

BOOK REVIEW
The Last European War
by John Lukacs / Anchor Press-Doubleday / \$15

Charles R. Kesler

In 1939 the Germans smashed into Poland, to the outrage of every civilized European, and the next year wheeled and slashed their way through Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France, to the horror of every civilized European. Right? Wrong; and it is to John Lukacs, learned historian and philosopher of history, that we owe the honor of having liberated us from this stale good guys-bad guys interpretation of the opening moves of what we loosely term the Second World War.

His opus, *The Last European War*, is a work of conscious revisionism which, unlike the concoctions of Gar Alperowitz and his crowd, proceeds rather by the reconsideration than by the inversion of the old explanations. But this is revisionism with a difference; this is revisionism from the Right. At last, in a volume rich in scholarship and acute in perception, we have a fresh perspective on those world-shaking events. Admittedly, Lukacs' canvas is capacious: "The scope of this book is the history of an entire continent during two years of an enormous convulsion," he states in the opening sentence. His theme is the decline of the old Europe, the eclipse of the continent long foreseen by Tocqueville and others. The entry of the United States into the war and the Soviet victory at the gates of Moscow in December 1941 are the points Lukacs chooses to signal this eclipse. "The Last European War began in September 1939," he writes. "It became the Second World War in December 1941....The peoples of Europe may yet experience revolutions and civil wars; they may be conquered from the outside; they may be set against each other. But a war in which one nation sets out to dominate Europe, with the result of an all-European war—that is very unlikely to happen."

Nowadays such grand hegemonial designs, like some senescent uncle, grow old in the seclusion of a backroom, emerging to public view but rarely and shakily. At this year's Olympics they appeared in perhaps their most attenuated form to date—in the half-joking recognition that if East and West Germany were fused into a single country, that nation would have surpassed both the Soviet Union and the United States in total medals won. In the years from the Franco-Prussian War to the Last European War, however, the Germans were taken with considerably more seriousness. They were the last of the European powers to seek continental heg-

emony, and for three-quarters of a century their political, economic, and cultural ascendancy dominated mankind's history. The first two were important: Germany was the greatest industrial power in Europe, with a large, youthful, and growing population, and a seething will to power. But it's the last, the cultural predominance of Germany, which particularly concerns Lukacs, and which certainly has been the most neglected by scholars.

"The Germans had the potential to rejuvenate old Europe, to extend the European age, and the primacy of Europe, in the world for centuries to come," Lukacs insists. They blew it, of course, but the point is to recognize that they had the opportunity. Millions of ordinary and reasonable Europeans who were disgusted by the egoism and materialism of bourgeois society and the fecklessness of liberal democracy—what do *you* think of the Third Republic?—looked to Germany and national socialism as the architects of a new order in Europe. Up to now talk of a New Order has been passed off as so much Nazi propaganda. But Lukacs shows that this wasn't simply some of Goebbels' handiwork, that revulsion at existing society was widespread, and that national socialism was watered by such revulsion. It is, after all, not difficult to despise a society in which a French deputy, the mayor of Suresnes, after the first German bombing of Paris on June 3, 1940, and while his country collapsed around him, ran about the lobbies, screaming: "I will interpellate the government on this outrage as soon as the Chamber meets."

Lukacs points to the Third Republic as an object lesson in the failures of liberal, bourgeois society. He is, however, strangely silent about the other notorious example of liberalism's failure—the Weimar Republic. Here was a government based on the best models the West had produced. Its constitution provided for a popularly elected seven-year presidency; a bicameral legislature of which one chamber, the *Reichstag*, by virtue of a meticulous system of proportional representation, would be one of the most democratic in existence; a Supreme Court; and a secret, universal, direct suffrage for all citizens (including women) over 20 years old. For such enlightened origins, no regime ever proved a more dismal failure. The polity sagged under the weight of a multiplicity of parties, and the republic suffered from government Italian-style, as we might now think of it, running through 21 in 15 years. Democracy became a charade. Samuel Beer has well expressed this in his thoughtful little book *Modern*

Political Development: "Democracy is a remarkably empty doctrine. It legitimizes what the people will, but it does nothing to give their will object and content....Democratic doctrine holds up neither a vision for a people to pursue, nor an ideal by which an individual can mould his life....People do ask for a purpose in life, seeking to find something greater than themselves with which to identify—a cause, a movement, a historical or moral reality. In this quest, [democracy] is at best neutral."

Many Europeans were looking for such a cause in the thirties. Marxism was not it, for as Lukacs explains, with obvious relish, by that time Marxism was already widely regarded as...old, faulty, silly; but above all, old. Instead, the dissatisfied turned to national socialism.

It was a protean movement—there were many varieties of national socialism—and it was definitely not synonymous with Fascism. Lukacs is very good at drawing these significant but generally overlooked differences. He distinguishes, for instance, between Fascism and German National Socialism—the former a Latin, early twentieth-century movement, younger and less ideological and anti-Semitic than German Nazism, which was however influenced by Italian Fascism. Both movements were anti-liberal, anti-capitalist, and anti-Communist, but their aspirations and style were different. "The Fascist ideal was a neo-Renaissance one, not altogether incompatible with Catholic Christianity; the Hitlerian dynamic was reminiscent of the anti-Renaissance fury of Luther, with a powerful populist appeal, and anti-Catholic," he writes.

Why was national socialism so attractive? It was, in the first place, an offspring of nationalism, which Lukacs identifies as the primary force in modern politics. Nationalism swept everything before it—class, party, even ideology. It penetrated into socialism, producing the synthesis of national socialism, and demolishing the unreal international socialism of Marx. Workingmen of the world, unite? Bah. The world's workingmen distrusted each other, and by 1939 butchered each other, as ardently as ever. National socialism formed, in fact, what Lukacs calls the "principle political configuration of a century." Mao, Tito, Nasser, and many Western democrats—all their regimes could be described as different mixtures of nationalism with socialism.

Second, and more important, national socialism presented a clear alternative to liberalism and capitalism. In this regard Lukacs doesn't say enough, perhaps because much of the ground is so trodden.

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Nevertheless his failure to elaborate on national socialism as an ideology (if that is the right word for so confused a subject), and his uncertain understanding of just what role ideology plays in politics, form the central shortcoming in what is otherwise a magnificent volume. He too readily dismisses the *Blut und Bosen* aspect of the movement, its appeal to heroism and self-sacrifice rather than well-being and progress, its longing for community and nature, for *Bindung* and *Ganzheit*. The dark Nietzschean undertones of German National Socialism are similarly neglected. Little is said, for instance, of that element in the movement characterized by Goebbels' description of reason, in his unsuccessful novel *Michael*, as a "pus-ridden sore on the brain."

What Lukacs is splendid at, however, is that part of the explanation of national socialism's allure which is neatly summed up in his guiding maxim, "Men will adjust their ideas to circumstances with far more ease than they will adjust circumstances to their ideas." Which is to say that national socialism, particularly German Nazism, shone by the reflected light of the Germans' brilliant military and political victories. Stunned surprise gave way to admiration as millions watched the remilitarization of the Rhineland, *Anschluss* and the absorption of Czechoslovakia, the blitzkriegs through Poland, the Low Countries, and France. To the already widespread admiration of German arts and letters and science was added wonder at their military prowess, daring, and, well, success. In conjunction with this surge of Germanophilia came a renewed sense of disgust at the losers' own societies. Lukacs records the moving allocution of a French archbishop in 1940, as he lamented the fate of France...

for having expelled God from the schools of the nation, for having supported a sickening literature...for the depressing promiscuity in homes, offices, and factories Lord, we ask your forgiveness....What have we done with the victory of 1914? What would we have done with a victory in 1940?

Again, however, distinctions. Not every Germanophile was a national socialist, in fact comparatively few were, and not every national socialist was a Germanophile, though most were.

The other half of this story was the sea change in opinion that began in late 1941, when the continent realized that perhaps a German victory was not inevitable. Again, most found ideas more pliable than circumstances, and identification with a New Order began to recede.

What we are talking about was really a new dimension in international relations: the relations not of states but of nations. Instead of an elite corps of diplomats, whole nations were involved, exchanging

not communiques but images of one another. What did the Germans think of the Italians? the Danes of the Germans? the Croats of the British? The image one nation had of another assumed unprecedented importance, due chiefly to democratization and universal education.

Of particular interest to conservatives is the effect these international affinities had on the European Right. What happened was really a split in the Right between those perfervid anti-Communists who preferred German domination to cooperation with the Soviets, and those, like Churchill, who would make a pact with the Devil to defeat the Germans. As Lukacs remarks, the patriotism of the former was ideological, while the latter's was traditional. This split in the Right threw political terminology into a confusion from which it has never quite recovered. Was someone a "nationalist" who hoped for the victory of the Germans, even at his own nation's expense? Or a "conservative," who hoped for revolutionary changes in his society? The categories of Right and Left

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no longer described European politics, for the principal political struggle had ceased to be between Right and Left. The political battles before 1941, on the contrary, were fought between two Rights. This single insight does much to make the jumbled politics of those years intelligible. No one else has so persuasively described the dwarfing of the Left in the thirties.

The Last European War is a big book (562 pages), divided into two parts—the first a fresh, concise, and illuminating account of the diplomatic and military course

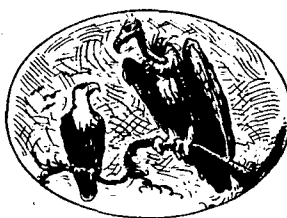
of the conflict from September 1939 to December 1941, and the other a much longer inquiry into “certain matters about the lives of five hundred million people of a continent during the war: how they lived, and what they thought....” In this section Lukacs’ marvelous analytical powers play over a variety of disciplines and subjects. Do you want to know what happened to religious belief during the war? how coffee consumption changed? how people fared in the neutral countries? All that is there, and more. His discussion of the Jews and

their tragedy is especially fine, pointing up the invincible air of moral superiority that Communism acquired as a result of the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jews, a superiority that today bolsters leftist dictatorships (at the expense of rightist regimes) all over the world. The footnotes, which fill the bottom of virtually every page, are important and lively, and should be read. In short, for anyone who wishes to have a deeper understanding of the twentieth century, this book is indispensable. □

THE NATION'S PULSE

by

Peter J. Rusthoven



Remembering Reagan

On August 18, 1976, at the Republican National Convention in Kansas City, Governor Arch Moore of West Virginia announced that the delegates from his state cast 20 of their 28 votes for the Presidential nomination of Gerald R. Ford. At that moment, the nation's 38th President secured the endorsement of his party to be its standard bearer against Democrat Jimmy Carter in the Republic's 48th Presidential election; and at that moment, the nine-month campaign of former California Governor Ronald Reagan—the most serious challenge to a sitting Chief Executive from within his own party since James G. Blaine denied the nomination to Chester Alan Arthur in 1884—came to an end.

Governor Reagan's campaign for the Republican nomination has to date been far the most intriguing feature of this year's battle for the Oval Office, and will no doubt prove a focus for political study and discussion for some time to come. Purely as a political story, it was a fascinating tale, and the most suspenseful in many years. Not since Robert A. Taft and Dwight D. Eisenhower fought it out over delegate seating credentials in 1952 has a convention begun without one candidate having enough firmly committed delegates to ensure a first-ballot nomination. Not in recent memory has the unsuccessful

challenger been so close to winning as was Reagan—out of a total of 2,259 delegates, he fell only 60 votes, or less than 3%, short of victory. Never in history has a candidate announced his running mate *before* the convention, as Governor Reagan did in selecting Senator Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania as his Vice-Presidential choice. And although all Presidential campaigns yield reams of journalistic coverage, few can match the Reagan candidacy in terms of the amount or intensity of media commentary it generated.

Most of that commentary focused, of course, on the actual race for the nomination and its political implications. The closeness of the final outcome led many to speculate that only slightly greater effort in the industrial Northeast might have pushed Reagan over the top. The defeated candidate himself wondered out loud whether a few more days in Ohio—which went 91-6 for Ford at the convention after a primary in which Reagan, with almost no campaigning, polled well over 40% of the vote—might have made the difference. The Schweiker move also sparked endless discussion, most of it concluding that Reagan had taken a daring but nonetheless “cynical” and ultimately foolhardy gamble; “betraying” his conservative constituency in a desperate attempt to salvage personal ambition. And of course, pundits

devoted a great deal of their time and attention to attempted analysis of the final impact of Reagan's candidacy, focusing on whether and how greatly the Republicans were “split,” whether and how far Reagan had “pushed” Ford to the Right, and on whether and how much the party itself, already a minority, had been “captured” by its own more conservative elements.

Now I am not opposed to discussion of this sort, and indeed find it rather interesting, as I suspect most politically interested and involved citizens do. To be sure, I find myself in disagreement with much of the consensus of opinion as outlined above. I do not believe that the Republican Party, to which I happen to belong, has been “captured” by a narrow band of extremists. Moreover, to my ears, talk of “cynicism” and “betrayal” in Reagan's choice of running mate sounds rather off-key, coming as it does mainly from those who normally extol the virtues of balanced tickets, and who are forever urging supposedly “narrow-based” and “unelectable” conservatives to broaden their appeal by seeking liberal alliances. On a more practical ground, it is plausible to suggest that while Reagan did not win, his selection of Schweiker shook up the already close delegate counts enough to keep his hopes alive going into the convention. But by and large, I enjoy the type of commentary and discussion engendered

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