

John Lukacs, R.I.P.: The American Who Understood Europe

He never resented disagreement, was always good-natured in debate, and was a delightful companion.

by Conrad Black



John Lukacs, who died last week at 95, was one of America's outstanding historians, and one of the most prolific historians in the Western world in the last 60 years. A native of Hungary, he fled the Communist Soviet puppet regime in that country shortly after World War II and was a history professor at a small Roman Catholic women's college (Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia) for 47 years (1947–1994), the first 27 of those years as chairman of the history department. He lived at Valley Forge and wrote some perceptive analyses of the place of the United States in the world and of European views of America, and even speculated on how the United States

might evolve. But his greatest contribution, and it was a very significant one, was as an interpreter of modern European history. As a new American who did not often venture far or lengthily into America, he avoided the temptation of entering too actively into the crowded field of American history. But as a highly cultured and multi-lingual European, he was for nearly half a century one of the leading American commentators on contemporary European history.

He styled himself "a reactionary," but that was unnecessarily self-demeaning. He was animated by a European skepticism that was always at some variance with the general American tendency to regard even improbable objectives as attainable. And he was not perceptibly made more confident of the potential for American intervention to effect change in other continents by the scale of activity and economic and industrial might of the United States, though he was always grateful and respectful of the fact that that scale, which the world had never before imagined to be possible, enabled the United States to come to the rescue of Europe three times in the 20th century, two witnessed by him.

John Lukacs, though more European than American in outlook, was no less a patriotic and proud American, and reconciled in his own views enlightened syntheses of the American and European historical experiences. He was a close friend of American diplomat and foreign-policy theorist George F. Kennan, generally considered the principal architect of the containment strategy that ultimately led to western victory in the Cold War. He shared with Kennan a wariness of any American effort to extend its influence beyond what was necessary to U.S. national security and foreign-policy goals that were attainable at acceptable cost. But he never underestimated what America had done for the Europe he always revered and somewhat romanticized (including in a moving and brilliant memoir of turn-of-the-century Budapest, his native city).

He once told me that when he appeared at the federal building

in Valley Forge during the Korean War to hand in his income-tax return, the official who received it said that of all the scores of people who had appeared in the last couple of days for the same purpose, John Lukacs was the only one who was smiling, and asked the reason for that. John replied that he was a refugee from Hungary, that he knew what the United States had done for the defeat of Nazism and fascism and the deterrence of international Communism, and that he calculated that his modest income might yield enough tax revenue to buy one shell for the main armament of an Iowa-class battleship and he was proud to provide it.

John's particular hero was Winston Churchill, an eminently worthy subject of such admiration, even if he tended to ascribe to Mr. Churchill more of John's own views than the great British prime minister actually espoused. One of the last times I saw John Lukacs was when he was accompanying Sir Winston's daughter, Mary Soames, to Budapest for the dedication of Churchill Square in that city. He believed Winston Churchill was the preeminent European statesman of the 20th century, and we had many lengthy and entirely cordial exchanges in which I suggested that Churchill tried to straddle between Europe, the Commonwealth, and the United States in a way that was beyond Britain's strategic post-war competence, though I yielded nothing to him in my admiration of Sir Winston. As a Roosevelt biographer, I had, to some degree, a natural rivalry with him in the attribution of credit for the deliverance of the West in World War II; there was plenty of credit for both.

Of his many works, over 30 books published over nearly 60 years, I believe John Lukacs's greatest historical observations were of the narrow margin of Churchill's victory in the war cabinet for the policy of resistance to the Nazis in late May 1940 as the evacuation from Dunkirk was proceeding (*Five Days in London*, May 1940); and in the probable reasons for Hitler's invasion of Russia in 1941 (*The Hitler of*

History). As the evacuation from Dunkirk of 338,000 British and French soldiers succeeded, former prime minister Neville Chamberlain and the Labour-party leaders rallied to Churchill against the preferred policy of the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, to attempt a negotiated peace. It was one of the decisive moments of world history, researched and described by Lukacs concisely, and with gripping drama. *The Hitler of History* went farther than any previous book in situating Hitler in German cultural history and reasoned that Hitler was advised by his astute ambassador in Washington, Hans Dieckhoff, that Roosevelt would seek a third term and would arrange a naval incident to get into war with Hitler when he was ready.

Roosevelt withdrew his ambassador from Berlin after the Kristallnacht outrages against German Jews in 1938, and Hitler responded in kind. But when Roosevelt did seek and win a third term, gave the British 50 destroyers, imposed peacetime conscription for the first time in American history, extended American territorial waters from three to 1,800 miles, ordered the U.S. Navy to attack any German ship on detection, and then passed the Lend-Lease Act offering the British and Canadians anything they wanted on relaxed repayment terms, Hitler had some reason to believe that he would soon be at war with America. In these circumstances, it made some sense for Hitler to imagine that if he was facing war in the west with Britain and America, Stalin might be induced to stab him in the back – but if he could flatten Russia first and then commit his entire strength to the defense of the German European fortress, the Anglo-Americans might have to acquiesce in German domination of most of Europe.

It was an immense gamble, but his whole career had been based on such gambles, and this would be the last time he would have to risk everything on a bold stroke. This analysis of Hitler's strategic reasoning was the first sensible explanation of his thinking. His book was controversial because it placed less

emphasis than is customary on the attempted destruction of the Jews, and also because of his attack on David Irving and other Nazi apologists. (The Yale University Press in the U.K. was so intimidated by Irving's threats to litigate, I had to indemnify them against such a suit to get the book published in Britain at all. No litigation occurred.)

He called himself a "reactionary" because he was a traditionalist and a persuasive advocate of the necessity of historical knowledge to make any sense out of most things, and because he lamented the transformation of science into a false religion and the over-commercialization of economic progress, and was viewed as curmudgeonly. He was, in fact, unimpressed with much that was modern but not a pessimist; he never resented disagreement, was always good-natured in debate, and was a delightful companion. He was an important historian of great integrity and originality, and certainly one of the greatest American historians of modern Europe. He will be long and gratefully remembered by all who knew him, and his death will not interrupt the natural and meritorious rise of his reputation and importance.

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