

*John Lukacs is both an historian and an historical philosopher of international repute. His books include, A History of the Cold War, Historical Consciousness, and The Last European War. Evelyn Mackenzie has a Ph.D. in history. She lives in Louisville, KY where she works as a local historian.*

# The Triumph of Nationalism

A Book Review by Evelyn Mackenzie

## THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND THE END OF THE MODERN AGE

By John Lukacs

New York: Ticknor & Fields (Houghton Mifflin) 1993  
291 pp., \$21.95

Nationalism, the defining political force of the twentieth century, is likely to remain the most prominent feature in the political landscape of the twenty-first. From under the rubble of collapsed communism, old nations and old feuds are struggling back to life, while myriad tribal wars are being fought by peoples seeking a piece of land to call their own.

All of this is the inevitable reaction against the artificial boundaries carved out in the aftermath of two world wars and held in place despite and not because of natural ties that create and bind a "people." What we are witnessing, then, is the triumph of the natural over the unnatural.

Yet for author John Lukacs, veteran commentator on Europe's shifting sands, the natural is not automatically right or desirable. At best ambivalent, he is more often downright gloomy when contemplating the probable victory of resurgent nationalism. The book can be read as his own struggle to put the historical events he describes into a moral context.

Lukacs argues that even the great historical forces generally thought to be driven by ideology are really expressions of national character. For example, he quickly dismisses the notion that the twentieth century has been dominated by the struggle between Democracy (U.S.A.) and Communism (U.S.S.R.). The Cold War was nothing but a "reciprocal misunderstanding": Stalin and his successors had such great difficulty absorbing Eastern Europe that the West mistook their digestive problems for hunger pangs, while the Soviet Union was deluded by the idea that the U.S. wanted to challenge its hegemony in Eastern Europe.

Lukacs' repeated insistence that American patriotism has been identical to anti-Communism and is "the ideological cement that bound the American 'conservative' movement and the Republican party together," will infuriate some, as will his belief that the Soviet Union was not pushed by the West, but fell naturally. This latter point bolsters Lukacs' arguments about national character — eventually the Russian

people would cast off an alien ideology held in place by artificial political restraints.

Lukacs well understands that "the character of a people molds their institutions" and not vice versa. No government can endure unless it recognizes that there is little difference between the cultural and the political, that is to say, when we speak of our country we are also speaking of our people.

Yet, for a man who sees this, Lukacs often fails to understand those engaged in nationalist struggles. While he points out that if there were no Serbs in "Croatia," there would be no civil war in the former Yugoslavia, he later argues that the whole sorry mess came about "because of tales told by national idiots, full of sound and fury, fighting for an 'independence' signifying nothing." When is a nationalist not a nationalist idiot? That is the question with which Lukacs wrestles for much of the book.

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As a self-described "participant historian," Lukacs includes much of the personal in this book, quoting extensively from his prior works and including large extracts from his journals. Lukacs' own experience shows that nationalism springs from the soul. One's national identity is a part of oneself that cannot be changed like a passport or a country of residence.

In 1946 Lukacs fled Hungary, which he calls his mother, for a matrimonial alliance with his wife, America. Although the union has lasted for the better part of half a century, Lukacs does not feel American enough to say "our" with ease. "I am Hungarian and American. But I am a European American and a European Hungarian."

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Lukacs believes that Europeanness is worth preserving. Nevertheless, it cannot be founded on currency union or a common market. If Europe is to survive, it must have an all-European immigration policy. Without this, he writes, "there can be and there will be no `Europe' worth anything. No reality, no `fact' in this world, has any meaning except by its contrast with other facts. *If there is a `Europe,' it must be different from any other place in this world that is not Europe* [emphasis added]."

What is true of Europe is also true of the United States. In Lukacs' view, "Not only the American Constitution but the very existence of the United States depended (and probably still depends) on the condition that the prevalent majority of its inhabitants spoke, and speak, English." This is not something that should be left to chance. If America wants to survive as a nation, if indeed it even is a nation in Lukacs' sense of the term, it must define and maintain itself as a people. Just whom should Americans mean when they use the pronoun "we"? Lukacs believes the native population of the U.S. will force the government to restrict immigration. "There can be no sovereignty without the control of one's land." This control naturally includes the right to determine who will be invited to live on one's land.

Human nature does not change, says Lukacs, but he cannot completely reconcile himself to nationalism, fearing as much as hoping that it will triumph. His fears are those of many well-meaning Americans who, like Lukacs, see the rise of a "new barbarism" and the decline of the country they love, yet wonder if they have the moral authority to take steps to save it. For this reason alone — the insights it provides into immigration reform — the book is worth reading.

Although it was surely not Lukacs' intention to write a book that mirrors the genuine dilemma of the many Americans who fear for their nation's future but who wonder if they have the right to exclude others, that is just what Lukacs has done. His personal doubts are the same as those which paralyze this country. Those who would end the paralysis would do well to read this engrossing and honest account of one of its causes. ■