

A historian's historian

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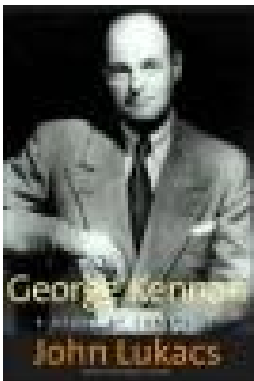


John Lukacs

Visiting Kansas City, Mo., to give a lecture on World War I, John Lukacs is reading *The New York Times* when we meet. "It's a chore -- reading the paper today," says Mr. Lukacs, putting the newspaper down. "I read it with a slightly sickly feeling in my stomach. What's in the paper has less and less to tell me that will interest me."

At age 84, Mr. Lukacs can be forgiven a certain world-weariness. The author of 25 books, the Hungarian-born historian has spent a lifetime studying the condition of the world, a condition that does not generally improve much.

World War II has been a major focus for him -- he's written nine or 10 books on that topic -- and so is the nature of historical knowledge, another subject he's written about voluminously. "The how in history is always important," he muses. "This is what no machine can answer. In every question the how and why are combined."



The man whom David McCullough, the Pulitzer-prize winning author of *Truman* and *John*

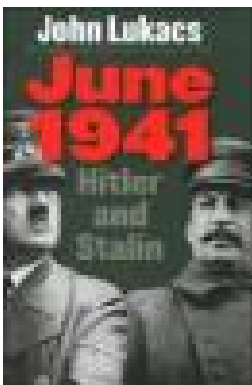
Adams, once referred to as "the greatest living American historian" came to the United States in 1946. Except for occasional visiting professorships, he spent his career teaching at Chestnut Hill College, a small Catholic college for women. Now retired, Mr. Lukacs continues to write. In 2005, he published *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Loathing*, a brilliant tour de force that flits back and forth between observations on contemporary American politics and reflections on 20th-century history and such towering figures of the age as Churchill, Stalin and Hitler. In 2007, he published *George Kennan: A Study of Character*, a biography of the American diplomat and historian with whom Mr. Lukacs maintained a long and close friendship. He's currently at work on a book called *Last Rites*, about which he will disclose only the title -- "It may be the only good thing about the book" -- and that it may well be his last one.

Readers of Mr. Lukacs' books, many of them such as *The Duel: The Eighty-Day Struggle between Churchill and Hitler* and *Five Days in May, 1940* absorbing narrative histories appealing to a broad audience, know that he believes the historical significance of communism has long been overrated. America's entrance into World War I in 1917 was a far more decisive event in his view than the Bolshevik Revolution that took place that same year. "Twenty-eight years after the Russian Revolution, the only country that was communist was Russia," he noted. Communist intellectuals were everywhere in the West, but their influence was very limited. They were like chicken droppings, he said; the emergence of communist regimes in the Third World owed more to anticolonialism than to the power of Marxist ideas.

Nationalism, not communism, was the principal political force of the 20th century, he said, and with it populism, the danger of which he believes is underrated. Hitler was perhaps the most popular revolutionary leader in history, he writes in his book *The Hitler of History*. While the battle between liberalism and conservatism dominated the 19th century, Hitler realized earlier than most that the chief forces in the 20th century would be nationalism and socialism and that of the two the former was stronger. Mr. Lukacs notes that it took the short-term alliance of Western liberal democracies and communist Russia to defeat the dynamism of National Socialist Germany in 1945. "Now of course we are all national socialists," he remarks, observing that nationalism as a sentiment and socialism in the form of the welfare state have become almost universal.

Mr. Lukacs came to his interest in history and wariness of mass politics partly through experience. He grew up in Budapest, the son of a doctor and a mother who was a Jewish convert to Catholicism. Despite being raised a Catholic, during World War II, he was forced to serve in a Hungarian labor battalion for converted Jews. Conscripted into the Hungarian army when Hungary was allied with Germany, he became a deserter and survived the Siege of Budapest.

Mr. Lukacs identifies populism as "the extension of democracy to its utmost, the total sovereignty of popularity." Initially a phenomenon of the left, it has become the hallmark of the right, he said, with the Republican Party in the United States more adept than the Democrats at appealing to nationalist and populist sentiments.



"We speak of the people. So many people think that because we live in the age of

democracy, life will be simpler. It's not true. Because the people seldom speak. Other people speak in the name of the people. Right now, the majority of the American people are against the war in Iraq and yet not against the war in Iraq. The people are a very complicated thing," he said.

An early critic of Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s -- in 1954 Mr. Lukacs published an article in *Commonweal* titled "The Totalitarian Temptation" on American Catholics' predilection for Sen. McCarthy's crude form of populism -- Mr. Lukacs has written that anticommunism was in many ways a more powerful force than communism. Skeptical of the Cold War, which Mr. Lukacs believes was more often than not a great waste of American money and energy, he is equally dismissive of many of today's shibboleths.

He calls the war on terror "not a war but a phrase." Wars, he said, are fought between armies and between states.

As for terrorism, "There's always terror around. I have a nuclear power plant about 12 miles from where I live," Mr. Lukacs said. "I'm less worried about an insane Arab flying into it than some American who is drunk or sex-crazy driving into it."

A critic of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, Mr. Lukacs says that he is shocked by the army of private contractors the United States now employs there. Since when, he asked rhetorically, has the United States employed mercenaries? But it's the military juggernaut that the United States has become that seems to get Mr. Lukacs most riled.

"Do you know we have more than 700 military bases all over the world? There is not one person in the Pentagon who could enumerate them. There is probably not one person in the White House who could name one half of them. Do we need that? What for?"

Age has its privileges, one of which is to speak one's mind. This Mr. Lukacs is clearly unabashed about doing. In his autobiography, an exhilarating read that showcases Mr. Lukacs' elegance as a writer and charts his progress from moody teenage socialist to Catholic anticommunist to an émigré anti-anticommunist historian skeptical of every ism under the sun, he notes with commendable understatement, "I have been blessed (and sometimes cursed) with a fairly independent mind."

A foray into Mr. Lukacs' writings shows him impatient with Americans' faith in the idea of progress, enraged by self-serving, dishonest intellectuals ("Among intellectuals of whatever nation, whether liberals or conservatives, communists or anticommunists, the ratio of opportunism to honesty seems everywhere about the same," he writes) and, overall, relatively evenhanded in his criticisms of both the right and left. Writing of the American conservative movement with which he has had an erratic affiliation, he notes, "Here was a peculiarly American paradox: The liberals had become senile, while the conservatives were immature."

The Catholic church is considered an anachronism by many. One suspects that very quality would appeal to Mr. Lukacs, a self-described "reactionary," a phrase he admits to using partly for its shock value, partly in an effort to distinguish himself from today's conservatives, most of whom he said aren't conservative at all. Certainly the current crowd in the White House is not.

"This administration is against conservation. How can you be a conservative and not want to conserve the air and the earth?" Mr. Lukacs queried in disbelief.

In his autobiography, *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, Mr. Lukacs writes of being a European Catholic in the United States. "Many Americans, including most Catholic intellectuals, too, thought (and still think) that the church was too old-fashioned, too reactionary, too authoritarian," he observes. But Mr. Lukacs believes a bigger problem with American Catholicism is its eagerness to conform to popular Americanism.

In *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, he writes that his respect for religion came from reading -- literature rather than theology, he noted -- and from observation of the world around him as a young man. "It was not only that the behavior of religious men and women inspired me with respect; it was not only, after everything was said, that the Catholic church was, at least in principle, supranational and not national. ... What mattered even more in my view was the fact that the Roman Catholic concept ... of human nature corresponded with what I was seeing and experiencing, especially during the last years of the war."



Today, Mr. Lukacs still sees value in the church's teachings on human nature.

"We are God's creatures made in his image. The Catholic church must be anti-Darwinist," he told *NCR*. "No matter how small, there is a fundamental difference between human beings and all other living beings in the universe," Mr. Lukacs said. "If this difference is not fundamental, then there is nothing wrong with abortion, nothing wrong with murder, nothing wrong with incest."

Gloomy about the future -- "It's partly my temperament," he says -- but good-humored, courteous but incisive, passionate yet also philosophical, Mr. Lukacs comes across as a person of principle, a courtly gentleman with a zest for calling it as he sees it. In his lecture on World War I in Kansas City, he bashed with equal relish Lenin and Woodrow Wilson. But it's the unexpected, stray observation as Mr. Lukacs is on his way to someplace else in his thoughts that arrests a listener's attention just as much as his extensive scholarship on World War I and II.

"This constant wish for superficial things makes people very complicated," he mused apropos of today's consumerism. "This is of course an enormous generalization, but there are very few simple people left. People are very complicated, very mentally unbalanced and disturbed because of the complexity of modern life. Until about 200 years ago, illnesses and infections all came from the outside. Now 90 percent of people in the doctor's offices, their illnesses come from the inside -- strokes, cancer, ulcers."

It's the occupational hazard of the historian to be asked not about the past, which he has studied, but about the future. "I'm a historian, not a prophet" is Mr. Lukacs' standard reply to such inquiries. But he can occasionally be induced to give his thoughts about the future, and when they emerge they reflect Mr. Lukacs' deep-seated humanism.

"I greatly admire Wendell Berry," Mr. Lukacs said of the essayist and poet-farmer. "He has in it one sentence. He wrote or said it almost 10 years ago: The world is divided already and will be divided between people who consider themselves as creatures and people who consider themselves as machines."

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An elitist in a democratic age

John Lukacs is something of an anomaly: an elitist in a democratic era, both a traditionalist and a maverick, an iconoclastic thinker deeply respectful of the Roman Catholic church. His books span a wide spectrum, from straightforward narrative histories of World War II to a cultural history of Budapest to more reflective works such as *Historical Consciousness* and *The Passing of the Modern Age*.

Mr. Lukacs' heroes include Winston Churchill and Alexis de Tocqueville. The first he praises for his magnanimity, for his courage and for his political acumen. Churchill may not have won the Second World War, but he was the man who didn't lose it, says Mr. Lukacs, who has written extensively about Churchill. As for Tocqueville, Mr. Lukacs calls the author of *Democracy in America* a "seer" and "the Aristotle (and perhaps the Plato too) of the democratic age."

Mr. Lukacs' own views about the dangers of democracy are summed up in the following: "These exist because of the democratic tendency to interpret equality and freedom in ephemeral, superficial and abstract ways, and of institutionalizing them in deadening and impersonal forms; in sum, because of the deadly inclination of democracy to inflation and to bureaucracy."

-- *Margot Patterson*

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