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## AN ANTI-UTOPIAN LIFE

*Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, by Michael Ignatieff. Owl Books (115 W. 18th Street, New York, NY 10011), 356pp., \$16.00 paper, 1999.

ISAIAH BERLIN, who died in 1997, was that rare man of letters who was also a man of the world. If Churchill was the statesman who earned laurels as an historian, Berlin was the intellectual who served with distinction in the trenches of diplomacy and politics and, not surprisingly, the careers of the two men are intertwined. True to its title, this biography, with which Berlin cooperated but over which he exercised no editorial control, is accordingly as much about Berlin's life as his thought.

Berlin brought a sense of realism to philosophy, which had become preoccupied with abstractions, of which the most dangerous, Marxism, was also the most popular. Berlin was incapable of enthusiasm for these intellectual fashions for reasons that were rooted in his childhood in Russia, that influenced his early career as an Oxford philosopher, and that set the stage for his intellectual achievement.

Indeed, the value of this biography is that it shows how Berlin's life may have influenced his thought. From childhood, Berlin was engaged with the world and its dangers. Born in 1909 in Riga, then a polyglot Tsarist Russian provincial capital—where Russian was the language of government, German the language of culture and commerce, and Yiddish and Latvian the languages of the street—Berlin was the pampered only child of a Jewish timber merchant and his wife. A threatened German invasion during World War I prompted the family to move to St. Petersburg, only to face the Russian Revolution. In 1920, they fled Bolshevik thuggery, first to Riga, then to England, where all three would live out their lives peacefully. Many of the relatives they left behind would later die in the Holocaust.

These encounters with history, Berlin later confirmed, made it impossible for him to embrace socialism, which set him apart from most of his peers. As Ignatieff puts it, "his own two years in Lenin's Russia, waiting for the Cheka to knock, had inoculated him against Marxism for ever." His personal experiences might also have accounted for Berlin's decision as a

young scholar at Oxford to put aside pure philosophy in favor of intellectual history—a discipline which Ignatieff says barely existed at Oxford at the time—opting to study actual events and real people rather than the abstractions and doctrines favored by his colleagues. That Berlin would become firmly grounded in history may, in turn, have had something to do with the half-dozen small roles he later played in the making of history.

Unlike many if not most intellectuals, Berlin constantly sought out the company of other people, including politicians and other men of action. At one time or another, he was personally acquainted with Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Guy Burgess (innocently), John Maynard Keynes (not so innocently), T. S. Eliot, Boris Pasternak, Greta Garbo (who told him, "You have beautiful eyes"), C. S. Lewis, Felix Frankfurter, Virginia Woolfe, and a young Rhodes Scholar from Germany, Adam von Trott, who would a decade later be arrested and executed for his role in the plot to kill Hitler. Berlin assisted Churchill with his memoirs, received from Pasternak an early draft of *Doctor Zhivago* and helped publish it in England, and huddled with President Kennedy on the first night of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Berlin's first meeting with Churchill—or non-meeting, as it turned out—became the kind of story Berlin would live off for many years. Working for the British Embassy in Washington during the Second World War, Berlin's dispatches on American politics and opinion made an impression on Churchill, but the prime minister knew their author only as "Mr. Berlin." When Clementine Churchill informed her husband that Irving Berlin was in London in 1944, the Prime Minister naturally insisted on having him for lunch. Peppered by Churchill with questions about Roosevelt's Washington, the guest replied with "only vague and noncommittal replies," reports Ignatieff. As Churchill's probing elicited further shrugs, he became confused, then irritated. Finally, Churchill asked his guest what was the most important thing he had written. "White Christmas," came the reply.

Less famous, but far more important to Berlin, was his meeting with the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova. Dispatched to the British Embassy in Moscow in 1945, while London's relations with Moscow were still aglow from the allied victory, Berlin found Akhmatova in her cramped, spare Leningrad apartment. They talked until sunrise the next day. A subsequent crackdown by the KGB on Akhmatova and other intellectuals led the poet to believe firmly that her meeting with Berlin had actually

launched the Cold War. For Berlin's part, "He never doubted that his visit to Akhmatova was the most important event in his life. He came away from Russia with a loathing for Soviet tyranny, which was to inform nearly everything he wrote in defense of Western liberalism and political liberty thereafter."

His essays, especially "Two Concepts of Liberty" and "The Hedgehog and the Fox," are seminal works of twentieth-century thought. His "Winston Churchill in 1940," in which he described his subject as "the largest human being of our time," helped to create Churchill's modern reputation, enabling his admirers to forget that Churchill had for much of his career been a hated, defeated, and ridiculed figure.

In a promotional interview, Ignatieff called Berlin "the greatest liberal philosopher since John Stuart Mill." If true, this speaks more to the materialist and secularist shortcomings of liberalism than it does to the achievements of philosophy. For like Mill, Berlin had strong libertarian convictions, but a somewhat leftist political profile and little in the way of religious faith of a traditional kind. In the vernacular of the era, he was a liberal anti-Communist or Cold War intellectual. Ignatieff describes Berlin as a big-government liberal, who thought government power was needed to create the essential conditions for freedom but who also believed that government power had to be limited so as to defend freedom.

Yet it was to Berlin's credit that he acknowledged and, perhaps most importantly, articulated, the conflicts that tear at the heart of modern liberalism, despite the best efforts of liberal politicians to deny them. Berlin, Ignatieff says, "challenged the whole post-war social democratic tradition by pointing out that the values at the heart of it—equality, liberty, and justice—contradicted each other. For example, it might be necessary to increase taxation on the incomes of the few in order to bring greater justice to the many, but it was a perversion of language to pretend that no one's liberty would suffer as a result." Ignatieff then quotes Berlin:

Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience. If the liberty of myself or my class or nation depends on the misery of a number of other human beings, the system which promotes this is unjust and immoral. But if I curtail or lose my freedom, in order to lessen the shame of such inequality, and do not thereby materially increase the individual liberty of others, an absolute loss of liberty occurs. This may be compensated for by a gain in justice or in happiness or peace, but the

loss remains, and it is a confusion of values to say that although my 'liberal' individual freedom may go by the board, some other kind of freedom—social or economic—is increased.

In making the case for liberty, Berlin reminded us of both the necessity of choice and the inevitability of loss. He reintroduced a tragic vision to politics, saying:

If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.

Berlin was persuasive in his arguments that freedom was an objective good, yet the critic might ask, good for what? A dazzling lecturer and prolific essayist, Berlin was criticized for never producing a major opus. Limiting himself to lectures and essays may be seen as enabling Berlin to avoid grappling with the weightier issues that a larger work might have required. Yet beyond defending political liberty in the here-and-now, Berlin had no agenda. "Berlin's central objective," Ignatieff writes, "was to separate a defense of liberty from any claim that it had an emancipating or improving effect on human nature. Indeed, the only defense he offered of liberty's priority in politics was in terms of pluralism. If values were in conflict, then liberty's priority was procedural.... He never professed to be bothered by his own failure to ground the defense of liberty on ultimate principles." Making apparent the connections between Berlin's life and thought, Ignatieff's life of an intellectual who was at once Russian, German, Jewish—and English to the core—illuminates what perhaps were the sources of Berlin's enthusiasm for unfettered pluralism.

Berlin's value derives from his arguments against utopian ideas during a life that coincided with—and was touched by—utopian horrors. He reminded us what the Greeks already knew, that utopia was another name for "no place." He resurrected Kant's warning for the ages that, "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made." In reminding us of the flaws in liberalism and socialism, he shared with us the hard truths that scholarship—and life—had taught him.

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