

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 Geoffrey Megargee

Published on H-War (September, 2006)

In his latest work, John Lukacs revisits the story of what was, without a doubt, one of the greatest confrontations of all time. Readers of this list with any interest in the era will have heard, many times by now, that if Hitler had not attacked the Soviet Union, or if the USSR had gone down in defeat, the history of the Second World War would have been very different. For that reason alone, an understanding of the conflict's origins is essential. How can one explain the outbreak of such an important conflict?

For Lukacs, the answer is clear: everything depended upon Hitler and Stalin. This is unabashed "great man" history, and this reviewer would be the last to argue that Lukacs's approach has no merit, especially in this case. The problem is that he has not executed it well. His writing is engaging and lively (if pedantic at times), the story is fascinating, and there is no shortage of thought-provoking material, but in the end the book is not nearly so useful as it could have been. The first half of *June 1941* concerns itself with developments leading from the 1930s up to the invasion in two parallel chapters, the first from

Hitler's perspective and the second from Stalin's. A series of four chapters then describe the events of June 22, 1941, in Berlin; Moscow; London; and Washington and beyond--each chapter only four to eight pages long. Then, Lukacs wraps up with chapters on the crisis following the first day of war, and on what he calls "unintended consequences" (p. 129). Finally there is an appendix containing a letter that Hitler may or may not have written to Stalin in May 1941, with Lukacs's analysis of the document.

Several points constitute the main elements of Lukacs's argument. The most basic of these concern the significance of the conflict and the centrality of Hitler and Stalin to its origins. In examining their roles, Lukacs concludes that both men were far more interested in statecraft than ideology. In Hitler's case, for example, the book argues that his anti-Communism was more a tool than a fundamental belief. For Stalin, the main goal was to strengthen the state and his own power within it, even if he had to sacrifice Marxist principles in the process. As far as the military conflict itself is concerned, Lukacs argues that

Hitler's main goal was to get at Britain, not to conquer *Lebensraum* in the east. He also emphasizes Stalin's unwillingness to accept the idea that Hitler might attack him, right up to, and even beyond, the point at which the attack began, and he also rightly dismisses the idea that the German attack was pre-emptive.

There are problems with the content on several levels. One can question the confidence, for example, with which Lukacs dismisses Hitler's commitment to ideology; Hitler could be a brilliant political tactician, and to that end he sometimes set his long-term goals aside, but he neither forgot nor discarded them. They constituted, after all, his vision of what was best for Germany, and as such his mission in life, not just a means to power. Lukacs needs to marshal far more convincing evidence if he is going to argue otherwise.

Lukacs's examination of Hitler's decision to attack the USSR, which is central to the book, illustrates the pitfalls of dismissing ideology. Lukacs emphasizes Hitler's statements to the effect that an attack on the USSR was a way to knock Britain out of the war; he maintains throughout the book that Hitler's main enemy was Churchill, not Stalin. Lukacs correctly points out that Hitler's "motives and purposes were compound and not simple" (p. 137), but for the most part he is unwilling to pursue that more balanced argument, to accept that Hitler was capable of attacking for both geostrategic and ideological reasons.

Weaknesses in the content are, not surprisingly, reflections of problems with the methodology. The issue here is not so much the "great man" approach, but the lack of depth with which Lukacs applies it. There is so much that the book fails to examine. To cite one example, what place did the campaign's criminal aspects have in Hitler's thinking? By the spring of 1941, the SS and the Wehrmacht were laying the groundwork for the slaughter of millions of Jews, Communists, and other Soviet citizens, and those plans went hand-in-hand with the plan of campaign. Hitler

knew of them and contributed to them. Why then do they receive so little attention in this work? There is nothing on them in that portion of the book which covers the planning process. In fact, the murder of the Jews occupies only a page and a half of text, and only in the last chapter, curiously entitled "Unintended Consequences"; other victim groups do not appear at all. Lukacs is far from being a Holocaust denier; he did, after all, sound the alarm about David Irving's work, long before most other scholars caught on. But his account leaves out a central element in the planning process for the invasion, disregarding much of the recent literature linking the military and criminal aspects of Operation Barbarossa, and thus gives the reader a distorted picture.

On those subjects that he does address, Lukacs has a tendency to write with great confidence about leaders' thinking, but his use of the evidence is frequently open to criticism. He states, for instance, that Hitler was not pleased with the Soviet invasion of Finland in November 1939, but that he "gave no public or even private expressions of his displeasure" (p. 25). Naturally that statement begs the question, how do we know he was displeased? At another point Lukacs argues that Hitler was not confident of victory (p. 93). He backs that claim up with some of Hitler's statements on the eve of the attack. But we know that Hitler frequently suffered from the jitters before a major offensive, and Lukacs is too quick to dismiss the many other occasions on which Hitler's attitude was very different. Here again, one wishes that Lukacs would do more to acknowledge the story's complexity, rather than offering such a smooth, simple, and ultimately incomplete set of explanations.

The book's use of secondary sources is puzzling. Lukacs has had a long and fruitful career, with over twenty-five books to his credit. Surely he is aware of the many works that touch on this subject. However, in his list of the "documents, books, and articles that I consulted during the

writing of this book," the gaps are huge (p. 160). Where are Gerhard Weinberg, Christopher Browning, or Peter Longerich? Where are Williamson Murray, Adam Ulam, or Ian Kershaw? Where is the excellent series from the Military History Research Institute in Potsdam?[1] Mention of these and many other works would have, at the very least, given the general reader places to go for more information and alternative interpretations, while demonstrating to the scholar that Lukacs had done his homework.

The work's structure also does not further the author's aim of examining the relationship between Hitler and Stalin, in contrast to the works that simply compare the two. (He criticizes Alan Bullock's work *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* [1992], as being "useless" in this regard [p. 14].) By having separate chapters on Hitler and Stalin, Berlin and Moscow, he weakens the unity for which he is striving. In the end there is remarkably little here on the relationship between the two men, possibly because their actual relationship was so limited. Each man's ignorance defined him to some extent; each might have harbored some twisted admiration for his fellow tyrant's power, but there is no evidence of much familiarity beyond that.

Near the end of his book, Lukacs writes that "the most important duty of the historian is to struggle against the prevalence of untruths, since the pursuit of truth is often a struggle through a jungle of sentiments and twisted statements of 'facts'" (p. 142). There, in a nutshell, is the key to Lukacs's approach and style, and there is something to be said for it. Unfortunately, in his crusade to destroy the untruths surrounding the origins of Operation Barbarossa, he has left us in exactly the kind of jungle he describes. His version of the war is so argumentative, and at the same time so incomplete, that neither the scholar nor the lay reader will gain much from it, aside from a glimpse into John Lukacs's thinking. *June 1941*

ought to provoke discussions, but it does little to settle them.

Note

[1]. Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Peter Longerich, *The Unwritten Order: Hitler's Role in the Final Solution* (Charleston, S.C.: Tempus, 2001); Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-73*, 2d. ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); and, *Hitler: 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). Also see Military History Research Institute, *Germany and the Second World War*, esp. vol. 4, *The Attack on the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

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Citation: Geoffrey Megargee. Review of Lukacs, John. *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

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