



FRANCIS CARSTEN

## Francis Ludwig Carsten 1911–1998

DURING HIS LONG and productive life as an academic teacher and widely-read scholar Professor Francis Carsten occupied quite a unique position in his profession. He was, in the half century between the end of the Second World War and his death on 23 June 1998, probably the most important and most understanding as well as the most suitable mediator in establishing closer contacts between British and German historians after a political disaster of appalling dimensions. More than any other scholar in his generation of ‘refugee historians’ or ‘continental Britons’ Carsten resolutely concentrated his research, writing and teaching on the history of Prussia and Central Europe, mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thus inspiring over the years an influential and continually growing number of younger British historians with a strong interest in the history of Germany.

Likewise, discreetly and tactfully, but with the same determination as in his scholarly work, he spared no effort to forge relations between historians in Britain and Germany which, in the years preceding 1939, had never been particularly close and had to start from scratch after the twin catastrophes of the Nazi dictatorship and Hitler’s military aggressions. They had made him suffer personally and had a profound effect on his development as a scholar. He had to flee Nazi Germany in 1936 and pursue a career in a country he had not visited before his rather unplanned short stay in that year. It became his permanent home shortly before the outbreak of war in 1939. In later life Carsten never spoke of the various difficulties he had encountered during those dangerous and unsettling

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years. Instead, he never tired of expressing his admiration for and loyalty to a country that had offered him generous hospitality in times of oppression and the chance of becoming a respected scholar in his chosen field. In spite of personal persecution and emigration he had turned into one of those broad-minded emigrants who helped, with his modest means, to bring back a democratic Germany into the fold of civilised nations and its scholars back into the international community of learning. In his house in Hampstead, filled to the brim with books and paintings, he and his wife Ruth, *née* Moses, played host to countless German academics and brought them into contact with their British colleagues. For many decades the Carstens provided the entrée and the welcoming intellectual atmosphere for two generations of German historians whose work or research interests had directed them to London. Francis' and Ruth's role as go-betweens vis-à-vis two scholarly cultures and two former enemy nations, basically people of very different backgrounds and equally different experiences, is fondly remembered by all who were privileged to enjoy their friendship, and lives on in their memories.

## I

Francis (Franz) Ludwig Carsten was born in Berlin on 25 June 1911, the second son of the ophthalmic surgeon Paul Carsten and his wife Frida, *née* Born, in a prosperous Jewish upper middle-class family. Frida Born came from a wealthy banker's family of Austrian origin which allowed her widowed mother Jennie to live in grand style in a villa in the rather posh *Tiergartenstraße* with servants and stables. In her spacious house and garden her three grandchildren spent much time. Paul Carsten's parents ran a business. They owned a clothing-house in the centre of Berlin, called 'Die Goldene 110', in the busy *Leipzigerstraße*, which is mentioned in Theodor Fontane's novel *Die Poggenpuhls*.

Carsten's father was a well-known specialist with a small private clinic in the bourgeois *Tiergarten* area. As was almost common among Berlin's secularised Jewry, Judaism was not prominent in Carsten's education which was essentially left in the hands of a governess. In later life he spoke of his parents as 'rather remote' and the children seeing them mainly at meal-times. They were, in short, archetypical Wilhelmine conservatives with strong monarchical convictions. Like their gentile neighbours, they put the flags out to celebrate Sedan Day, imperial Germany's national holiday, and the German victories in the First World War. In the harsh

war years his father, Carsten later remembered with hardly concealed amusement, very often appeared in uniform with a spiked helmet and sabre to demonstrate his patriotism and support for 'the cause'. Even after the demise of the Hohenzollern monarchy his mother who was related to Berlin's 'Jewish aristocracy' would still refer to 'our Empress'. For young Franz Ludwig, as he later recalled, all this represented 'a stifling bourgeois atmosphere'<sup>1</sup> which he tried to escape while he was still a pupil at the *Mommsen Gymnasium* round the corner from his father's clinic.

Of his schooldays in Berlin Carsten had no happy memories. He remembered the *Gymnasium* in these early years of the Weimar Republic as 'cold, Prussian and strictly disciplinarian', with many unpleasant teachers. 'Some of the teachers had been officers and would talk about their war experiences at the front and make anti-French and anti-Polish speeches, in particular at the time of the fighting in Upper Silesia in the early 1920s. The Treaty of Versailles was contemptuously pronounced "Versalj". My form master was a choleric petty tyrant and everybody was afraid of him. The teaching of Latin and Greek was excellent but I hated the whole atmosphere and did the minimum of work.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, Carsten like almost all his contemporaries grew up in a country that had suddenly adopted democracy but whose elites in their majority still stuck to antiquated political ideals and tolerated the educational system of a bygone age.

Carsten's activities in those formative years were very much focused on the Socialist Pupils' League which he had joined at the age of fifteen, much to the understandable consternation of his parents and teachers. Sympathies for the Left, at first for the Communists and soon for the Social Democrats and the labour movement, were to accompany him all his life and made him again and again toy with the idea of becoming a politician. Whenever Carsten referred to the ambitious aspirations of his youth and early adulthood his friends and colleagues found it hard to imagine that this most scholarly and private man would have found pleasure in crude political rhetoric or delivering political speeches, or that agitated crowds would have bothered to listen to him. His forte was certainly not the charisma of a public orator or the opportunism of a shrewd parliamentarian. Was he only joking or simply testing their reactions to a

<sup>1</sup> Francis L. Carsten, 'From Berlin to London', *Year-Book of the Leo Baeck Institute*, 43 (1998), 341.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 340-1.

prospect which his friends and colleagues perceived as being rather far-fetched? However, as one of his early students has observed, Carsten ‘rightly regarded himself as a refugee from Nazi Germany foremost on the grounds of his political activity, not his Jewish origins.’<sup>3</sup>

Despite his open sympathies for the political Left and his work as the co-editor of a short-lived magazine called *Der Schulkampf* which exposed the reactionary and nationalistic bias of his teachers, Carsten earned his *Abitur* in 1929. By then he had joined the *Kommunistischer Jugendverband Deutschlands* and, in his own words, ‘without much knowledge of Marxist theory or of the reality of Soviet Russia’ became an ‘enthusiastic young Communist’.<sup>4</sup> Although history had been his favourite subject at school and his maternal grandfather’s library his treasure-trove for historical literature Carsten decided to read law and economics, in his first semester in Geneva, then in Berlin and, during 1930–1, in Heidelberg. There he met Richard Löwenthal who had been expelled from the Communist Party for, as the jargon went in those days, ‘right wing deviationism’. Under Löwenthal’s forceful influence Carsten slowly became more critical of Communist policies and propaganda and increasingly interested in the history of the German labour movement. Löwenthal, who also emigrated to England in the 1930s and then played a highly influential role in the ideological re-shaping of the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) after the war, was to become a life-long friend and mentor.

After his return to Berlin from Heidelberg, however, Carsten’s political activities still mainly centred in Communist youth organisations. Clashes with the much more numerous Nazi students were frequent and Carsten liked to point proudly to the visible scars of a head wound he had received in one of these heroic street battles. He noticed then, and always remembered in years to come, that anti-Semitism was not a preserve of the political Right. On the contrary, the Communist attitude towards Jewish groups and organisations was decidedly hostile, whether these were pro-German or Zionist. Both varieties of Jewish political awareness were equally considered enemies. This experience contributed to Carsten’s disillusionment with the official Party-line. Consequently, he read the pamphlets in which Leon Trotsky attacked the Party and blamed it for not working for an urgently needed united front with the Social Democrats against the Nazis. These years witnessed their rapid growth as a mass

<sup>3</sup> Henry J. Cohn, ‘F. L. Carsten, 1911–1998’, *German History. The Journal of the German History Society*, 17 (1999), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Carsten, ‘From Berlin to London’, 341.

movement which the split Socialist movement was so obviously unable to oppose effectively. For Carsten the bitter ideological conflicts of the time sharpened his understanding of politics and induced him to acquire a substantial collection of books and pamphlets which were published by the labour movement and the Socialist parties in their fight against Capitalism, Nazism, and each other. This truly unique collection, covering the years 1894 to 1947, has survived all the upheavals and U-turns of his life and represents a historical source of great importance. In his will, Carsten donated it to the German Historical Institute in London where it is now easily accessible for researchers.

Through Löwenthal, early in 1932, Carsten was persuaded to join a newly-formed secret organisation whose aim it was to reunite the feuding working-class parties. The so-called 'Org' whose impact, with hindsight, Carsten was prone to overestimate, was strictly conspiratorial; the members and leaders used cover names. The 'Org' formed study groups concentrating on ideological and historical issues. So when Hitler came to power in January 1933 Carsten 'ran a large group in a red working-class district of Berlin on Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*—a topic far removed from the German reality. At the same time I was forbidden, under Party orders, to make any preparation for the Party to go underground; its normal activities were to continue as if nothing had happened. The illusion would not last many weeks.<sup>5</sup> At this point his involvement in politics did not stop Carsten from pursuing his legal studies and, in May 1933, he passed the first state examination with satisfactory results. But Hitler was now consolidating his iron grip on Germany and this was the end of Carsten's legal career as 'non-Aryans' were not allowed to continue. So, in his remaining years in Berlin Carsten worked briefly in a bank, then opened a bookshop on the *Kurfürstendamm* which, after a few weeks, was closed down by the Gestapo for some arbitrary reasons. He was eventually arrested for a couple of days in 1934 because of his political activities in his student days. Meanwhile, the 'Org' had turned into a small underground group, acquiring the name 'Neu Beginnen' from the title of a pamphlet published in Czechoslovakia by its founder Walter Löwenheim. Carsten, known in the organisation under the code name 'Herbert' or 'Zeiss', recruited members, in particular from the former Socialist Youth, tried to raise funds and to find flats suitable for clandestine meetings, collected reports on local conditions, and established contacts with other underground groups.

<sup>5</sup> Carsten, 'From Berlin to London', 343.

## II

However, the days of the 'Org' and with it Carsten's days in Berlin were numbered. Friends advised him, after a tip-off that the Gestapo was after him, to leave the country. This he duly did in 1936 via Basle and Paris to London. Carsten was now a political refugee with hardly any means of support, let alone a job. In conversations with the sociologist Norbert Elias Carsten chose, for the time being, to leave politics and practising law, and take on the study of history instead. 'A plan emerged that I should develop my interest in history and work on early Prussian history. I aimed to discover the factors which had caused the peculiar development of Prussia, especially of its nobility, the Junkers, and the secret of the latter's long-lasting power.'<sup>6</sup> Thus the momentous decision could hardly be interpreted as a sign of despair and succumbing to the inevitable. In exile, too, Carsten kept contacts with friends in the Socialist movement and even had the dubious opportunity of meeting the post-war East German Communist leader Walter Ulbricht. According to Carsten the brief meeting did not go very well.

Early in 1936 Carsten moved to Amsterdam and spent three years there, in close contact with the newly founded International Institute of Social History and some supportive Dutch historians. Carsten could now work fairly undisturbed and was able to publish a number of articles from his field of research in Dutch learned journals. He was also able to assemble the source material which was soon to form the basis of his Oxford thesis, for the worsening political situation forced Carsten to move on. In April 1939 he returned to England with the intention of trying to obtain a scholarship. Recommendations from his Dutch friends proved helpful, and so was Patrick Gordon Walker of Christ Church, Oxford, whom Carsten had met years before in Berlin. In the autumn of 1939 Carsten was in fact fortunate to go up to Oxford with a research scholarship at Wadham College where he was welcomed by the Warden, Maurice Bowra, and received much encouragement from the Regius Professor of Modern History, Maurice Powicke. Soon joining the local Labour Club the 28-year-old refugee from Berlin became friendly with some contemporary and future luminaries of the British labour movement such as G. D. H. Cole, Anthony Crosland, and Roy Jenkins.

The outbreak of war inevitably affected Carsten's life. As an 'enemy alien' he had to appear before a tribunal in March 1940 and was classified

<sup>6</sup> Carsten, 'From Berlin to London', 345.

A, on a scale from A ('proven anti-Nazi') to D ('pro-Nazi'). However, this did not make him immune to police action. 'In the summer vacation [of 1940]', Carsten recalled, 'I wanted to work for the war effort and volunteered for the Oxford University forestry camp in the Forest of Dean. But as soon as I got there I was arrested by the Newport police—they were pleased to have found a German spy—and interned with many thousands of refugees, following Churchill's dictum "Collar the lot!"'<sup>7</sup> Carsten was first interned at Warth Mill near Manchester and later, as almost all the 'enemy aliens', on the Isle of Man. But Carsten was lucky. After only three months of internment he was released and voluntarily joined the Army Pioneer Corps at Ilfracombe in Devon. Again, this proved to be a short spell. In the winter of 1940/1 Carsten caught severe pneumonia, was pronounced unfit for military service and discharged with a small weekly pension of ten shillings.

The remaining years of the war which Carsten spent in Oxford and Bedfordshire were notable in three respects. First, he finished his Ph.D. thesis on 'The Development of the Manorial System—*Grundherrschaft* and *Gutsherrschaft* in Northeastern Germany until the Seventeenth Century' early in 1942. Secondly, Carsten met his future wife Ruth 'on a rainy day in Cornmarket', as he liked to say, though not giving further details about the circumstances. They married in 1945. And, thirdly, he found a job with the Political Warfare Executive, housed at Woburn Abbey and the surrounding villages, in late 1942. Carsten's task there was to prepare a handbook on Germany to be used by the occupation army after the war had ended. The handbook contained chapters on German administration, local government, education, social services—and a chapter on German history to be written by A. J. P. Taylor. However, Carsten drily liked to reminisce, it 'was so anti-German that it was rejected at my suggestion'.<sup>8</sup>

### III

The end of war found Carsten in London. He had time to work in the library of the British Museum and lectured in prisoner-of-war camps in various parts of England, especially at Wilton Park near London, and to British officers who were being trained for administrative duties in

<sup>7</sup> Carsten, 'From Berlin to London', 346.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.



Germany. Carsten had now set his sights on a life as an academic, and after several fruitless attempts he finally succeeded and was appointed, in 1947, to a lectureship in modern history at Westfield College, University of London. After years of wandering about and existential insecurity Carsten, who had become a British citizen in 1946, could at last settle down, concentrate on his academic interests as well as his growing family and enjoy a more tranquil life.

In his fourteen years at Westfield College as lecturer and reader Carsten reintroduced practically single-handedly German and, to a lesser extent, Austrian history as an academic subject in England. At first, though he continued his work on Prussian history, he published a number of articles in the *English Historical Review* and his first book, *The Origins of Prussia* (1954). The book was well received in Britain, but in Germany there was criticism from some conservative historians who disliked Carsten's stress on social and economic factors. A German translation of the book had to wait until 1968. In the meantime Carsten had gradually broadened his interests. In his *Princes and Parliaments in Germany: From the 15th to the 18th Century* (1959) he pointed out that in many parts of Germany the Estates and Diets survived the period of princely absolutism and sometimes even played an important part in the history of the principalities as, for example, in Wurttemberg, Bavaria or Saxony. The twentieth century, too, now came into his view, partly, as Carsten later wrote, 'because of my old political interests, partly because German documents from the Weimar and Nazi periods had become available for research'.<sup>9</sup> A first result of Carsten's involvement with contemporary history was his *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918–1933* (1966, German edition 1964). Understandably, the book made a much greater impact in Western Germany than in Britain, but the echo was not always friendly, to say the least. Again, there was severe criticism from the conservative camp, from historians and former army officers alike. They disliked Carsten's assessment of the army's political role (and activities) in the Weimar years. But Carsten had the satisfaction that the *Bundeswehr* bought hundreds of copies for its libraries, in spite of all the criticism and bad-tempered objections from men of the past, and that it made him well known in post-war Germany.

Carsten's shift to dealing with relevant subjects of contemporary history also had something to do with his taking over the Masaryk Chair of

<sup>9</sup> Francis L. Carsten, 'From Revolutionary Socialism to German History', in Peter Alter (ed.), *Out of the Third Reich. Refugee Historians in Post-War Britain* (London and New York, 1998), p. 33.

Central European History at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, in 1961. From then onwards Carsten produced, with astonishing regularity, a substantial book almost every four to five years, and after retirement in 1978 even every two to three years. All his publications in these highly productive years are solidly based on archival material. Perhaps for this very reason his books are slightly too factual and descriptive, occasionally lacking a bit of imagination and colourful narrative. Most popular among this string of publications which, as a rule, appeared in English and German, was *The Rise of Fascism* (1967). His aim in the book, which sold particularly well in the United States, was to show the similarities and the differences between the major fascist movements in the various European countries and, at the same time, to explain why certain regimes, such as that of General Franco in Spain, were in his view only related to fascism. In a similar way Carsten's *Fascist Movements in Austria: From Schönerer to Hitler* (1977) showed that the regime of Engelbert Dollfuss and Kurt Schuschnigg, although authoritarian beyond any doubt, was not fascist, but that certain political movements in the defunct Habsburg Empire and post-war Austria had inspired Hitler. Both studies were truly pioneering achievements which, in the following years, led to a whole series of more detailed and comparative investigations of the questions raised in them.

The crucial problem of Central European history in the twentieth century, why democracy had failed there and what had prepared the ground for fascism, was constantly on Carsten's agenda. It was, one might safely say, at the core of his research and prolific writing as an academic and lecturer in his middle and later years. It had profoundly affected his own life and that of his family and many friends. Against this background Carsten wrote *Revolution in Central Europe, 1918–1919* (1972) which explained why the revolutionary movement at the end of the Great War had not led, in Germany and Austria, to a true 'democratisation' of state and society although democratic institutions were adopted in both countries, why the old structures in the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the army were preserved to a large extent, and why the workers' and soldiers' councils had faded away so quickly. Carsten returned to these questions, applied to a slightly earlier time, in *War Against War: British and German Radical Movements in the First World War* (1982). This study was a comparison of anti-war movements in the two countries during the war. Both books, each in a different way, broaden our understanding of the course of German history in the fateful twentieth century. So does *Britain and the Weimar Republic* (1984), based on the mass of reports by British

diplomats in Berlin, now held in the Public Record Office in Kew Gardens. This collection of documents makes it clear how well informed the Foreign Office was about political developments in Germany and how closely it monitored the rise of the Nazis. A complementary publication was Carsten's *The First Austrian Republic, 1918–1938: A Study Based on British and Austrian Documents* (1986). However, Carsten's interest in the history of Prussia lingered on, and proof for this was his *A History of the Prussian Junkers* (1989) which took up the theme of his Oxford Ph.D. thesis and discussed it over a much longer period.

In his late seventies and early eighties Carsten still visited archives and libraries in Britain and Germany although the illness of his wife Ruth increasingly restricted his mobility. 'Pensioners have plenty of time', he used to say laconically when asked how he combined running the household, entertaining guests, and tending the garden with writing reviews, articles and books. In his scholarly work Carsten had, in a way, returned to his roots in the German socialist movement before the war. He published two biographies, one on *August Bebel und die Organisation der Massen* (1991) and another on *Eduard Bernstein, 1850–1932: Eine politische Biographie* (1993). Both works appeared in German only. Carsten's last book *The German Workers and the Nazis* (1995), published when he was 84 years of age, is based on the voluminous published sources, mixed with his memoirs of underground work against the Nazis and the history of 'Neu Beginnen'. It was a book, as Carsten freely admitted, 'which is strongly influenced by my own observations'.<sup>10</sup>

Francis Carsten was certainly the last person to deny the fact that his upbringing and early political experiences in Berlin before the Second World War had an enormous and lasting influence on his life and his work as an academic. But he would have determinedly rejected the label 'emigrant' for himself when it implied something like 'suffering in exile' or feeling like a foreigner in the adopted country. Carsten felt completely at home in England. 'I was always much attracted by academic life in England, with its relaxed and friendly atmosphere,' he wrote in an autobiographical essay<sup>11</sup> a few years before his death. He very much appreciated the honour of being elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1971. On the other hand, Carsten bore no grudge against his country of origin. He welcomed the birth of a democratic Germany after 1945 and took a close interest in its political affairs. He enjoyed contacts with German

<sup>10</sup> Carsten, 'From Revolutionary Socialism to German History', p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

historians, provided they were not of the conservative, nationalistic and narrow-minded ilk. He was an unfailing supporter of the German Historical Institute in London which opened, very much due to his energetic lobbying, in 1976. Besides his valuable collection of pamphlets Carsten donated his whole library of more than 5000 volumes to the Institute where, particularly in his later years, he liked to work and listen to lectures.

To a younger generation of German historians who had the good fortune to meet him Carsten appeared as the epitome of an anglicised Prussian or, rather, as a Prussian Londoner (if that is, after all, imaginable). For them and many of his friends and colleagues all over the world Carsten incorporated, in a very touching way, something that is, to all intents and purposes, extinct in modern Germany: A 'Kantian' Prussian with a love of scholarship, literature, the arts and good conversation, with a barely concealed antipathy for militaristic and nationalist thinking, a hard-working man with an overwhelming sense of duty, modest and frugal in his personal life-style. Carsten, always politically alert, was a scholar who, in spite of all that he had witnessed in his life, had not lost his faith in a better world where reason, tolerance and humanity would reign. He was unwavering in trying to make his own small contribution to the realisation of this utopia.

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*Note.* A list of Francis Carsten's books and articles up to 1980 can be found in Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (eds.), *Germany in the Age of Total War* (1981), pp. 258–60.



