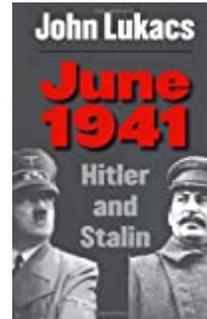




John Lukacs. *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. xii + 169 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11437-9.



Reviewed by Stephen G. Fritz (Department of History, East Tennessee State University)

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The Duel, Lite: Less Satisfying, Less Filling

Over the years John Lukacs has distinguished himself through a series of books in which he has reinterpreted well-known events and brought a fresh perspective to existing evidence. In works such as *The Last European War* (1976), *1945: Year Zero* (1978), *The Duel: The Eighty-Day Struggle between Churchill and Hitler* (1991), and *The Hitler of History* (1997), among others, Lukacs challenged the reader to cast aside preconceived notions and to think afresh about the events he was discussing. Always more analytical and interpretive than narrative in his style, Lukacs could be relied upon to inject refreshing insights into the historiography. In a sense, this book follows the same pattern. Lukacs aims to provide a penetrating new view of the relationship between Hitler and Stalin, one that will energize the debate over Hitler's decision to wage war against the Soviet Union. But this volume, unlike Lukacs's other works, is unsatisfying for, in truth, despite the glowing testimonials on the book jacket cover, he offers little in the way of a novel reinterpretation of Hitler's decision, nor does he provide much that is unique in his assessment of Stalin.

In a very real sense, whether intended or not, this

volume picks up where *The Duel* left off, with Hitler's decision not to proceed with the very risky invasion of England. This decision, of course, meant that despite the brilliant military victories in the field, the crucial goal of the blitzkrieg campaign had failed: Germany had left a key enemy standing. In the short term, as Hitler well knew, this failure would be immaterial since there was little the British could do to affect German domination of Europe. In the long term, however, Great Britain proved a nemesis for Hitler. Despite his ostensible focus on the Hitler-Stalin relationship, it is really the vexing problem of what to do about this stubborn island nation that constitutes, for Lukacs, the key nexus in Hitler's thinking.

Although providing a cursory acknowledgment in his chapter on Hitler of the Führer's anticommunism and his notions of *Lebensraum*, Lukacs clearly means to debunk the prevailing view among historians that ideology drove Hitler's decisions, arguing that this is "a simplistic generalization" (p. 12). Nothing demonstrates this assertion more, to Lukacs, than the fact that Hitler made a pact with Stalin and then proved willing not only to concede the Baltic States to the Soviet sphere of influence but

also to inaugurate in late 1939 a policy of repatriation of *Volksdeutsche* from this area back to the Reich. Indeed, Lukacs claims that “his considerations of statesmanship ... were more important than his ideology” (p. 13). Here, then, appears to be the hook: Hitler’s evolving decision-making in the summer and fall of 1940 was driven not by his ideological obsessions, but by calculations of his own and Germany’s situation and prospects. If not ideology, though, what considerations shaped Hitler’s assessment of the German position in Europe? To Lukacs, “Hitler’s main preoccupation in high summer of 1940 ... was not Russia; it was England” (p. 27).

Having staked out this rather disappointing and unoriginal claim, Lukacs attempts to substantiate it by referencing numerous statements of the Führer to the effect that “England’s hope is Russia and America. If hope on Russia is eliminated, America is also eliminated.... Russia [is] the factor on which England is mainly betting” (p. 27). Problems with this interpretation arise almost immediately. Hitler certainly was aware of the prevailing view among the German military leadership that the dismal Soviet performance against Finland and the continued disorganization of the Red Army indicated the likelihood of a rather easier campaign than a cross-channel invasion of Great Britain. Hitler, though, knew history, and especially the fate of Napoleon’s Grand Army. On the eve of the invasion, in fact, Lukacs admits that Hitler’s close associates noted his great unease, anxiety and meager optimism about the upcoming campaign. When Göring sought to reassure him, for example, Hitler snapped, “It will be our toughest struggle yet, by far the toughest. Why? Because for the first time we shall be fighting an ideological enemy, and an ideological enemy of fanatical persistence at that.”[1]

Just as importantly, as Lukacs admits, if Great Britain was indeed the principal foe, Hitler had a readily available and more achievable alternative that, almost certainly, would have caused Britain to leave the war. The Mediterranean strategy so ardently promoted by some of his military and naval advisors, as well as Mussolini, could have, with a relatively small input of men and resources, made possible their hopes of chasing the British out of Egypt and the Middle East, provoking an Arab uprising and securing oil resources. Not least, procuring Japanese help in the eventual war against the Soviet Union loomed as a very real possibility. Yet, as Lukacs acknowledges, “his priority was Russia” (p. 39). Why? If Hitler’s decision-making was indeed based on a cool calculation of Germany’s situation, one indicating that England needed to be eliminated as an enemy, a move into

the Mediterranean would have made more sense than the invasion of the USSR. After all, Germany could continue to enjoy the economic advantages of the pact with Stalin, even as it secured resources and allies, likely including Turkey as well as Japan, for a later move against Russia, while denying both to the communist leader. Why was Hitler obsessed with the Soviet Union? Not, as Lukacs would have it, in order, indirectly, to knock Great Britain out of the war. In cold truth and much to Churchill’s frustration, the British could do little to shake German domination of the continent. Hitler understood this as well, which is why he knew that in the short term an attack on the USSR raised little risk of a two-front war. Once Russia was defeated, England would be forced to make peace. Here Lukacs’s argument rings true. He is also correct in his assertion that every historical event has multiple causes, which form a hierarchy of importance. In this instance, though, Lukacs inverted the pyramid. Hitler did not choose to attack the Soviet Union in order to force Britain out of the war. He made the decision for ideological reasons, knowing that victory in Russia would likely bring the positive benefit of a negotiated peace with England. Otherwise, none of his other decisions at the time, from his rejection of a move into the Mediterranean to the determination to fight a racial war of extermination in Russia, make much sense.

What, then of Stalin, and his actions during this crucial period? Lukacs makes much of Stalin’s evolution, at least in his own mind, to the role of a statesman. Indeed, for Lukacs, by 1941 Stalin had become far more a statesman than a communist ideologue. In this sense, Stalin’s actions from 1939 on had a certain logic. Better to embroil the Germans and the capitalist, western democracies in a war than risk betrayal of Russian interests at the hands of the British and French, as during World War I, in a war with Germany. This logic explains the pact with Hitler. Stalin could not help but be pleased with the results of his partnership with the German dictator. Hitler’s forces had humiliated both Britain and France, which did not displease Stalin, and in the meantime the Georgian had taken advantage of his partnership with the Austrian corporal to re-impose Russian dominance over the Baltic States and Bessarabia. The relationship had proved so fruitful, in fact, that Stalin could see no reason why it should not be extended to include Italy and Japan. This goal, the extension of a “spheres of interest” agreement to the entire world, lay behind Molotov’s key November 1940 trip to Berlin. It was, however, precisely Soviet demands for dominance in Eastern Europe that ended Hitler’s characteristic vacillation in deciding on

his next move, not because he feared a Soviet preemptive strike, an idea Lukacs rightly dismisses as false, but because he now had definitive evidence that his ideological goals and Stalin's aims were incompatible. If Hitler had been the calculating statesman portrayed by Lukacs, why rush to war with the USSR, which was indeed what Hitler now decided? Why not be patient and knock Britain out of the war through the Mediterranean thrust, especially since time would work to German advantage economically and since Stalin was not planning a preemptive attack? Again, Hitler's decision-making shows evidence of ideological obsession.

Just the opposite apparently characterized Stalin, as Lukacs demonstrates. Much has been made, and rightly so, of Stalin's complete disregard for the mounds of evidence, in the months and weeks before June 22, 1941, indicating the increasing likelihood of a German attack. His almost obsequious deference to Hitler and desperate pleadings with the German ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg, almost defy logic. In an ironic sense, the Georgian's actions could be interpreted, as Lukacs seems to suggest, as Stalin's acknowledgment of Russia's importance to Great Britain. Thus, warnings from the West could be discounted because Churchill and Roosevelt as well had an obvious interest in stirring up trouble between Germany and Russia in hopes, in the famous phrase, of having Stalin pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them. As a statesman, however, Stalin clearly believed that his and the Soviet Union's best interest lay in continued cooperation with Germany; therefore, he felt the need to reassure Hitler that the USSR had no hostile intentions. The paradox in Lukacs's explanation, then, is the implication, whether intended or not, that Stalin saw the situation in much the same way that Lukacs imputes to Hitler: namely, that Great Britain only persisted in the war because of its hopes in the USSR. Stalin, then, reasonably enough, believed that if he reassured Hitler, the German dictator, seeing the situation through the same perspective as Stalin (and Lukacs), would understand that he had nothing to fear from Stalin and no reason to attack the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, and in contradiction to Lukacs's thesis, Hitler viewed things through an

ideological prism and no amount of reassuring could deflect him from believing in the historical necessity, as he saw it, of his racial war for *Lebensraum* in the East. This effort was, as Hitler clearly understood from the beginning, to be a war of extermination between two hostile ideologies. The final irony, perhaps, was that, even after all the bloodshed, Stalin had not completely divorced himself from his earlier attitude. As Lukacs notes, "his daughter Svetlana remembered her father saying after [the war]: 'Together with the Germans we would have been invincible'" (p. 140).

As an admirer of many of Lukacs's previous works, for me this volume ranks as something of a disappointment. As always, his observations are provocative, but in this instance the whole is less than the sum of the parts. Despite Lukacs's assertion that Churchill, and not Stalin, was Hitler's principal opponent, the overwhelming weight of evidence points to the contrary. Hitler was and remained obsessively ideological, while his twin goals of *Lebensraum* and a racial reordering of eastern Europe required a war with the Soviet Union. As even Lukacs admits, "German rule over eastern Europe, including the conquest of at least portions of European Russia, was what Hitler always wanted" (p. 137). Hitler, despite his recognition in late 1941 that Germany could not win the type of victory he had originally envisioned, in spite of his acknowledgment that Germany should negotiate a peace with Russia and regardless of Stalin's numerous offers to conclude such a peace, persisted to the point of ruin in the attempt to impose his vision on Europe. At the very end, in the surrealistic atmosphere of his bunker deep beneath the streets of his dying capital, Hitler exulted in one thing: at least he had destroyed the hated bourgeois civilization. Hitler certainly had occasional statesmanlike and strategic flashes of insight, but in the end he was and remained foremost an ideologue.

Note

[1]. Max Hastings, "Foreword" to Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself: The Inhumanity of War, Russia, 1941-1944*, ed. Stefan Schmitz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. vii.

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