



*Photograph by Walter Stoneman, 1947*

SIR LEWIS NAMIER

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1888-1960

LEWIS BERNSTEIN NAMIER, died in London on 19 August 1960 at the age of 72. Though he had for some months been feeling the frustrations of failing health, his last illness was mercifully short, and he was working at his desk, as he had worked without intermission for many years, on the day before his death.

Namier was, without doubt, one of the outstanding historians of his day in his phenomenal knowledge and powers of synthesis, his individual and eclectic historical imagination, the range and precision of his learning, and the seminal nature of his influence on historical thought. He was also a publicist of high distinction, and the master of a finely tempered prose style. His historical writings fall into four categories, and he admitted as an historian to two long-standing ambitions: to write the history of the politics of England in the years leading up to and during the American Revolution, and to write the history of Europe between 1812 and 1918. The second of these ambitions reflected his European youth and upbringing, reinforced by his experience in government service during the First World War; the first arose from his identification with his adopted country. The stormy events through which he lived imposed on him two other fields of study; the relations of the Powers of contemporary Europe as formed and distorted by two world wars, and the rise of Zionism, closely bound up with these events and reflecting his deepest aspirations as a Jew.

Neither of his two main historical ambitions was fully realized. The history of nineteenth-century Europe was never written, though he indicated in lectures and essays the lines he would have followed. His short work *Germany and Eastern Europe* (1915), his 'Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy' written for the *History of the Peace Conference of Paris* (ed. H. V. Temperley, 1921); his *1848: the Revolution of the Intellectuals* (based on his Raleigh Lecture of 1944); his Waynflete Lectures (1947) on

<sup>1</sup> For most of the evidence on which I rely for the early years of this biography, and in much also about the later years, I am indebted to Lady Namier, who is preparing a biography of her husband. She has consulted a number of his friends and colleagues, and the information with which they have so generously provided her lies also behind much of what I have written.

'The German Problem 1848-50' (unfortunately unpublished); his lecture to the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei at Rome in 1948 on *Nationality and Liberty*, and his Creighton Lecture (1952) on *Basic Factors in Nineteenth Century European History*, show the issues which occupied his thoughts.<sup>1</sup> They were issues in which his basic beliefs and emotions were deeply engaged, and were those which found expression in his studies of contemporary international affairs and of the Jewish problem.

It was the first of his two ambitions which was the more nearly realized. In his work on the politics of the early years of George III's reign, he was able (detached from the preoccupations of contemporary affairs) to exercise all his powers as an historian in the re-creation of a remote and self-contained world which had a peculiar fascination for him. Here he produced his two masterpieces *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929) and *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (1930). To these he added in 1934 his Ford Lectures on *King, Cabinet and Parliament in the Early Years of George III* (some fragments of which have been published posthumously);<sup>2</sup> and in 1952 his Romanes Lecture on *Monarchy and the Party System*, which gave an indication of the way in which his views had been developing in the twenty-three years since he first wrote on the subject. The great bulk of his biographical work for the History of Parliament on which he was engaged at the time of his death, will, when published, throw still further light on this process. It is on these works that his claims to greatness as an historian primarily rest, for they not only threw a new and dazzling light on the political institutions of mid-eighteenth century England, but they constituted a revolution in historical method the effects of which were seen in periods and topics far removed from those to which they were, in the first instance, applied. Nevertheless, here too, his aim was only partially realized, for his work covered no more than a fraction of the ground which he had marked out for himself (ground in itself closely limited) and some of it is still barely charted.

Ludwik Bernstein *vel* Niemirowski,<sup>3</sup> as he was called before

<sup>1</sup> All of these, except *Germany and Eastern Europe* and *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (and the Waynflete Lectures, which were never published) were republished by him in his *Vanished Supremacies: Essays on European History, 1812-1918* (1958).

<sup>2</sup> In *Crossroads of Power* (1962).

<sup>3</sup> The original family name was Niemirowski (which Namier spelt for English convenience Namierowski). Forced to adopt that of Bernstein (in Polish Bernsztajn) at some period, they had kept alive the older name, at



he changed his name by deed poll first in 1910 and again in 1913, was born on 27 June 1888 on his grandmother's estate at Wola Okrzejska, some miles to the east of Warsaw. He was the second child and only son of Joseph Bernstein *vel* Niemirowski by Ann, daughter of Maurice Theodor Sommerstein. Both were of well-to-do land-owning families, polonized Jews who no longer practised the Jewish religion. On his father's side he could trace his family back through a succession of Rabbinical scholars to the Talmudic era, and his paternal grandmother was a direct descendant of the renowned Gaon of Vilna, Eliyahu ben-Solomon (1720-97).<sup>1</sup> Joseph had practised as an advocate, but by the time his son was born he had relinquished his profession and concerned himself with the management of the estates of his own and his wife's family in what was then Congress Poland and the Austrian Ukraine.

On these estates Namier grew up, a brilliant and delicate boy, in a highly civilized milieu. Looking back in 1922 to what was already a vanished age, he wrote:

Before the war the manor-houses on the big landed estates were centres of high culture and mainstays of modern economic life in Eastern Europe. They resembled Roman villas in semi-barbaric lands. Their inhabitants read the books and thought the thoughts of the most advanced civilization in the midst of an illiterate peasantry.<sup>2</sup>

He received an excellent private education, and absorbed the romanticized socialist and nationalist ideas of the young Polish intellectuals of his day. He also became aware of his ambiguous position as a Jew, and, rejecting his parents' search for assimilation, applied to the Jewish people the nationalist principles which he advocated for others. He said later that he had been 'a strong Jewish Nationalist since about 1906'.<sup>3</sup> His university career was varied; a few unhappy weeks at Lwow University, where among other unpleasantnesses he met anti-Semite hostility; a semester at the University of Lausanne, where he was sent for his health and where he was fortunate enough to attend

least in legal documents. Namier, when he entered the University of Lausanne enrolled as 'Ludwik Bernsztajn de Koszylowce, Autriche'; at the London School of Economics and Balliol as 'Ludwik Bernstein'.

<sup>1</sup> I. Epstein, *Judaism*: revised edition, 1945, p. 107, calls him 'the greatest intellectual and spiritual force in Rabbinic Judaism since Moses Maimonides'.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Manchester Guardian*, April 1922. Reprinted in *Skyscrapers and Other Essays* (1931).

<sup>3</sup> See p. 375, n. 2.

the lectures of Vilfredo Pareto; then, after his father had vetoed his plans to go to the Sorbonne, a year at the London School of Economics on the recommendation of an Anglophile relative, where he became for a time a keen Fabian; finally, four years at Balliol where A. L. Smith was one of his tutors, years which influenced profoundly the course of his future development. He went down with a First Class in Modern History, a part-share in the Beit Prize for an essay on 'Proposals in the direction of a closer union of the Empire before the opening of the Colonial Conference of 1887' (a subject which he carried no farther than the American Revolution), an admiration and affection for the traditional English governing classes, a devotion to Oxford and, still more, to Balliol, and the determination to become an historian. Already he had decided to adopt British nationality,<sup>1</sup> and already his Fabianism was changing into his own version of English conservatism.

But he was not destined as yet either to satisfy his ambitions as a would-be historian or to live as an Englishman. After a year spent partly at home and partly in England he went in April 1913, at his family's request, to the United States to take part in an enterprise planned by one of his father's business associates; and for the next year he was occupied in what proved to be uncongenial work, relieved only by historical study undertaken in the evenings and on Sundays in the excellent public libraries of the Eastern cities.<sup>2</sup> At this time he began his work on eighteenth-century history. It arose out of his essay for the Beit Prize. He tells us that in 1912 he had started work on what he called 'the Imperial Problem during the American Revolution'. In the United States he concentrated at first on the history of the colonies, but a 'distinguished American historian'—Professor Charles B. Andrews—advised him to direct his attention to the English end of the problem. He took this advice and decided 'to produce something on the British Parliament during the American Revolution'.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1914 he was back in Europe on a holiday, with the idea of carrying out this work. World events were,

<sup>1</sup> The formalities were completed on 31 March 1913.

<sup>2</sup> He mentions particularly the New York Public Library, where he worked on the Bancroft transcripts; he also worked at Yale on the Ezra Stiles MSS. (Letter of 11 August 1926 supporting his application to the Rhodes Trustees). I am indebted to the trustees for permission to use this and other information from their files.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction to *The Structure of Politics*. Professor Andrews's name is given in the letter quoted in note 2 above.

however, to intervene. In May, on a short tour of eastern Europe, he saw that war was imminent. He wrote in an article in a New York paper 'Europe is proceeding with its preparations for the storm of our age'.<sup>1</sup> When it broke out he at once enlisted, but his knowledge of eastern Europe was too valuable to be wasted and early in 1915 he was transferred from the army first to work in the Propaganda Department (1915-17); then in the Department of Information (1917-18), and finally in the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office (1918-20) when he attended the Peace Conference at Paris. During these years he vastly increased his knowledge of contemporary affairs, while the contacts with those who controlled them were to be of great importance to his future work. It was also about the end of the war that another of his future interests began to take shape—one which was to conflict from time to time with his academic ambitions—his association with the Zionist movement. At Oxford he had ardent Zionists among his friends but had not been attracted by what he saw of Zionist activities. During his stay in America he was 'much interested in Jewish affairs but was not in touch with Jews'. During the war his preoccupations lay elsewhere, though when Turkey entered the war he 'talked to Lionel Curtis about Palestine and the possibility of Great Britain doing something for Zionism. I believe he spoke to Herbert Samuel but got the reply that nothing could be done.'<sup>2</sup> Now he met Dr. Chaim Weizmann, and they discussed the possibility, when the Foreign Office released him, of his taking up paid work with the Zionist organization. But the negotiations hung fire, and when Balliol approached him in December 1919 with the offer of a temporary lecturership, he accepted with alacrity.

Namier taught history in Oxford from May 1920 until the end of the academic year 1921. He carried a heavy load of teaching and he was engaged on his chapter in the *History of the Peace Conference* on 'The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy'. He also tells us that at this time he began the work on the 1848 Revolution which culminated in his lectures of 1944 and 1947. But he could find no time for his major eighteenth-century project, and so as to be able to give his full attention to it, he entered into business on his own account in 1921 to amass the necessary capital. In the disturbed conditions of eastern Europe

<sup>1</sup> In the *American Leader*. New York, 9 July 1914. Reprinted in *Skyscrapers and other Essays*.

<sup>2</sup> About 1930 he dictated a note on his early connexions with Zionism.



at the time, his knowledge and adroitness won their reward, and by 1924 he decided that he had saved enough to keep him if he eked out his resources with free-lance journalism. He therefore settled in London to concentrate on the intensive study of the sources of his chosen period. For nearly six years he was absorbed in the researches which gave him his unrivalled knowledge of the politics of the mid-eighteenth century, and in the creative effort of mastering his material. They were difficult years for him; his first marriage, contracted in 1917, had broken down, and the war and its sequels had separated him from his family. Moreover the work took much longer than he had expected, and only loans from loyal friends and grants from the Rhodes Trustees in 1926 and 1929 enabled him to complete it<sup>1</sup>. As he wrote to the Rhodes Trustees when applying on 6 February 1929 for the second of these grants,

work on the scale on which I have been doing it, can hardly be combined with teaching, whereby most historians, with no private means of their own, secure their livelihood. . . . In the last two-and-a-half years I have piled up debts to the amount of £1,500; they are not of a pressing nature as the people who lent me the money really meant it as an endowment, but I do not accept endowments from private individuals and am determined to repay every penny of that money.

At the same time he was becoming increasingly concerned in Zionist affairs. In 1925 when he was attending the Zionist Conference at Vienna, the possibility of his taking up employment with the Zionist organization was again raised, and finally in 1928 he accepted the position of Political Secretary of the Jewish Agency for Palestine on the understanding that he would assume office in 1929 when his work would be ready for publication.

As soon as the *Structure of Politics* was published in 1929 its remarkable qualities were recognized and it was acclaimed by a far wider public than normally interest themselves in serious historical works. *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, which came out a year later, and to which the *Structure of Politics* served as an introduction, was also enthusiastically received, though perhaps by a more professional public. It was intended to be the first of a series of volumes. That the author of these two outstandingly original and learned works should have withdrawn from full-time historical work even before they

<sup>1</sup> The Rhodes Trustees, whom he approached through P. H. Kerr (later Lord Lothian), made him two grants of £300 each. He had also in 1925 taken a loan from the Zionist organization to hasten his work, but this he repaid on obtaining the Rhodes Trustees' grant.

were published was obviously a grave loss to scholarship. He himself expected to 'have to give up history work, perhaps for a few, possibly for many, years'.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, however, the loss was for a short time only. Namier's experiment in political administration was not a success; he had serious disagreements with the political executive of the organization, and in 1931 he was offered and accepted the Chair of Modern History at Manchester University. He held this chair, except during some five years' leave of absence during the Second World War, until he reached retiring age in 1953.

Namier held clear views on the duties of a professor. One of his former assistant lecturers wrote of him 'Namier held that the primary duty of a university teacher was to be a scholar, teaching was a duty, but scarcely a vocation, while administration should be left as far as possible to those who had no better use for their time'.<sup>2</sup> He was an excellent lecturer and a stimulating if somewhat overwhelming teacher, and he warmly encouraged those of his students who were interested in research; but he gained more stimulus from life in the metropolis on the fringes of politics, and from his activities as a publicist, than from academic society and he divided his time between Manchester and London, giving the latter the preference.

The years between 1931 and the outbreak of the Second World War did not give him the leisure to go on with his *England in the Age of the American Revolution*. He had lectures to write and seminars to conduct. Moreover some of the manuscript sources on which he was dependent were not yet available to scholars; and still more, the state of the world was unpropitious. The rise of Hitler and the mounting international tension preoccupied him, and the persecution of the Jews not only gave a new urgency to his Zionism, but engaged much of his time in work for the victims of Nazi oppression. Nevertheless his Ford Lectures in 1934 showed the development of his thought on eighteenth-century political and constitutional questions, and a short but masterly book published in 1937, *Additions and Corrections to Sir John Fortescue's Edition of the Correspondence of King George III (Vol. I)* illustrated the precision of his scholarship as well as his uncompromising rigour as a critic. In 1931, moreover, he began the practice, which he was to follow for the rest of his life, of republishing some of the most

<sup>1</sup> In his letter to the Rhodes Trustees of 6 February 1929.

<sup>2</sup> A. L. Cooper, 'Recollections of Namier', *Oxford Magazine*, 3 November 1960.



important of his reviews and articles in book form, grouping them to illustrate his thought on various topics. In 1931 he published the first of these under the title of *Skyscrapers and other Essays*; in 1939 a far more important selection appeared entitled *In the Margin of History*.

He had planned to take 1938-9 as a sabbatical year to prepare his Ford Lectures for publication; but by that time it was clear that he would be otherwise engaged. In the spring of 1939 he was principal adviser to Dr. Weizmann at the Palestine Conference at St. James's Palace, convoked by the British Government for discussions with the Jewish and Arab leaders. In 1940 he was given leave of absence by the university at the instance of Dr. Weizmann, the Foreign Office and the Director of Naval Intelligence, being 'lent to the Jewish Agency and to the government departments concerned therewith'.<sup>1</sup> He remained on leave of absence until January 1945.

His war-time duties kept him in London and, though they were often onerous, he found also other engrossing interests. War-time London, as the centre of governments in exile, offered exceptional facilities for contacts with men of many nationalities who had taken an active part in the transactions which led up to and in some cases determined the course of the war. In the intervals of his official duties he concentrated his attention on contemporary diplomatic history and between 1941 and 1945 contributed to the *Political Quarterly* the five masterly analyses of the 'Coloured Books'—the documents on the causes of the war published by the various governments concerned—which he republished in 1948 as the first part of his *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-9*.

On his return to academic life at the beginning of 1945 he continued these studies in contemporary history, his materials being swollen by the revelations of the Nuremberg Tribunal and by the flood of personal reminiscences (mostly self-exculpatory) which came out on the return of peace. In addition to the *Diplomatic Prelude* published in 1948, he produced two other collections of essays, *Europe in Decay, a Study in Disintegration, 1936-40* (1950) and *In the Nazi Era* (1952). These collections differed from those which he had published before the war. The earlier volumes were selections from reviews and articles he had written without any conscious plan for republication; the new volumes were built up of materials deliberately selected

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Vice-Chancellor of Manchester University for this information.

with an eye to republication in book form. These were fertile years, for in addition to what he wrote on contemporary history he published much of his nineteenth-century work during this period. Nor were his eighteenth-century studies neglected, and in 1951 they once more claimed priority when he became concerned in the co-operative project for a biographical history of Parliament, which was to be the over-riding activity of his last years.

Namier had served on the Departmental Committee of 1928 to consider the plans for a History of Parliament worked out by Colonel Josiah (later Lord) Wedgwood. Like other historians he did not agree with much in Wedgwood's methods, but he was greatly attracted by the idea. In an article 'The Biography of Ordinary Men'<sup>1</sup> he sketched out at this time his proposals how such a project should be executed so as to display 'that marvellous microcosmos of English social and political life, that extraordinary club, the House of Commons'. The war and Wedgwood's death followed the publication of the first two volumes, but the trustees for the scheme succeeded in reviving it after the war in a new form. They were successful in obtaining a parliamentary grant, at that time thought to be substantial, and they decided to submit the historical supervision of the work to an editorial board presided over by Sir Frank Stenton who, as one of the trustees, had played the major part in bringing the plans to fruition. Namier was among those invited to join the board, and in 1951 he agreed to become the editor for the period 1754-90. Sir Goronwy Edwards, also a member of the board, writes:

Once having decided to do it, Namier threw himself into the work with great enthusiasm. He did a great deal of travelling in search of unworked manuscript material, and took immense trouble to gain the co-operation of private owners of collections—incidentally doing a great deal to give publicity to the whole scheme of the History of Parliament. He then settled down to the immense task of compiling the two thousand or so biographies pertaining to his period. As he was working at the Institute [of Historical Research] and I was then Director, I know by direct observation how unremittingly he worked at these biographies, especially during the last 3 or 4 years of his life. He used to say that he had never worked so hard, and I can quite believe it—his day at the Institute was often 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Thus, at an age when many scholars begin to reduce their commitments, Namier took on a formidable new one, and though in the subsequent years he often lamented his slavery to

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in *Skyscrapers and Other Essays*, and in *Crossroads of Power* (1962).

the task, he saw the work as the culmination of his studies; and his delight in the intricacies of character and situation which his biographical researches brought to light, was as keen as ever. With the able and indefatigable help of Mr. John Brooke and his staff, and occasional assistance from others, he had by the time of his death nearly finished the purely biographical part of his work. But the supplementary volume intended to sum up the results of these investigations, and in which he hoped to embody his mature views on the eighteenth-century topics he had made his own, was left unwritten.

As a man Namier was a complex personality, powerful and strikingly individual, composed of contradictory strands and tendencies fused by a kind of intellectual and imaginative passion into a whole which bore visible signs of the struggle by which it had been achieved. Whatever his foibles, it has been said, nothing could obscure 'the passion, fortitude and melancholy which gave his personality its stature and interest'.<sup>1</sup> Though fond of society, he never became part of it, and he remained for most of his life an isolated and enigmatic figure around which legends collected. Though a remarkable and copious talker, he gave little away about his private affairs, and the details of his personal history as well as his private preoccupations were known (until the happiness of his second marriage broke down much of his defensive mechanism) only to the few friends of his less guarded youth. Though courageous in the face of adversity, and capable of great generosity to others, he was quick to take offence and easily moved to scorn and dislike, and in his younger days was a formidable controversialist whose blows were sometimes heavier than others thought necessary. A Jew by race, and proud of it, he never adhered to the Jewish religion. An intellectual of strongly academic interests, he preferred the company of men of action and affairs. In politics he called himself a Tory Radical, but his views bore little resemblance to those of others who at one time or another used this description. A naturalized British subject with a deep appreciation of the language and traditions of his adopted country, he yet bore the indelible marks of a childhood and youth spent in eastern Europe—in a world destroyed for ever by revolution and the march of armies—and of a tradition of learning very different from Anglo-Saxon empiricism.

In his latter years the harsher sides of his character noticeably softened. In these years success and recognition showered in on

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Cooper. See p. 377, n. 2.



him. In 1944 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy; in 1948 an Honorary Fellow of Balliol (an honour which gave him especial pleasure). In 1952 he was knighted, and in the same year the University of Oxford invited him to deliver the Romanes Lecture—one of their highest honours. Oxford, Rome, and Durham awarded him the honorary D.Litt. and Cambridge the honorary Litt.D., and in 1960 Mr. Harold Macmillan at the first Encaenia after his election as Chancellor of the University of Oxford, conferred on him an honorary D.C.L. A visit to Israel in 1958, at the invitation of Mrs. Weizmann became, in Sir Isaiah Berlin's words 'an extraordinary pastoral progress across that land' in the course of which he delivered 'the most remarkable series of Zionist valedictory speeches'. More important than any of these honours in smoothing out the asperities of his character was the domestic happiness which came to him with his second marriage in 1947 to a gifted Russian lady, Iulia de Beausobre, who gave him her constant companionship and delicate understanding for the rest of his life.

Namier justified the study of history as one which helps man 'to master the past immanent both in his person and in his social setting'.<sup>1</sup> He saw history as the study of 'human affairs, men in action, things which have happened . . . , concrete events fixed in time and space' but, he added, 'in all intelligent historical quest there is underneath a discreet, tentative search for . . . a morphology of human affairs'. For the historian himself the 'crowning attainment of historical study' is the achievement of the historical sense which he characteristically described as 'an intuitive understanding of how things do not happen (how they did happen is a matter of specific knowledge)'. The principles which underlay his own approach are not difficult to trace. When he began his work on the English background of the American Revolution he thought he could complete the study in about a year; it proved more than a life-work. For he found himself unable to accept the generalizations current among historians who had written on the period. In the first place he was temperamentally unable to accept the liberal historicism of the late nineteenth century; the English version of this faith, the so-called Whig interpretation of history, was antipathetic to him. History, he once said, is 'disorder' though 'intelligible disorder'. In the second place he was convinced that no historian could understand a society until he had

<sup>1</sup> 'History', reprinted in *Avenues of History* (1952).

a full comprehension of its structure—a word he used in the post-Marxist, sociological sense of a complex institutional whole into which the individual is integrated. Such comprehension could be achieved only by breaking down this institutional whole into its component parts, men in their groupings. (This is the approach which some have called ‘structural analysis’ and others have nick-named ‘Namierization’.) And in the third place he believed that the rationalizations which men put out in explanation of their actions, both public and private, are far less revealing than what they do and what they say to each other in the business of day-to-day life; and indeed that their generalizations are likely to be positively misleading to the scholar unless he has first made a detailed study of their activities. ‘One has to steep oneself in the . . . life of a period before one can safely speak, or be sure of understanding, its language.’<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted, however, that it is possible to overestimate the degree to which his own work depended on the study of men in their groupings. It is true he used it extensively and that he laid great stress on its value. He took as his motto for the *Structure of Politics* a quotation from Aeschylus:

I took pains to determine the flight of crook-taloned birds, marking which were of the right by nature, and which of the left, and what were their ways of living, each after his kind, and the enmities and affections that were between them, and how they consorted together.

Many years later he defined the problems of modern historical writing as that of dealing with ‘aggregates otherwise than in vague generalizations; to treat them as entities in which each person retains his individuality’.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he depended only in part on this technique, and a good deal of his best work is the product of the methods of research and evaluation of evidence employed by scholars in all ages. Here his advantage over his predecessors in his field was the prodigious extent and ready availability of his learning put at the service of a powerful historical imagination.

Though the nature of his contribution to historical study was recognized at once, its percolation into the writing of history was slow (particularly perhaps in his own field of studies) but by his death the process was complete. By the same time a reaction against this influence had also begun to show itself, and criticism, silenced at first by the sheer weight of his

<sup>1</sup> *The Structure of Politics*, i. vii.

<sup>2</sup> ‘History’, reprinted in *Avenues of History* (1952).

onslaught on established ideas and methods, began to be voiced. The most serious indictment brought against his method and his own historical writings were that the method 'took the mind out of history' and that in his works preoccupation with the material interests and personal relationships of men blinded him to the power exercised over them by principles and ideas. It is easy to see on what these accusations (raised chiefly in connexion with his eighteenth-century studies) are based; but it is also easy to see that the form of the criticism is misconceived.<sup>1</sup> Namier was certainly contemptuous of anything which called itself a history of ideas—'to some the subject-matter of medicine is disease, and of history ideas, as if these were extraneous things which visit or befall human beings'<sup>2</sup>—he also discounted without much discrimination the attempts of contemporaries to rationalize their actions; the 'party cant' of Burke was from this point of view of no more value than the 'clap trap' of George III—but no one who reads his works right through can fail to realize that he was both acutely aware of the power of ideas in shaping the conduct of men, and that he subscribed to a coherent system of ideas himself.

The difficulty from the point of view of his critics was that his conception of ideas as forces which mould the course of history was very different from theirs. While to them such ideas were the product of man's reason backed by basic beliefs of an ethical and social nature, to him the ideas which have most powerfully influenced mankind were complex forces in which a thin surface-layer of rationalism and morality served to mask formidable fires of primordial irrationalism and even mass hysteria. In this he was, indeed, a true son of his generation, with modern psychology as well as modern experience to provide him with his justification. It is interesting to trace in his writings the development of this viewpoint under the pressure of events. The eruption of such forces in the last days of the Habsburg régime he saw with some measure of exhilaration:

The October days of 1918 will forever remain remarkable as a study in mass psychology and an example of how ideas, talked about yet unthinkable on one day acquire life on the next, whilst other ideas,

<sup>1</sup> Professor J. L. Talmon stressed this point in his article 'The Ordeal of Sir Lewis Namier: the Man, the Historian, the Jew'. *Commentary*, February 1962.

<sup>2</sup> 'Communities' written in 1927. Reprinted in *Skyscrapers and Other Essays*.



which had seemed solid fact, pass out of reality. . . . The masses listened to the march of events, the leaders watched the movements of the inarticulate masses. Elemental forces seemed to work through men and to control them, uncontrolled by them. The solid political foundation of inherited, everyday existence vanished, and in the enormous void, ideas seemed to move, free from hindrance, obeying their own laws.<sup>1</sup>

The exhilaration is already tinged with uneasiness, but in 1927 he could still preserve some detachment. 'History when viewed in terms of pure ideas becomes a record of human folly. But men are seldom so absurd as words make them appear; seldom, if ever, do they fight and die, or even kill, for a mere shibboleth.'<sup>2</sup> But by 1948 he felt more intensely; the forces of racial or 'linguistic' nationalism—for him the ruling idea of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe, and once thought 'a great and noble force which was to have regenerated Europe'—had shown themselves to be appalling obsessions born of emptiness and the unease of uprooted masses, the vehicle as well as the source of passions destructive to the peace of nations and the freedom of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Yet he admitted the existence of ideas less destructive and compulsive, the product and cause not of violence and disharmony, but of order and security. 'A man, to attain full moral stature and intellectual poise, to enjoy life and be socially creative has to be at ease',<sup>4</sup> and to be at ease he must have his recognized place in an ordered society. It was one of the attractions which drew him to the study of mid-eighteenth-century England that in it these violent and destructive forces were at least temporarily stilled, and that room was left for the operation of ideas based on order and harmony. The ideas underlying the eighteenth-century concept of 'independency' with its overtones of personal freedom in social security (a concept which assumed increasing significance for him in the studies of his last years) were, as he saw them, those to which he himself subscribed.

Liberty [he wrote], is the fruit of slow growth in a stable society; is based on respect for the rights of the individual, deeply embedded in the life and habits of the community; is in its origin an aristocratic idea; of the self-conscious individual, certain of himself and his position, and therefore perfectly at ease.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy' in the *History of the Peace Conference of Paris* reprinted in *Vanished Supremacies*. <sup>2</sup> See p. 383, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> 'Nationality and Liberty', 1948, reprinted in *Avenues of History* (1952).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Jews', 1941, reprinted in *Conflicts, Studies in Contemporary History* (1942).

<sup>5</sup> 'Nationality and Liberty', 1948, reprinted in *Avenues of History* (1952).

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