

and did not refer to the Kirov murder in his memoirs. Since then Roy Medvedev has declared Stalin's guilt "almost proved" and Fyodor Burlatsky, writing in a collective volume entitled *Proryv* (1988), declared outright that Kirov was removed by Stalin. (The English translation, *Breakthrough*, published in New York by Walker, has merely that Kirov and others "were executed" without saying by whom.)

Reviewing Ulam's novel in *The New Republic* (July 18, 1988), Walter Laqueur writes that the search for a motive for the killing by Stalin is "not likely to lead to any conclusive truth," since Stalin later killed many of his allies and supporters. I do not find this logic compelling. Stalin thought he faced a possibly imminent danger of being replaced by Kirov and wanted him out of the way — on that there can be no doubt. That he thereupon sought to arrange the murder of his possible rival and succeeded in so doing seems almost as certain. Perhaps the Soviets will offer us certainty in the months and years to come. In the meantime, *Conquest* has given us all of the story at present available, and he has done so objectively, fairly, and carefully.

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## Wild About Budapest

by Paul T. Hornak

Budapest 1900

by John Lukacs

New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson;  
225 pp., \$20.95

◆  
Come down the Danube through a "painters' paradise" of low hills, past a "bosky island," around a bend where suddenly the spires and parapets and bustling quays spread before you "in a pearly, blue-gray light." Glimpse the Royal Castle, its cupola "studded with stony warts, a suggestion of an old Magyar warrior's semibarbaric helmet." Debark at the promenade, check your bags at the Hungaria, and take the

subway ("an inimitable smell of varnished wood and of the ozone of direct-current electricity") out Andrassy Avenue — an East European Champs-Elysées — to the park and the zoo. Or rub elbows with *artistes* at the Japan coffeehouse. In the Inner City breathe the "fresh cool paper-smell and warm burnt coffee-smell, occasionally enriched by a whiff of lilac water." Or swim at St. Luke's Baths, "the salty smells of steam and cabin-wood mixing with the pleasantly bitter odor of freshly tapped beer." If it is winter, try the Skating Club, where the clubhouse is "warm as an oven . . . reeking of oiled leather, coal-smoke and . . . melted ice." Chances are it's winter, for "winters came earlier than they come now. They were colder and snowier." But then, you are in "a city of distinct anticipation and of distinct seasons, more distinct than now." This is turn-of-the-century Budapest, and your guide is John Lukacs.

It was R.G. Collingwood who speculated that a historian could reexperience Caesar's thoughts by careful scholarly concentration; is Lukacs, by concentrated description, replaying the pleasures of a vanished time? "*Budapest 1900* was not inspired by nostalgia," he curtly states. And later: "We must watch for the symptoms of an uncritical and, therefore, unhistorical nostalgia."

Then the book is, perhaps, about the city's phenomenal transformation after the 1867 compromise with Vienna. In the empire revived under the name Austria-Hungary, Hungary got the long leash it fought for in Kossuth's revolution of 1848, and Budapest went from sleepy cow town to thriving metropolis in 30 years. By 1900, 733,000 people lived in the place, the very name of which impressed a contemporary correspondent as "big with the future." Uprooted by land reform, peasants poured in from the countryside, while their former feudal lords struggled to pay taxes for the first time in the country's history. Business boomed. The middle classes burgeoned, and with them came democracy. Hungary's Parliament building was the world's largest.

But it was populated by loudmouths, scoundrels, and plain ignoramus: by 1901 the Catholic People's Party proposed a stiff tax on stock

transactions. A respected literatus proclaimed: "Free competition is a fraud." Anti-Semitic and pro-"Christian" sentiments sprang up in tandem with a redneck nationalism; intellectuals looked not to laid-back Vienna of the doddering Habsburgs, but to Germany. Yet "this is not a political history of Budapest, let alone of Hungary," warns our author.

Just what is it? Well, a sometimes pleasing, sometimes exasperating cross between a coffee-table book and a chamber of commerce commemorative. Only don't expect Lukacs to say so. "The theme of this book is not the history of a city but its historical portrait at a certain time, a portrait of its atmosphere, of its peoples, of their achievements and troubles." But a city cannot sit still for the historian as it could for Monet. One cannot capture "achievements and troubles" with oils and brushes. History is drama — likely as not, tragedy — enacted in time. The focus of a particular year, 1900, immediately becomes blurred as Lukacs, despite self-imposed limitations, plunges into the "history of a city" with a capsule history of Hungary and of Europe. He does a passable job; certainly nobody without his grasp of Hungarian is going to call him on fine points. One might, however, question whether such a thing exists as "Magyar pessimism," and whether anyone ought to brag that "the Hungarian mind is very observant and sensitive to every psychic nuance."

History, Lukacs says, should be told hierarchically. First come sense impressions, then people, politics (yes, despite his own disclaimer), intellectual and artistic enthusiasms, and finally "less tangible but nonetheless evident mental and spiritual inclinations." Sure enough, the chapters fall out this way, and as soon as we begin to drift toward nostalgia or cause and effect we are told that that's not the point of the book. History isn't science, but the retelling of events imprinted on the collective mind of a nation. It isn't nostalgia, but a detached means of remembering. That is Lukacs' argument in *Historical Consciousness*, where it made a great deal of sense. But in *Budapest 1900* this philosophy amounts to little more than an organizational framework that relegates many illuminating particulars to eye-wrench-

ing footnotes. Speaking of the city's new buildings, the text says: "Their ornamentation is surely excessive, with strange, twisted ornaments on their roofs and parapets." Footnote: "What are these ornaments for?" someone asked Lechner. "Who will see them?" "The birds will see them," Lechner answered."

There is a wild indulgence in literary diction, as in "The year 1900 was the noon hour of Budapest, even in winter. Summer was galloping in its skies and in its heart." In such passages our author is attempting to do the novelist's job. Here is Gyula Krúdy:

He saw . . . those heart-rending days in spring when the new frocks bedeck the pavements like flowers in the meadows; and the lilting, snowy days in winter when the sun comes out at noon on Andrassy Avenue to encourage the poor office girls to step out with the gait of duchesses. . . .

Lukacs (using his own excellent translations) quotes generously from Krúdy, enlivening the narrative every time, though the result is not history. It is to historians that we turn for the concrete origins of "atmosphere." *Budapest 1900* shorts us explanations in favor of a dreamily inert historiography. Readers charmed by Lukacs—and there will be many—ought to consider the fate of those who refuse to analyze the past: they are condemned to relish it.

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## Babes in Gangland

by Bill Kauffman

**Billy Bathgate**  
by E.L. Doctorow  
New York: Random House;  
323 pp., \$19.95

◆  
E.L. Doctorow is our loudest contemporary champion of the social novel, whose defining characteristic he posits as "the large examination of society within a story" of "imperial earth-shaking intention." (The genre's Amer-

ican apotheosis is Frank Norris's *The Octopus*.)

*Billy Bathgate* is Doctorow's latest, and if his publicist's yowling chorus of "masterpiece" is a bit much, the novel is nevertheless entertaining, mordant, and surprisingly—for those who have read Doctorow's dreary socialist harangues in *The Nation*—sage.

Fifteen-year-old Billy of Bathgate Avenue in the Bronx is standing outside a beer warehouse, juggling a battery of balls, fruits, and stones, when gangster Arthur Flegenheimer, AKA Dutch Schultz, spies him and pronounces the dexterous lad "a capable boy." This throwaway remark begets in Billy grand dreams, and he bids adieu to his urchin-pals, to their "dead witless eyes" and inevitable "slow death[s] of incredible subjugation." With great resourcefulness, Billy insinuates himself into Dutch Schultz's inner circle as the mobster's "proto-jay."

Schultz is a brutal psychopath, given to crushing the skulls of hapless marplots. He is a primitive, an anachronism almost, in the brave new world of the 1930's. Dutch's comptroller, Abbadabba Berman, explains to Billy that in the "upcoming generation," the criminal will, perforce, be of a sleeker, more refined shape. "Everything will be streamlined," he declares, echoing the regnant New Deal faith in a progress that is founded on science, efficiency, and centralization.

Try as he might, Dutch just can't adapt. To attain polish he takes up with a blue-blooded member of the Saratoga horsey set; she cuckolds him (with callow Billy, no less!). Awaiting trial in Syracuse, Jewish Dutch converts to Catholicism as an "insurance policy"; the Church, in his last desperate days of supplication, will let him down. Even Tammany boss James J. Hines, Dutch's ethical kin (he, too, adjudges Billy "capable"), refuses a bribe; the ward-healers are giving way to good-government prigs like Thomas E. Dewey. Dutch, *pace* Elvis Costello, is a man out of time.

And what of Billy? Doctorow has said elsewhere that "a child's life is morally complex . . . a child is a perception machine." Maybe. But our narrator Billy witnesses—even abets—the grisliest murders, including a concrete-shoe drowning, and by novel's end he is surveilling prosecutor

Dewey preventive to a daring assassination attempt. Throughout these sanguinary adventures, Billy is wholly remorseless, without compunction. We never learn how this bright lad became injured to the most sickening violence. Book chat has it that Doctorow views Billy as a ghetto Huck Finn: an odd analogue, given Huck's supremely moral choice in the matter of Jim's freedom.

"A perception machine" Billy indubitably is. He puts Schultz's appeal tersely and well: "People liked to be where things happened, or could happen. They liked power."

That is what *Billy Bathgate* is about; that is why young Billy is first attracted to Dutch. Doctorow understands the devilish lure of power—the marcelled, sluttish girls, the expensive booze, the evening wear and Black Packards and the feeling that one is at the center of something very big indeed—and he knows that the purpose of glamour is to conceal enormity, to gloss over carnage and conquer.

In the past, Doctorow has written feverishly of the transcendence of the collective. When *To Have and Have Not's* Harry Morgan snarls, "A man alone ain't got no bloody ----- chance," this is epiphany; Hemingway, Doctorow exults, has glimpsed "a monumental insight."

But the gang offers Billy Bathgate poor sanctuary. He finds only menace in numbers. The slightest deviation from prescribed behavior—a loud noise, an inept crack—can get him killed. In Dutch's ambit, betrayals "issue perpetually from the seasons of life."

Safety can only be found in ever-larger conglomerations of thieves. Abbadabba Berman lectures: "The modern businessman looks to combination for strength and streamlining. He joins a trade association. Because he is part of something bigger he achieves strength. Practices are agreed upon, prices, territories, the markets are controlled."

The stifling regimentation of this new order—(coincidentally?) redolent of the New Deal—breeds respect for creeps like Schultz. As the discerning Billy admits: "How I admired the life of taking pains, of living in defiance of a government that did not like you and did not want you and wanted to destroy