as exciting and vexatious as post-war thought in France. There were overlaps of course: Deutscher wrote for Sartre's Temps Modernes, for instance. But the narrative and analytical nature of British thought, centred on contemporary history and not on theory or sustained philosophy, meant that the debate between the two could be immediately appreciated by a much wider public than academic audiences or intellectual elites. Both Berlin and Deutscher wrote

extensively for newspapers and magazines and were involved in the politics of those newspapers and magazines. Both had huge public reputations.

What is deeply surprising therefore is that the two almost never met. And what is at the heart of Caute's book is an episode of which Deutscher actually knew nothing, and which the wider reading public knew almost nothing, and that is Berlin's blackballing Deutscher from being awarded a Chair at the new University of Sussex.

Caute actually was first alerted to the possibility of this happening by Berlin's own consultation of him at All Souls, where both were Fellows. Caute has obviously harboured the memory of this meeting and conversation from long ago, and finally set about researching and writing about it. A tiny clandestine episode of British academic life – replete, with or without Berlin and Deutscher, with blackballings, vilifications, cattiness, and innumerable displays of amors propres – is crafted by Caute into a hook on which to hang a wonderful comparative study of the lives and thoughts of two men with similar backgrounds but vastly different styles and intellectual ambitions.

Berlin saw hope in the glamour of liberalism, and Deutscher in gods who had clearly failed at the moment when they lived in history.

In the end, neither man emerges as sympathetique. Berlin, in particular, comes across as vain and nasty. Deutscher at least did not revel in the company of Kennedy and the Camelot White House, of Neville Chamberlain, and the whole compromised ilk. He did revel in being the defender of the last great prophet, Trotsky, and to a significant extent even of Stalin, despite the huge amount of evidence against him as the architect of gulags and slaughters. Berlin saw hope in the glamour of liberalism, and Deutscher in gods who had clearly failed at the moment when they lived in history. Neither man had any time or patience with the revolting students of 1968 and, finally, both men come across as quaintly conservative. But then it is as two middle-aged intellectuals that we see them as Berlin plunged the knife into Deutscher's back. So that two of the three very great intellectual figures of post-war Britain – Karl Popper was the third – are reduced to an episode of pique and pettiness. Caute leaves the blame, fault, and guilty verdict with Berlin. But, by book's end, it is impossible to like Deutscher either.

NOTES
1 David Caute, Isaac & Isaiah: the covert punishment of a cold war heretic, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013